



Smoking and drinking among college students: “It’s a package deal”

Mimi Nichter^{a,*}, Mark Nichter^a, Asli Carkoglu^b, Elizabeth Lloyd-Richardson^c,
the Tobacco Etiology Research Network (TERN)¹

^a Department of Anthropology, University of Arizona, Emil Haury Building, Tucson, AZ 85721, United States

^b Department of Psychology, Dogus University, Istanbul, Turkey

^c Department of Psychology, University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, MA, United States

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ABSTRACT

Background: This paper reports on qualitative research on smoking in contexts associated with drinking among college students. Although a plethora of survey research has shown a positive association between smoking and alcohol use, little attention has been given to the utility functions of these co-occurring behaviors.

Methods: Data are drawn from semi-structured interviews with college freshmen at a large Mid-western university in the U.S. ($n = 35$). In addition, eleven focus groups with fraternity and sorority members were conducted ($n = 70$). Interviews and focus groups focused on a range of issues including current smoking behavior, reasons for smoking, and smoking and drinking.

Results: A review of qualitative responses reveals that smoking served multiple utility functions for this population including (1) facilitating social interaction across gender, (2) allowing one to structure time and space at a party, (3) enabling “party” smokers to smoke with fewer negative side effects, and (4) helping to calm one down when drunk.

Conclusions: Whereas smoking was stigmatized during the context of one’s everyday life as a student, at parties while consuming alcohol, smoking was viewed as normative and socially acceptable. Preventive interventions are needed on college campus that target co-substance use and address widespread misperceptions about the harm of tobacco use and addiction.

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1. Introduction

Substance use, including tobacco and alcohol use, has been reported to peak in early adulthood (McKee et al., 2004; Reed et al., 2007; Weitzman and Chen, 2005). 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). Results of national studies in the U.S. have shown that approximately 30% of college students’ report having smoked in the past 30 days, and 40% report having smoked in the past year (Johnston et al., 2001; Rigotti et al., 2000). Smoking rates among young adults who do not attend college are higher than smoking rates among

college students (Johnston et al., 2002), although the patterns of smoking appear to vary. College smokers are more likely to be non-daily smokers, meaning that they smoke more in social situations when compared to their non-college peers (Harrison et al., 2008; Moran et al., 2004).

Nearly 50% of college students in the U.S. report engaging in heavy drinking in the past year and much concern has been expressed about this harmful behavior (Johnston et al., 1998). College students tend to drink more heavily than their non-college peers (Gfroerer et al., 1997; McCabe et al., 2005; Schulenberg and Maggs, 2002).

Alcohol consumption and tobacco use are known to be strongly related behaviors (Bobo and Husten, 2000; McKee et al., 2004; Weitzman and Chen, 2005; Acosta et al., 2008), and the association between these two substances has been found to become stronger with the heavier use of either substance (McKee et al., 2004; Harrison and McKee, 2008; Rose et al., 2004). Recent studies have found that smoking urges increase rapidly following heavy drinking, even among light smokers (King and Epstein, 2005).

A better understanding of the social contexts in which smoking occurs and the utility functions it serves in the lives of young adults may help enhance tobacco control research and practice (Poland

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: mimin@email.arizona.edu (M. Nichter).

¹ The Tobacco Etiology Research Network (TERN) includes: Richard Clayton (Chair), David Abrams, Robert Balster, Linda Collins, Ronald Dahl, Brian Flay, Gary Giovino, George Koob, Robert McMahon, Kathleen Merikangas, Mark Nichter, Saul Shiffman, Stephen Tiffany, Dennis Prager, Melissa Segress, Christopher Agnew, Craig Colder, Lisa Dierker, Eric Donny, Lorah Dorn, Thomas Eissenberg, Brian Flaherty, Lan Liang, Nancy Maylath, Mimi Nichter, Elizabeth Lloyd-Richardson, William Shadel, and Laura Stroud.

et al., 2006). In a previous paper, we discussed social contexts of smoking associated with stress among college students, including during exams and managing social relationships (Nichter et al., 2007). In this article, we focus on another social context – parties – where smoking occurs in the context of alcohol use. Data presented draw on qualitative research and highlights the perceived social and physical utility functions of smoking and drinking at parties. Although there is an extensive literature on alcohol and tobacco use among college students, little is known about how smoking serves as a consumption event that facilitates social interaction and the perceived benefits of their combined use.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

This paper draws on data from a longitudinal study of college students (2002–2003) participating in the University Project of the Tobacco Etiology Research Network (UpTERN). A complete description of study rationale, design and participant selection has been previously reported (Colder et al., 2008; Dierker et al., 2006; Tiffany et al., 2008). The study was conducted at a large mid-western university, where first-year college students (freshmen) were followed through the academic year to provide detailed assessments of the trajectories of smoking through weekly web-based quantitative data collection as well as through qualitative interviews and focus groups. The study design was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the university at which the research was conducted.

During freshmen orientation, a 27-item screener questionnaire was completed by 71% ($n = 4690$) of incoming freshmen. Students who had smoked one or more puffs of a cigarette in his or her lifetime were invited to participate ($n = 2001$). Of these 2001 freshmen who were eligible for the study, 912 agreed to participate. Of these 912 students, 46% were female, and 54% were male and the average age was 18. Forty five percent of students had smoked in the past 30 days.

Study participants completed 35 consecutive weekly online surveys. Students were asked to report on smoking, drinking, and other drug use during the previous week as well as to provide information on mood and other health risk behaviors. If a participant reported substance use in the past week, they were administered a web-based daily diary which asked them to report on the frequency and quantity of each substance used, as well as a variety of other questions. Eighty six percent of the sample showed a significant association between reports of smoking and drinking within a day, and data supported a greater likelihood of a bidirectional relationship between alcohol and smoking than that of a unidirectional relationship (Dierker et al., 2006).

Survey responses were used to identify informants for the qualitative component of the study. Following the study protocol, one-half of the students who participated in the web-based surveys were accessible by researchers for the qualitative component, ensuring that the other half remained clean from potential bias or behavioral change that might be introduced through interviews.

2.2. Procedure

Preliminary data analyses in Month 4 of the study provided insights into the range of smoking behavior in the sample. Based on review of these data, we established specific criteria for defining “party smokers”, who are the focus of this paper. Party smokers were defined as those participants who (a) reported smoking on four or more of the weeks that they completed the survey by the middle of first semester, and (b) smoked more than two-thirds of their reported cigarettes 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 because of the fine-grained weekly quantitative data from the larger UpTERN study available to us.

A random sample of students who met these “party smoker” criteria was identified for interviews ($n = 91$). From this group, we randomly selected 40 for interviews, and 35 agreed to participate (18 males and 17 females). Semi-structured individual interviews with party smokers lasted approximately 1 h and focused on a range of issues including current smoking behavior, reasons for smoking, and smoking and drinking, etc. All interviews took place on the college campus and interviewers and participants were matched by gender. Interviewers were graduate students who had received extensive training in conducting qualitative interviews. Informants were paid \$15 for their participation.

Focus groups were conducted with fraternity and sorority members as the Greek system was found to be a highly pervasive organization on the college campus with large membership.² During their first several months on campus, fraternity houses

are common party locations for freshmen males and females, despite the fact that freshmen are not yet Greek members themselves. Fraternity houses are important sites for tobacco and alcohol consumption. They are also “socialization sites”, where incoming freshmen observe the behavior of upperclassmen (defined as second year of college and higher) and learn what is normative on campus. Therefore, focus groups were conducted in fraternity and sorority houses to learn about smoking and drinking behaviors in these contexts. Focus group participants (approximately 6 per group) were non-freshmen because we were interested in interviewing fraternity and sorority members. 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; and smoking at parties. In all, 11 focus groups (4 sororities; 4 fraternities; 3 mixed groups) were conducted by the authors. Focus groups lasted about one and one-half to two hours and participants were paid \$15 each.

2.3. Data analysis

All interviews and focus groups were transcribed verbatim and coded using ATLAS.ti 5.0. Graduate student coders were given a 2-day training in the software and coding scheme. The coding scheme was developed based on the themes and concepts developed in the interviews and emergent from the data. Inter-rater reliability between coders was established through an iterative process where coders went through an interview transcript and coded it. Codes across interviews were compared to check for inter-rater reliability. This process was repeated until 90% reliability was achieved between coders. Although this paper draws largely on qualitative interview data, some quantitative data are presented as background.

3. Results

3.1. Social acceptability of smoking and drinking

As previously reported, quantitative analysis revealed that both smoking and drinking patterns differed based on the day of the week, with significantly higher levels of use reported on week-ends (Friday and Saturday). Drinking on Thursday was significantly greater than mean drinking levels from Sunday to Wednesday (Colder et al., 2006). The average number of cigarettes smoked on the weekend nights was approximately five per night for both males and females (Nichter et al., 2006).

A distinction was posited between “party time” and “normal time”, with parties viewed as social space where the rules for everyday behavior did not apply. Parties were a time “to chill, kick back, and relax” and to have a break from the stressors of normal life, which included classes, homework, and exams. The majority of party smokers believed that smoking while drinking was “not really smoking” and was therefore socially acceptable. As one party smoker explained, “It’s kind of a package deal. When you’re at a party, the daytime norms of social acceptance for smoking just don’t apply”. Another student explained, “smoking while you’re drinking has become a social aspect of drinking, it’s totally acceptable... that’s not true about smoking in public”. In a cultural milieu where smoking is increasingly stigmatized, college students did not want to appear to be “real” smokers, defined as those who smoked alone or at high levels.

Focus groups among upper-class fraternity members also confirmed that there was a perceptual distinction between being a smoker and smoking at parties. When asked if many of the fraternity members in the house smoked, informants estimated that “only about 10 percent of members are ‘real’ smokers”, a number that they believed had been steadily declining. However, when asked about parties, they were quick to note that “60–70 percent of the people at our parties smoke”. They described how they might chastise a friend who smoked too much during the daytime, whereas at a party it was acceptable because “everybody is doing it”. As one young man noted, “everyone’s drunk so they just don’t care”. Another fraternity brother expanded on this theme:

² In American colleges and universities, social fraternities and sororities refer to organizations that have existed since the 1800s that are part of national organiza-

tions. They typically have their own houses on or near campus where members live and where parties are held (DeSantis, 2007).

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