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TAKING PLAY SERIOUSLY: LOW-LEVEL SMOKING AMONG COLLEGE STUDENTS

ABSTRACT. Cigarettes have been socially engineered to become potent symbols. Therefore, they need to be understood as cultural products invested with cognitive and emotional salience as well as nicotine delivery devices engineered to create a population of dependent users. In this paper, we look at the symbolism of cigarettes, but unlike many researchers examining this topic, we attend as much to what tobacco users do with cigarettes as to what smoking means to them cognitively. Based on interviews with low-level smokers conducted on two college campuses, we suggest that students use tobacco in order to accomplish interactional goals and to structure social time and space that would otherwise be ambiguously defined. By conceptualizing this structuring activity as play, we gain valuable insights into early stages and trajectories of tobacco use among college students. Our conceptualization of smoking as play is not meant to trivialize low-level tobacco use. Much the opposite, we caution that the contexts in which low-level smoking takes place and the utility functions of such smoking must be taken seriously by researchers in light of current increases in tobacco use among college students.

KEY WORDS: smoking, college students, boredom, drinking, ethnography

INTRODUCTION

Tobacco use is the most preventable cause of mortality and morbidity in the United States (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2003). Although the prevalence of smoking among adults has decreased significantly in the past three decades, research among college students continues to document high rates of smoking, with almost 30 percent of students reporting smoking within the past 30 days and 40 percent of students reporting smoking within the past year (Everett et al. 1999; Johnston et al. 2001; Rigotti et al. 2000). In contrast, smoking rates among high school students peaked in 1996–97 and are presently at their lowest levels in many years (Lantz 2003).

Careful study of the early phases of tobacco use is important because emerging research suggests that low-level smokers may experience some symptoms of dependence sooner than previously thought (DiFranza et al. 2000; Henningfield et al. 2003; Shadel et al. 2000).[1] The college years appear to be a time of increased risk for smoking initiation and movement into regular patterns of use (Bachman et al. 1997; Chassin et al. 1992). These years mark an important developmental transition from adolescence to adulthood, during which students have increased opportunities to experi-

ment with a range of behaviors including smoking and drinking (Schulenberg et al. 1996). Alcohol consumption and tobacco use are known to be strongly related behaviors, and several studies have shown that attending college is linked to increased rates of drinking (Bachman et al. 1997; Maggs 1997). Young adults are also a market of increasing interest to both the tobacco and the alcohol industries, which commonly portray these behaviors as co-occurring (Lantz 2003; Ling and Glanz 2002).

To date, much of what is known about tobacco use among college students is based on the results of cross-sectional survey data. While such data are extremely valuable in tracking prevalence, they provide little understanding of the role of cigarettes in students' lives and how dependence develops over time.[2] Few studies have explored the meaning of smoking to college students and the role it may play in the negotiation of one's identity. Little is known about how smoking is used to facilitate social interaction on the college campus and how cigarettes may serve as a resource during times of emotional turmoil. Smoking among college students needs to be located and embedded within specific social and cultural contexts.[3]

In this article, we explore three of the primary reasons for smoking described by two groups of college students who smoke at low levels. The first group is composed of students who smoke only in social contexts and typically do not define themselves as regular or dependent smokers. To conceptualize this group in a more quantitative way, they smoke on average three to eight cigarettes per week, primarily on the weekend while in a party context. The second group is composed of students who smoke more regularly than the first group, on both weekends and weekdays, but consume no more than 9–20 cigarettes per week. These students may or may not have an established pattern of smoking.

Drawing on two ethnographic studies of smoking among college students, we explore how tobacco use among these low-level smokers is deeply embedded in significant semiotic performances. Such performances are not measured by the sorts of instruments and scales typically used to describe youth smoking behavior. One productive way of looking at these performances is to examine the spaces and times when they occur. We argue that cigarettes are often used by low-level smokers to structure ambiguous social situations and, further, that these uses can be conceptualized as a form of play. This way of thinking is not meant to trivialize tobacco use among college students. We take such play seriously because nicotine is a highly addicting substance[4] and cigarettes are a highly effective nicotine delivery device (Benowitz 1998; Hurt and Robertson 1998; Royal College of Physicians of London 2000; Slade 1995). Nicotine is in fact one of the most

addicting substances even when compared to alcohol and drugs such as cocaine and heroin.

BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

Our investigation of the early phases of smoking draws on two ethnographic studies of cigarette use among first-year college students conducted at one private university in Oklahoma and one public university in Arizona. In the Oklahoma sample, 29 smokers (12 males, 17 females) were interviewed between one and five times over the course of the academic year. In the Arizona sample, 26 smokers (16 females, 10 males) were interviewed between two and five times in their freshmen year. Because of the structure of the study, we also interviewed a number of nonsmoking students who we expected might become smokers over the course of the freshman year based on two questions on a preadministered screener.[5] Neither these nonsmokers nor any students whose cigarette consumption exceeded 20 cigarettes per week are included in the present analysis. At both sites, informants were predominantly Anglo-American and largely middle-class.

Recruitment was accomplished by giving brief presentations about the study in undergraduate classes at both campuses and asking students who were interested in participating in the study to complete a short, 10-item screener survey. In some cases informants nominated friends to participate in the study because they matched study inclusion criteria well. Students eligible for the study at both universities were those who had experimented with tobacco, smoked less than a pack a week, and did not smoke every day at the beginning of the study.

A biographical approach to interviewing was utilized. Students were encouraged to narrate their histories of transition from high school to college and to discuss the role that smoking played in their biographies. During subsequent interviews, informants not only updated these biographies but reflected on and revised them. The interview guide was designed to be open-ended, allowing for exploration of emergent themes. Reports of smoking were situated in context as part of the freshmen experience. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed verbatim. Observations of youth smoking in particular contexts were also made by interviewers who were themselves undergraduate and graduate students in anthropology.

Following transcription, interviews were coded using ATLAS.ti 5.0 software. This software program permits classification and retrieval of data on the basis of codes, which facilitates the comparison of discourse across participants. An initial coding scheme was developed by the research team

based on the themes and concepts developed in the interviews and emerging from the data. To facilitate the data analysis process, the authors regularly discussed emergent themes and research findings from their sites and compared the similarities and differences across campuses.

During the first round of interviews we found that our low-level smokers largely fell into the two broad categories mentioned earlier—those who smoked mostly at parties (often while using other substances such as alcohol or marijuana) and occasionally outside their residence halls, and students who smoked both at parties and during the course of the week, often during times of stress and boredom. These three contexts (parties, stress, boredom) represent common situations in which low-level tobacco use takes place. We became interested in a pattern of smoking that began in party contexts and expanded into times of stress and boredom. The following quote captures this trajectory:

> Am I a smoker? I guess I have become one. It just sounds so weird to be saying that. I smoked a few times in high school, mostly small cigars. When I came here, I started smoking at parties and outside the dorm with friends every now and then. That was it. Around Thanksgiving, I got pretty stressed out when my girlfriend and I were breaking up. Now it's April and sometimes when I'm bored or taking a study break, or too lazy to go get something to eat, I'll smoke a cigarette. You asked me if I buy cigarettes...well, I've bought a pack every week for the past month ... guess that makes me a smoker. Most days I only smoke a couple of cigarettes, not a lot. But summer is coming and I have this really boring job. I don't want to end up smoking all the time.

We suspect that the transition from party smoking to smoking in other contexts, especially those of stress and boredom, is a pattern typical of college students. Our study was not designed to plot smoking trajectories over time, however, and thus we cannot confirm this suspicion based on our data (see Moran et al. 2004 and Wetter et al. 2004 for studies of smoking trajectories).

THE UTILITY OF SMOKING: THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Our intent was to study the contexts in which students smoked and to better understand reasons for smoking in these contexts by looking at their utility functions—that is, what youth got out of smoking at particular times in particular places. Ongoing analysis of interviews led us to see that much of our informants' smoking occurred in contexts that could be characterized as relatively unstructured. This led us to wonder whether the utility functions

of smoking in this group might address features of unstructured situations that subjects felt needed to be modified. Parties, stress, and boredom are all instances of peculiar moments in social life that lie outside the demand structure of everyday life. Thus we began to look to theoretical frameworks that might help us better understand why early smoking occurs more commonly at such times.

We took as our starting point a premise in social theory well articulated by Peter Berger (1963:87):

...Institutions [as well as customs, conventions, explicit rules, and so on] provide procedures through which human conduct is patterned, compelled to go, in grooves deemed desirable by society. And this trick is performed by making those grooves appear to the individual as the only possible ones.

Here Berger intends to highlight how little of our unreflective behavior is simply spontaneous and how much of it is naturalized by social and cultural forces. Our own emphasis is somewhat different: given that so much of our behavior proceeds in familiar grooves, we can expect that persons who find themselves outside of a groove (or needing to shift to another one) must resort to a somewhat different form of engagement with social context than that which is most typical of the everyday world.

On most days we enter and exit institutions that contain fairly circumscribed activity domains such as jobs or classes. Then there are other, often less structured, contexts that nevertheless impose, for reasons of function, tradition, and so on, demands on actors: eating and sleeping, engaging in entertainment activities, or studying. However, there are also situations that lie significantly outside the structure of the everyday and are often recognized as such: the break, the vacation, the celebration, the moment in which there is nothing to do, the situation when demands are so great that one's unthinking compliance to the routine begins to break down. Our research suggests that it is in the latter category, outside the structure of the everyday, that much low-level college tobacco use occurs.[6]

We refer to social situations that lie outside the structure of the mundane and everyday as "extrastructural situations."[7] Extrastructural situations are not at all uncommon, and all of us encounter them throughout the day as we proceed through our daily schedule of activities. Even in a closely structured work environment there are fairly regular breaks, moments of reverie, transitions between locations, and so on. Extrastructural situations are an especially significant trigger for tobacco use among young adults who use tobacco occasionally but have not as yet developed firm patterns of consumption.

Play enters the argument here because it is, even in its improvisational forms, structured activity that is often initiated in response to extrastructural situations.[8] Play (this is especially obvious with specific games) typically takes shape around particular rules. These general comments about play can be applied to certain other forms of social action as well, ritual being the most obvious example. When people are performing a ritual or playing a game, they are acting in reference to a restricted framework of meaning that informs much of their action. In this sense, play and related activities are an understandable reaction to extrastructural situations, for they impose a clear meaning framework upon a situation that lacks one.

Note, then, a subtlety in our argument. Extrastructural situations are social moments that lie outside the familiar framework of the everyday. But extrastructural situations cannot be assumed to be unstructured, because typically social actors quickly find a means to impose some sort of order to substitute for that which is missing. The material we present here is intended to bolster the case that for many beginning smokers, cigarette use is a form of play that serves this purpose. We begin with a brief ethnographic sketch of college life, followed by the presentation of our findings.

THE COLLEGE ENVIRONMENT: A CONSIDERATION OF PLACE

College freshmen are embedded in a cultural environment, and their substance use must be understood in relation to that environment. One's freshmen year, particularly the first few weeks on campus, is often a time of establishing one's identity and finding new friends. Entering the larger environment of college, one is no longer limited by peer group membership and activity involvement that marked the high school years.

Most students who live on campus in residence halls experience new levels of freedom compared to high school. Importantly, as students transition into college life, they are faced with more unstructured time and fewer explicit rules that govern their behavior. This is true both inside and outside of the classroom. Academic schedules in high school are typically arranged to cover every minute of the school day and busy work is often assigned for the purpose of filling students' time as well as for pedagogical reasons. At home, students of high school age typically live with parents or adult guardians, not with peers as they do in college. Although not all households are strongholds of tight discipline, parental control typically exceeds what would be self-imposed in this age group.

Thus, along a number of dimensions, the transition from secondary school to the first year of college is likely to be experienced as a shift from a

relatively structured to a less structured environment. The young adult often leaves his or her natal family for the first time and enters an institution in which independence is stressed, as many formerly regimented aspects of life become regions of discretion. Class schedules, attendance policies, oversight on campus, and other aspects of the student's life now offer the opportunity to sink or swim.

Another important issue to keep in mind here is the broader cultural context. Youth live in an age of increasing time compression, greater opportunities for arousal and diminishing tolerance for boredom, and the proliferation of products that promise instant gratification (Starace 2002). Thus, the social conditions faced by a contemporary college freshman typically include expectations of high arousal levels and a sharp spike in exposure to extrastructural situations. One begins to see how cigarettes could be useful here, for they have been biologically engineered to be a fast and effective nicotine delivery device and socially engineered (advertised) to be an antidote for boredom (Mark Nichter 2003).

This point has some broader implications. If we want to better understand the appeal of the cigarette among this population, we should focus on the pervasive effects of growing up in a high-consumption capitalist economy in which people are exposed to a constant flow of marketing messages inviting them to consume in contexts where they feel lack, a desire to connect, or any number of other emotional deficits. Keeping this point in mind may help us to broaden our understanding of the development of addiction. Today's college students grow up in a cultural environment in which freedom in the form of self-expression is valued, a sense of desire and lack are cultivated as the prerequisites to selling more and more goods, a panoply of high-arousal products and activities are available around the clock, social connectedness is possible in ways never before imagined, and self-medication is condoned as a way of handling negative emotional states. It is therefore no coincidence that an advanced consumer capitalist economy should develop products designed to confront anomie and feelings of lack with arousal. Tobacco maintains its status as a recreational drug among college students in the twenty-first century both because smoking has important utility functions in their social world and because cigarettes have been designed to become physiologically addictive long after their social utilities have diminished.

UNSTRUCTURED AND AROUSED: THE PARTY

Parties are an important part of life for many college students, perhaps especially during their first year when they are finding their place in a new

environment. For many of the students in our sample, parties or other social gatherings are the contexts in which most smoking occurs (cf. Larson and Richards 1998). The stories our informants told us suggest that cigarettes serve a variety of utility functions in the party setting.[9] First, cigarette smoking is strongly associated with alcohol consumption. For those students who described themselves as smoking once in a while but not really being smokers, drinking lowered inhibitions enough to let them smoke without feeling self-conscious. Some informants noted that tobacco enhances the effects of alcohol, or in the words of one informant, "brings on the buzz." Other students explained that having a cigarette was "useful" while drinking, as it provided a break from drinking—a few moments "to straighten out your head." A benefit of smoking in this context was that the rhythm of smoking provided one with an opportunity to pause and plan one's statements (a particular advantage if one has been drinking). After a break, one could return to drinking with renewed vigor. While some students smoked to enable heavier drinking, others described the use of cigarettes as a means to drink less because smoking gives one something else to do other than drink. Both drinking and smoking served to structure the unstructured situation of the party through routines of consumption.

Another reason to smoke at parties is that it facilitates social interaction. Because smoking is usually done outside,[10] lighting up provides a reason to go outdoors with a group. As one female party smoker explained:

Everybody that goes to a party is always there just to like, not to just sit there and watch people—you're there to kick back and meet people and socialize. Everybody always wants to fit in ... and the best part of a party is always outside and you can't just go out and do nothing, so usually you smoke.

The routines of those who smoke regularly at parties are probably familiar: bumming a cigarette, asking for a light, offering a light, and so on. All of these contribute to the solidarity that arises among people who are smoking in the immediate vicinity of one another. A male informant explained:

If I saw someone at a party, or a group of people, that were smoking I'd ask them for a smoke. And that would get me into the conversation or get me closer or something. It's a tool. Just like someone else would say during class, "Do you have a pencil?" It's just one of those things that people do, cheap little things to get themselves in.

Several students explained that smoking "makes the flow of conversation go easier." For those who were shy, having a cigarette with friends made it easier to talk with others.

Smoking also helped one fill time. At a party, one may find oneself unoccupied, with no one to talk to or dance with. This opens up the possibility of being bored at the party or, worse, of being perceived as a person who is boring. As one informant explained:

I smoke [at a party] to look comfortable when I feel out of place or don't know any people, or maybe more out of boredom. If I was in a situation where I didn't know a lot of people it would be because I didn't have anything better to do. Smoking a cigarette makes me look like I'm doing something.

Some of the points raised by our informants are more or less explicit techniques for structuring time and space at a party. For example, one can use the cigarette to move in and out of different party spaces. Like refilling one's drink, the cigarette gives one an excuse to take leave of one group or location and enter another. One can also take a smoke break from the party, exiting the party and then reentering it.

All of these observations can be summarized under two general categories. First, there is the utility of the cigarette as a means of structuring an otherwise fluid and ambiguous situation. Second, in various ways, the cigarette promotes social interaction, contributing to an atmosphere of egalitarian camaraderie that Victor Turner (1969) referred to as "communitas." These two factors were also found to be significant among smokers who identified stress as another reason for smoking.

SMOKING AND STRESS

The relationship between smoking and stress is from one perspective well understood, and strong correlations between perceived stress and tobacco use have been demonstrated (Ng and Jeffrey 2003). However, such correlations do not in themselves constitute a complete understanding of the relationship between stress and tobacco use. For one thing, as has been widely observed, it is not always clear just what stress is (Kassell et al. 2003). That the concept of "stress" has a significant cultural component is attested to by the fact that the term has a particular historical and cultural provenance, having exploded in popularity in recent decades in both popular and scientific discourse.

The conviction that stress has been shown to be real and to have real effects in disease processes must be tempered by awareness that it is also a broadly defined and variously used term. Stress is not a neatly delimited entity such as horsepower or temperature. It is, in the first place, an

important concept applied by many to express and understand aspects of their experience, and thus stress is multivocal—used and understood in many different ways. It is what one of us (Mark Nichter and Nichter 1989) has called a "specific ambiguity;" the term has an appealing ring of scientific precision, while being useful in a wide range of contexts.

Given that individuals are likely to use the term *stress* in a number of different senses, and to apply it in rhetorical ways, one must be careful not to jump to the conclusion that one understands the relationship between stress and tobacco use. Some of our informants, particularly those who have begun smoking outside of party contexts, testify to the widely accepted position that smoking can directly counter stress: "It's weird, it releases my stress when I smoke. I don't know, it may sound stupid or something, but I actually feel it. I just feel relaxed." Here, and at other places in his interview, the respondent, Justin, seems to conceive of stress relief as a direct, perhaps physiological, effect of tobacco. But at other times, he makes it clear that the stress-relieving effect of cigarettes may have more to do with the actual process of smoking: "But if I'm like under a lot of stress maybe I'll smoke more, or something. Because I actually do find that it does help to release the stress. Because it focuses me more on smoking the cigarette than actually thinking about the problems." Here the stress-relieving effects of tobacco are more tied to the way in which smoking a cigarette structures one's time and attention. Another student who smoked at low levels similarly explained, "Smoking occupies your body so you can just think better and not be distracted. It's like you're totally preoccupied when you're having a cigarette, you're inhaling, and using your hands, just all of it."

Finally, Justin points out that smoking may relieve stress because it draws one into contact with others:

Justin: Well, like it's been really stressful the last couple of weeks. So it just feels good to hang out one night and smoke and drink with my friends.
Interviewer: But does the smoking itself have any good effects, other than just calming you down?
Justin: Uh, I don't know. It's more of a social thing too. You just step outside and smoke a cigarette and talk.
Interviewer: Yeah. In a situation like that, is it just something to be doing while you're talking, or...?
Justin: I think it's more used for that, honestly, like smoking. Like, we'll do it in the house, and drink and smoke, and go outside and smoke a cigarette, and it's like a whole new thing. Because people will start a conversation while they're out there smoking.

This case illustrates that the stress-relieving effects of tobacco use are more complex than a straightforward physiological response to nicotine

(which is, after all, a stimulant). Here the informant points out that the stress relief one finds in the cigarette comes not only from the cigarette but also from the contact with others that the cigarette facilitates. To share a smoking break with another is often more than just two people smoking cigarettes in the same physical space. One can smoke together with someone, attending to their movements and feelings, tolerating silences that would be awkward without the cigarettes and thereby, perhaps, augmenting the intimacy of the encounter. Smoking together facilitates a sense of connectedness with another, something Csordas (1993) has described using the term "somatic mode of attention." Further, the rhythm established by sitting and smoking cigarettes together may be soothing in and of itself.

I just smoke sometimes to make the time more passable. I think sometimes I can think more clearly when I smoke. Not more clearly, I guess that's the wrong word. I'm bad at talking. I just think more smoothly when I'm smoking a cigarette. Because, I guess, it makes the situation a little more familiar to me.

Another young women explained, "When I'm stressed out, I'll talk to a friend and when we're talking, I'm smoking a cigarette. You can put those two together and then I'd say the cigarette makes me feel better."

As was the case in the previous section, then, the efficacy of the cigarette in addressing the situation of stress is said to be twofold. First, it provides a structure that orders the situation. Second, it promotes social interactions that also ameliorate the negative aspects of the stressful situation.

Recent discussions of stress suggest that the most accurate way to understand the stress process is simply as a deviation from a preferred state of being (Dressler 1996:254). Although theoretically deviations from the preferred activity level can happen in either direction, in practice, stress is often associated with a perceived need or an increased demand on one's time and activity. Thus stress is associated, in the first place, with a situation in which demands exceed the capacity of the subject to respond. Like boredom, which we discuss below, stress entails a lack of alignment between the demands of a situation and the self. But whereas boredom designates a situation in which there is nothing to engage the self, stress designates the opposite problem: the situation entails so many demands that the self cannot adequately respond.

If surviving in everyday social life implies a flexible give-and-take between the capacities of the self and the demands of social situations, boredom and stress are two sorts of extrastructural situations where that expectation breaks down. Both are uncomfortable, and typically to label one's situation

as boring or stressful signals a need to realign self and situation (Shaw et al. 1996). A closer look at boredom will allow us to develop this point.

SMOKING AS A RESPONSE TO BOREDOM: TRANSITIONS INTO MORE REGULAR SMOKING

Our findings that smoking among college students is associated with parties and/or stress are consistent with other studies on tobacco use (Mimi Nichter et al. 1997; Nichter et al. 2004). The third context that was often mentioned by our subjects as an occasion for smoking is boredom, a result also reported elsewhere (Brisset and Snow 1993; Carton et al. 1994; De Vries 1995; Starace 2002; Vodanovich and Watt 1999).

As was the case in our discussion of stress, it is important to be specific about what is meant by boredom (Jervis et al. 2003). Most of us are familiar with an active form of boredom, exemplified by a repetitive task or an interlocutor who goes on too long about some less-than-compelling topic. This active form of boredom is certainly not unknown among first-year college students. But here we want to focus on a more passive form of boredom, which emerged in interviews as a far more salient issue for first-year college students.

It is important to note that this generation of college students grew up in a time of potentially intense connection with others. Not only did many have their own cell phones through high school, which facilitated constant connection, but many also had access to three-way calling (which could be expanded to six and nine friends), enabling interactivity with multiple friends at all hours of the day and night. Other forms of connectivity experienced by this age cohort include instant messaging, chat rooms, and interactive videos. Following years of intense connectivity (even when physically alone), nonconnectedness may be felt far more acutely compared to previous cohorts of youth.[11]

Passive boredom is, in the first instance, described in terms of nothingness (nothing to do) or emptiness. Boredom may also be characterized by the imagery of death, as in "killing time" or in the description of a situation as dead. Another feature of boredom talk (Mimi Nichter 2000) is the construction "just [verb phrase]." Young men and women will describe the boredom of engaging in "just" some activity. The point is not that these activities are repetitive and therefore actively boring but, rather, that these pursuits simply do not count as activity: "I didn't do anything all week. I just watched a lot of TV...." Common examples of this formulation are "just

sitting [or laying] there,'' ''just sitting [or laying] around,'' ''just doing nothing,'' and ''just passing time.''

These activities are characterized by passivity. Watching TV is more active than ''just sitting there,'' but even the former can be effectively pursued with little engagement or input. Thus in saying one is ''just doing X,'' one reports a dearth of structure or demand for activity in the situation.[12] Another situation in which the college student is likely to encounter this threatening lack of structure is in breaks in the schedule: breaks between classes, vacation breaks, uneventful weekends. As one informant reflected on being home over break: ''...I didn't have anything to keep me busy. That's pretty much what it is. That's why on the weekends you smoke more, except for smoking more when you drink. Just the fact that you have nothing to do.''

In the above case, we have not only boredom but cigarettes. The association of cigarettes and the rhetoric of boredom is a notable characteristic of our interviews with students who have started to use cigarettes in more established patterns and who are smoking more than in particular contexts like a party or outside the dorm to catch up on gossip. The gradual proliferation of contexts in which smoking occurs has been linked to the development of dependence (see note 3). Attentive to this shift, we note the importance of changes in discourse on smoking that index times of boredom. Such times may occur across contexts, even at parties or when informants describe why they smoke when stressed or to relax:

I'm not gonna smoke because I feel self conscious. I'm not gonna smoke because I feel insecure ... I'm gonna smoke because I'm standing there bored ... kind of in limbo, you know what I mean? You're standing there doing nothing so you might as well have a cigarette. That's the thought process I guess. Like I'll do something. And these cigarettes always make me feel a little better. I think, ''Why don't I just have one and I'll be more relaxed?''

The link between having nothing to do and smoking is a frequently repeated theme in our interviews among those who are establishing a pattern of weekday smoking, although not among those who smoke exclusively at parties when drinking. For the former group, smoking cigarettes begins to structure unstructured time. On the most basic level, smoking a cigarette fills up a time of emptiness (passive boredom). As one informant explained, the cigarette ''takes up like 3 minutes of your time when there's nothing going on.''

An admission of boredom may also function as an idiom of distress (Mark Nichter 1981) that alerts others to both one's distress and one's desire for companionship. Boredom, in this age group, is often associated with

being alone. As one young man said, "When I'm not doing something with friends then I'm usually bored." Although it was uncommon for our informants to explicitly associate boredom with loneliness, their use of the term *boredom* did on occasion imply feelings of loneliness and being without friends. An immediate implication in the use of the term is that, as with stress, noting a state of boredom is one indirect way of alerting others to the subject's need for interaction. On the other hand, looking like one is alone makes a negative statement about oneself and smoking alone (especially several cigarettes) often signals that one is troubled.

One female informant commented on how difficult it was when she didn't have someone to talk to as she meandered across campus: "Sometimes I'm just bored walking on campus, like there's nobody to call and I don't have to return any calls ... so having a cigarette is just filling in your time when you're bored. It's not like I'm chain smoking or jonesing for a smoke or anything like that."

This section has documented that the generalizations that can be drawn from interviews about party smoking and stress also hold for boredom and smoking. First, cigarettes have a range of utility functions that may be called on as one responds to the threat of boredom (an extrastructural situation). Smoking fills empty time; when one is smoking a cigarette, one is doing something. In addition, the various routines associated with smoking—acquiring cigarettes, moving to a place where one can smoke them, and so on—give further shape to unstructured time. Finally, cigarettes combat boredom, in its guise as loneliness, by bringing people together.

EXTRASTRUCTURAL SITUATIONS AND PLAY

We have described three situations that our informants describe as the primary contexts for their tobacco use and have pointed to a number of similarities both among the situations and in how smoking is used therein. Cigarette smoking occurs in response to what we have called extrastructural situations, social junctures that are somehow set off from the everyday and are characterized by a lack of correspondence between the demands of the situation and the capacities of the self. Extrastructural situations represent a break in the expected structure of the everyday world, which is typically comprised of contexts that offer guidelines for activity, those grooves that Berger described. In extrastructural situations the social actor is not drawn into a highly routinized pattern of behavior as he or she may be in more clearly structured situations such as the classroom or the workplace, and thus a rethinking of action is required.

We have suggested that cigarette smoking under these conditions can be fruitfully understood as a form of play. Smoking performances—like play more generally—structure unstructured time and allow one to recruit social groups. Our observation that low-level smoking is a form of play resonates with the reflections of our informants, who frequently classified their smoking as "play" or "not serious." Consider the following quote from a young woman who smoked primarily at parties in response to a question about whether she was concerned that she might become a smoker. She responded:

I can't believe how seriously you are taking this smoking a few cigarettes thing.... It's not serious—that's the point! No one is being serious. If someone is "seriously" smoking, like they're upset or something and sitting and smoking a ton by themselves or with a friend, well, they have a problem, and that is a whole different thing. When I smoke it's like whatever, it's no big thing, nothing worth talking about really. I am just smoking a few cigarettes and having a few drinks, that's all. These questions you are asking me ... well, it's like you're just blowing things way out of proportion. It makes my smoking sound so serious. It's not like I think about smoking. It's just play time, it's not something I do during the week, nor would I want to.

This level of explicitness about our thesis was rare. However, the contiguity of playing games and smoking,[13] the close association of parties and cigarettes, the assertion that cigarettes are an important part of having a good time, and a number of the other findings reported here support the claim that this woman put her finger on a sentiment that was widely shared among low-level smokers. She comments, as did several other informants, that being seen smoking alone is a signal that a person has got problems. Smoking while surrounded with friends at parties makes it appear that you are "just a party smoker."

But if many college students engage in smoking as play, then what sort of play is it? What are the conventions that govern this play? Erving Goffman (1986:40), building on the work of Gregory Bateson, pointed out that play is what he called a "keying" of some more established activity: "Play activity is closely patterned after something that already has a meaning in its own terms." Our claim is that for many low-level smokers, cigarette smoking is a playful keying of regular smoking.

It was common for students to tell us that they did not want to become "real" or "regular" smokers. After years of exposure to tobacco prevention programs in high school and mass media campaigns, most students recognize the health risks associated with tobacco use. Despite their smoking,

they differentiated themselves from "real" smokers: a telling analogy would be to a drama (a play), a staged event. As the actor is not Hamlet, so it seems that students smoking a cigarette are often not really themselves—at least not as they normally see themselves.

Again, this interpretation is richly supported by the comments of many of our informants. For young persons who are often still in a phase of experimentation with self-image, the cigarette facilitates the assumption of different roles, allows one to play with different images. The following comment from a female informant suggests that the cigarette can be used to temporarily assume another role:

I think that if you're smoking you look like so mysterious ... so much more deep down inside yourself, and I think a lot of people when they're talking to somebody, if they're not drunk they're trying to get to know that person, and if the person seems mysterious, then obviously you're going to be much more intrigued.

Several informants alluded to the idea that the person attending the party is "not really me." As one young woman noted, "People go out to parties, to have a break from like, normal life at school. And when you're going out to a party you're in an environment that's very different and you want to relax so there's going to be drinking, and you might smoke." One young man explained how cigarettes "are just this socialization type thing." Over time, he learned that smoking cigarettes helped him adopt a new persona and expand his social network. He explained:

I started smoking just to watch and witness how being a smoker changed me into all these different groups and people. So I'd be a smoker ... and I'd be at a party and someone would come up to me and ask for a cigarette or I'd go ask someone for a cigarette and we'd just start talking. It was kind of interesting how that would work, how being a smoker kind of helped me meet people.

Another informant related a similar idea about her smoking in both party and studying contexts:

I think that smoking looks really sensuous the way some people do it. Cigarettes may smell gross if you're the only one doing it, but at a party if everyone is doing it, it can look really sexy. Sometimes I do it to kinda, you know, announce myself, like "Hey here I am." I have fun with that—calling like a little attention to myself, not alot ... it's like a whisper not like talking loud ... and when I do it for a few minutes, I feel different ... it makes me feel a little sexier.

Such comments suggest that smoking a cigarette involves playing with possible identities. In these instances, smoking has a fantasy facilitating utility. The cigarette is what Kendall Walton (1990) called a prop, or what

Vygotsky (1978) referred to as a "pivot:" an object that facilitates the transformation into the space of play. For those smoking at parties, the act of smoking allows them not only to give up their day-to-day identity, but to become absorbed in a party space defined by possibility and performance as well as a suspension of normative rules—to some degree. Those who smoke (most often while drinking) as part of taking on a new party persona may easily get caught up in a party script where not only are they cued to smoke, but they lose their inhibitions and resonate with others participating in the same activities. Many informants noted that they smoked at parties not just to be like others (social influences), but to "experience" the party. Smoking was seen as an act of freedom and abandon—feelings that are often associated with play.

CONCLUSION

An unanswered question among tobacco researchers is, "Why do college students initiate smoking when most are cognizant of the health risks of tobacco?" Two common explanations are that youth have little understanding of long-term consequences and that they have a keen sense of invulnerability. In this paper, we add another dimension to the possible answers to this important question. We have called attention to the social utility functions served by smoking in party contexts and in facing unstructured states referred to by students as "stress" and "boredom." We have argued that these three contexts, parties, stress, and boredom, are all initiated as extrastructural situations and that many low-level smokers face these situations by engaging in a form of spontaneous play with a cigarette.[14]

We also have suggested that to engage in play is necessarily to adopt a form of subjectivity that is somewhat different from that which typifies the everyday world. If it turns out that it is not the everyday, taken-for-granted self that is involved in much early smoking activity, then we can perhaps begin to understand why the well-known health risks of smoking are not more of an impediment to lighting up. We conclude by reviewing our argument on this point, placing our points in a broader theoretical framework.

For reasons having to do with broad economic forces and with how our society handles the transition to adulthood for middle-class youth, first-year college students are likely to find themselves facing a relatively loosely structured environment rich in extrastructural situations. In these contexts, many engage in spontaneous play with cigarettes. Like all play, this activity tends to create a world within the world.[15]

This possibility of entering an alternative world has obvious psychological implications. Once I commit myself to play the game, I enter an "as if" world (Holland et al. 1998) in which I agree up front to accept certain conventions. Having accepted these conventions, my self-concept and my emotions are now conditioned by this new frame within which I act. Vygotsky (1978:100) has pointed out that "[play] teaches [the player] to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious 'I,' to her role in the game and its rules."[16] Once I enter the world of the game, my very desires are structured by this "as if" world.

This is clearly seen in the case of the party. Party smokers may be absorbed in the moment and enter a domain of communitas where they let go of rigid identity boundaries and engage in play. This is a space where one does not take one's actions too seriously or adhere too closely to one's everyday identity. Substances like alcohol and tobacco enable this transition. They facilitate not only an altered state of experience and consciousness, but an altered state of identity.

If smoking constitutes play, as we have argued, the cigarette may be "called for" in the conventions of the play. In Vygotsky's terms, the smoker is the fictitious I in a play situation. The point has implications for how we understand the decision to use tobacco in this age group. To the degree that the approach outlined here is valid, many college students may not decide to use tobacco, if we interpret that word in its fullest sense. Rather, a student may decide to employ tobacco in spontaneous play, to play the part of one who smokes, to appear to be a smoker, albeit temporarily.

"Playing" with tobacco needs to be taken seriously. For reasons discussed in this paper, youth entering college are particularly likely to face what we have called extrastructural situations and, thus, are particularly likely to seize on available means for adding order to them. The use of cigarettes allowed our informants to transform the structural hiatus into something more manageable. However, the subtle shadings of self and the altered nature of responsibility in play are largely lost on the body, the body that may gradually move on to a dependence on nicotine.

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NOTES

1. Dependence is not a monolithic phenomenon having just one form or expression. Edwards (1986; Edwards and Gross 1976) has drawn attention to the multidimensionality of alcohol dependence. Following the lead of Edwards, some tobacco researchers have begun to study the multidimensionality of nicotine dependence in terms of degrees and not absolutes (Shadel et al. 2000). Expressions of dependence may manifest both at specific times and in specific contexts as well as emerge as cigarettes become less and less tied to specific contexts, cues, and scripts.

2. An exception to this generalization is a study (Wetter et al. 2004) that appeared as we were preparing the final version of the current paper. Wetter and his colleagues conducted a longitudinal study of transitions in smoking behavior among college students and found that positive expectancies regarding tobacco use and gender were the strongest predictors of future smoking behavior. They write in concluding, "The lack of strong predictive relations for numerous theoretically relevant constructs also indicated that much more research is necessary among college students to elucidate numerous questions raised by the current study" (175).

3. A focus on the utility functions of smoking complements studies such as that by Maggs (1997) that have investigated the social utility of drinking as goal-directed behavior among youth.

4. According to findings from the National Comorbidity Survey, after initial use, development of dependence to nicotine is far more common than to cocaine, heroin, or alcohol, and the rate of graduation from occasional use to addictive levels of intake is highest for nicotine (Anthony et al. 1994).

5. We included two questions on our screener that we believed would best capture the likelihood of future smoking: "Do you think you will smoke a cigarette at any time during the next year?" and "Consider the following: A good friend who is upset and smoking offers you a cigarette when you sit down to talk with him/her. Would you accept the cigarette and smoke with them?" Response possibilities ranged from "definitely yes" to "definitely no."

6. That is, our approach is similar to those in the microsociological tradition who focus on the minute interactions and encounters of daily life as the building blocks of the larger social order (a good summary can be found in Collins 1994). It is worth noting that some of the classic work in this tradition concerns the social construction of addiction (see, e.g., Becker 1997). Randall Collins (2004) has recently discussed tobacco rituals in a spirit that is compatible with, although quite different from, our own approach.

7. Our term overlaps considerably with what Victor Turner (1969) called "liminality." There is some ambiguity in Turner's work, however, about whether the term should be reserved for religious contexts. Thus, rather than augmenting the ambiguity, we offer our own term.

8. In saying that play is a response to extrastructural situations, we mean nothing other than that play is likely to occur at a hiatus in the structure of the everyday world. One undertakes playing not randomly but, rather, at junctures where an

opportunity presents itself. In our own society, such opportunities are closely defined by the character of the adult workday and workweek, and of course the fact that children are not integrated into this social scheme is directly related to the perception that childhood is a time for play.

9. The utility functions of smoking at parties are the subject of a more extensive follow-up study at Purdue University and the subject of a forthcoming article.

10. Smoking has moved outside due to increasing restrictions on smoking inside public buildings in recent years.

11. See Spacks 1995 for a more extensive argument linking boredom to modernity. See Nunley (n.d.) for an approach to teen alcohol use that parallels ours here in seeing arousal levels in the culture as a whole as an important contributor to adolescent substance use.

12. Conrad (1999) and Jervis et al. (2003) capture this quality of boredom as a failure of any activity to engage the self.

13. Smoking may be associated with playing cards, for example. Especially important in this context is the link between smoking and drinking games, which are common at college parties.

14. Goffman (1986:43) points out that playthings (such as, say, balls) are often objects that generate their own momentum and thereby guide the activity of play. Cigarettes are another example of the point.

15. It is not unusual to engage in activities such as play, ritual, reading, and so on that immerse the subject into a "world within the world." Doing so alters the meaning framework to which one's activity is oriented, and to change the meaning context in which the self is operating is to subtly alter the self (Goffman 1986) . Other authors have pointed out that activity in these contexts is not "authored" in precisely the same way as it is in the world of the everyday (Humphrey and Laidlaw 1994).

16. Many authors have discussed the transformation of self in play, including Huizinga (1955) and Mead (1934). A more recent treatment of the theme is Stromberg 1999. Similar points about the transformation of self have also been made in reference to ritual contexts. Here is how Durkheim (2001:220) describes the ritual participant in a famous passage: "It is not difficult to imagine that a man in such a state of exaltation should no longer know himself. Feeling possessed and led on by some sort of external power that makes him think and act differently than he normally does, he naturally feels he is no longer himself. It seems to him that he has become a new being."

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