

Beyond the Statistics of Adolescent Smoking

PENELOPE ECKERT, MA, PHD

Abstract: Statistical studies can identify the demographic characteristics of the adolescent smoking population but cannot reveal how clusters of demographic categories combine in the culture of the community to form salient social categories, or how social processes link these categories to smoking and smoking-related behavior. Because smoking and smoking-related behavior function as a key social symbol, anti-smoking campaigns that are based on an inaccurate understanding of the social context in which smoking occurs can

reinforce this behavior. Participant observation in a suburban high school suggests that adolescents begin smoking as part of a complex symbolic process growing out of the process of social differentiation between future members of the working class on the one hand and the middle class on the other. It points out inadequacies in two existing anti-smoking programs in the schools that result from ignoring the social dynamics of smoking. (*Am J Public Health* 1983; 73:439-441.)

Any smoking intervention program must be based on knowledge of who is being addressed and what social functions smoking has for them. Statistical studies have roughly identified the adolescent smoking population as children of non-high school graduates, and as nonparticipants in school sports, activities, and academics.^{1,2} These findings must be interpreted in the light of additional, qualitative information to understand which specific aspects of the social identities of that population are associated with, or expressed by, smoking.

The following discussion is based on one year of participant observation in a high school, and on hour-long taped interviews with over 200 students in that school, covering a variety of aspects of adolescent life, including substance use. A random sample was used as the point of departure of a network study, and all major social groups in the school are represented. The corpus of interviews represents 30 per cent of the population of one graduating class.*

Smoking and Adolescent Social Categories

Sociological studies have consistently found a socioeconomic division in schools, wherein those who participate in and dominate school activities tend to come from the upper end of the local socioeconomic continuum.^{1,3-5} The demo-

graphic studies of smoking mentioned above come up with the same correlation, finding that high school smokers are from lower socioeconomic families and do not participate in school activities. In the high school represented in this discussion, this division exists; in fact, the two social categories are highly polarized. In late elementary school, each class of students begins a process of intense differentiation into two social categories based on distinct and frequently conflicting sets of needs, interests, and aspirations. One category, consisting predominantly of students from middle-class homes, regard high school as necessary and sufficient preparation for the next stage of their lives—college. Insofar as their aspirations require the continuing sponsorship of adults and the adult institution of the school, they center their lives around school and school activities. Careful not to alienate these sponsors through direct challenge of adult prerogatives, these young people exercise their emerging adult identities through the performance of adult-like roles within the school and its activities. People in this category are referred to in this and in many schools as “Jocks”, but in other localities and other eras they might be called “Joe Colleges”, “Collegiates”, “Frats”, “Preppies”, or “Socialites”. Opposed to the Jocks are students, largely from working-class or lower-middle-class homes, who generally consider school inadequate and unnecessary preparation for the jobs they aspire to upon graduation. They are more oriented to neighborhood than to school ties, and feeling that the school has little to offer, reject its hegemony and express their emerging adult identities through claim to more immediate adult prerogatives. These people are called “Burnouts” in this and many other schools; in other times or other places, they may be called “Hoods”, “Greasers”, “Stoners”, or “Freaks”. While many people in the school do not consider themselves Jocks or Burnouts, virtually all members of the adolescent population measure their behav-

*The primary purpose of this field work was a quantitative study of the spread of linguistic change in the adolescent population.

Address reprint requests to Dr. Penelope Eckert, Department of Anthropology, University of Michigan, 1054 LSA Building, Ann Arbor, MI 48109. This paper, submitted to the Journal August 31, 1981, was revised and accepted for publication October 13, 1982.

ior in terms of the Jock-Burnout opposition. These two categories define the extremes of behavior in the school, and individuals recognize that adoption of various traits, particularly smoking, places them in the continuum between the two extremes.

The terms "Jock" and "Burnout" are used by the students themselves, and are not considered derogatory by the students to whom they are addressed. The terms refer to both sexes, and are far broader than their references to sports or drugs would suggest. Jocks and Burnouts are distinguished by a wide variety of traits such as dress (Burnouts wear bell-bottomed jeans and rock concert t-shirts whereas Jocks dress "preppy"); participation in school activities (Jocks do, Burnouts do not); academic programs (Jocks take college preparatory courses, Burnouts take vocational courses); drugs (Burnouts use them relatively openly, Jocks do not); and cigarette smoking (Burnouts do, Jocks do not). The list of traits goes on to include such things as territory, language, musical tastes, demeanor, and interests. A large portion of overt behavior is governed by social category affiliation, and each category puts a good deal of energy into maintaining and elaborating its differences from the other.

Smoking is a key symbol,⁶ a basic term in the oppositions that set Burnouts and Jocks apart. In fact, while the categories of "Jock" and "Burnout" are named for an interest in sports and drugs, respectively, smoking is a clearer defining trait. Many students define Burnouts as "the people who smoke (cigarettes)" and it appears that a more accurate statement would be that Burnouts are the people who *have* to smoke. For all the force of socialization, of adolescent identity, and of sanctions in the school system itself conspire to make Burnouts smoke, and to keep Jocks from smoking. As a common form of adult exploration among elementary school children, smoking is a ready-made symbol of adult status. Smoking clearly begins its symbolic career as Burnouts lay claim to adult status in sixth and seventh grades, and its original significance derives almost entirely from adult authority. But as differences in relation to adults and the adult institution of the school begin to create social divisions among youths, smoking acquires significance in relations among youths. Those who lay early claim to the adult prerogative of smoking sport cigarettes as evidence of this claim; those who accept adult hegemony both avoid and actively reject smoking. As these two categories polarize, the symbolic value of smoking increases, until one could almost say that Jocks do not smoke because the Burnouts do, and the Burnouts smoke because the Jocks do not.

The symbolic value of cigarette smoking is apparent to even the most casual observer: dramatic craving gestures frequently serve as greetings, and exchange of cigarettes is an important gesture of solidarity. Sharing is a common way of solidifying ties within social groups, and Burnouts share a variety of possessions and commodities such as cars, clothing, and information, with an intensity that Jocks do not show. Cigarette sharing is particularly intense, and frequently purely symbolic: cigarettes are often given but not smoked until later. The solidaristic function of cigarette sharing is no

doubt enhanced by the fact that what is being shared is a defining Burnout commodity. The status of cigarette smoking as a more widespread Burnout trait is confirmed by the regularly employed strategy of offering or requesting cigarettes to establish trust with strangers.

Social polarization and its accompanying set of symbols accounts for the force behind the Burnouts' smoking and the Jocks' abstinence. But it is important to consider a basic difference in the status of the two. While the Burnouts' behavior is based on a sense of continuity between their lives in high school and their lives after graduation (and their denial of the school's hegemony is a result of this), high school represents for the Jocks only a temporary world. The Jocks' abstinence is symbolic only within the high school context. A few Jocks do smoke away from school, and say categorically that they would never smoke in or near school, or at a school function. Some Jocks begin to smoke as they approach graduation, as they grow slightly cynical about the high school social order, and some do not discount the possibility that they will smoke in college, where the symbolic value of smoking may be different. When the Jocks and Burnouts go their separate ways after high school graduation, and the need to maintain these symbols decreases, the Burnouts will be stuck with an addiction, and the Jocks' abstinence may fade away.

Implications for Smoking Prevention Programs

Insofar as smoking is an index of Burnout social identity, a nonsmoking campaign must address itself to Burnouts and to Burnout norms. Anything that ridicules or threatens Burnout norms or identity will be counterproductive. A popular television spot aimed at an adolescent audience appears to be based on a misinterpretation of the adolescent smoking population's norms: a teen-age actress, presenting a perfect "Jock" image, announces that she regards smokers as "losers". This presentation of the Jock image as a high school role model reflects the American myth that there is one homogeneous adolescent culture: the high school culture of sports, cheerleading, school activities, clubs, and dances. The myth assumes that most teenagers aspire to prominence or at least membership in this culture, and in the elite that governs it. This television spot reminds Burnouts that the rest of the adolescent population considers them "losers". Its effect is more likely to encourage them to comfort themselves with a cigarette, or to hold up their cigarettes in defiance. It would be more to the point to see the kind of person Burnouts look up to presenting nonsmoking as the sign of a certain kind of Burnout who "has it together."

The school where this study took place has, as an elite activity, an organization that travels to elementary schools in the area dramatizing the dangers of smoking. This activity interacts with the symbolic system of the high school in much the same way as the television spot. Insofar as the school institutes as an activity (and thus part of the Jocks' domain) an anti-smoking campaign, it reinforces the symbolic force of smoking. If anything, the school should play down

the differences between Jocks and Burnouts, particularly in this respect. Any benefit from this program will not carry into the population of the high school itself, and it may well only impress those in its elementary school audience who aspire to "Jockhood". From a point of view of pure social structure, locating an anti-smoking campaign in the "Jock establishment" is unproductive, if not counterproductive. Jocks are not the ones who are in danger of smoking, and it is not altogether obvious that the Jock image is what is needed to influence those small children who may be future smokers.

Although this school is in a large "typical" midwestern industrial suburb, serving students from a variety of White ethnic groups and from a broad socioeconomic range, it is not necessarily representative of American schools or even schools in a given region. The details of the social significance of smoking are not necessarily the same in all areas or in all schools. But insofar as smoking seems to be most widespread among working class adolescents, it is probable that the findings in this school are generally applicable to a large number of communities throughout the country. This remains, however, an empirical question, and one that needs to be addressed as an obvious preliminary step to publicity campaigns aimed at adolescents. Although symbolic systems may vary considerably from community to community, the general status of smoking as an adult prerogative gives it a widespread and constant underlying significance among adolescents. And while this significance will be elaborated differently in different social contexts, the basic mechanisms of symbolic elaboration are constant. What is universal is that smoking is a highly symbolic act, and as such acquires social meaning and compulsion within a given community's symbolic system. It is within the local symbolic system that

an anti-smoking campaign will be interpreted, and the campaign's success will depend on the extent to which it provides meaningful alternatives within that system.

Campaigns that de-glamorize the actual gestures of smoking would appear to be the most reasonable broad-based approach, insofar as they may de-fuse the overall symbolic value of the activity itself. In a more focused campaign, however, the social approach required to influence people against smoking will depend on the local dynamics of smoking. A campaign based on an inadequate understanding of these dynamics can not only be ineffective, it may in the end actually encourage smoking. It is important to know when one is challenging a symbol, and when one is challenging what that symbol stands for. A campaign against smoking should not be a campaign against the people who smoke, but against smoking as an inadequate expression of their identity.

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