

Smokers as a Subculture CARDEW SfAA 2007 (final).doc Have you ever walked by a group of smokers huddled around an ashtray and gave the group a second thought - - other than, “how could they smoke those awful things?” or maybe “boy, I’d like one too?”. I believe that there is something more there- perhaps smokers use smoking as a social tool and perhaps those smokers are part of a subculture. Today, I’m going to talk about the project I did for Dr. Messing’s Language and Culture class at the University of South Florida as an undergraduate. My research suggests that smoking may be used as a social tool and that those smokers you see just may have some sort of camaraderie.

As I am present the major findings from my research, I will tie in concepts learned in the course and explain why I approached this topic from a linguistic framework. I’m going to wrap up by highlighting areas in which this research could be expanded. Additionally, I will explain how the research would greatly benefit from a more holistic approach. I believe that this topic could be better expanded by medical anthropologists and could lead to a more culturally relative smoking cessation program.

Before I get started with the “meat” of the presentation, I thought I’d share with you how the idea for the project came about. There were a group of smokers in Dr. Messing’s class; myself and six or so others. Most of us had other classes together because we were all anthropology students, but most of us didn’t know each other very well at the start of the course. We would all convene outside of the classroom prior to the start of class and during the break because we could smoke there. At first, we gathered there to smoke, but as the weeks went on we would intentionally meet a little before class to smoke *and* converse. We started off with idle chitchat, about the course or other classes, and as the course progressed conversation turned towards the topics of the week. We would all collectively enter the classroom when we were done smoking as a group. A few times during the break we had discussed the readings and come up with new aspects or thoughts that we would than share with the entire class after the break. The sentences usually started off with “while we were out on a break the smoking group discussed...”. There were also a few times when we would all get into

discussion and break for a few minutes longer than we were really supposed to and then migrate back in late. It became a joke within the class- the smokers were discussing the topics and had come up with something new or the smokers took a longer break than allotted. Dr. Messing would walk by the group sometimes and make a joke about what she was missing out on by not being a smoker. She made a similar comment about the time that the final assignment was being assigned and I decided to use our group as the inspiration for my project. There was another smoker in the group, Naomi Longshaw, who focused on the “regional variations and gender roles creating the identity of the smoking community”.

So, now for the “meat” of the presentation. Some of the themes that emerged from the data suggest that smoking can be used as a social tool are: the use of smoke breaks to move into an area beyond ear shot of the group, smoking as a way to pass time, smoking as a way to enter into conversation with others.

For my data collection I used observation, participant observation, and very informal interviews. I conducted plain observation and took notes at the University of South Florida, Four Green Fields (a small bar frequented by locals) that is actually about a mile from here, and the Plaza in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I logged about 15 hours of just observation between these locations and most of the hours were at the USF campus and Four Green Fields. I used participant observation and a voice recorder to tape conversations at the University of South Florida, Four Green Fields, Gray’s College Bookstore™ in Tampa, Florida, the Sleeping Dog (which is a bar) in the Plaza of Santa Fe, New Mexico, and the Albuquerque airport. I carried my tape recorder with me for two months with the intention of recording conversations of smokers. However, much to my surprise about 25% of my recordings were serendipitous in that I was talking with smokers not intending to collect data and got some of my best discourse. I took more field notes during my 20 or so hours of participate observation. I recorded and transcribed in detail about 5 hours of conversation. When it came time to analyze the data I looked over my field notes and transcripts by hand. I didn’t know how to use Atlas.ti at the time- in fact, I used different colored highlighters to find the themes.

The most interesting aspect of the data collection process was when I realized that smokers are very easy to find. In Florida, they're outside near the ashtrays. The laws restricting smokers from smoking inside office buildings, schools, restaurants and various other public places made the air inside the buildings cleaner and safer for everyone to breathe. However, the laws did more than provide a healthier environment - the laws led to the creation of defined spaces for smokers to smoke in public. Ashtrays signify the defined spaces. Most public buildings now accommodate smokers by providing ashtrays. While it is acceptable to smoke outside and not use the ashtrays provided, most smokers tend to congregate in the near ashtrays. I witnessed this all over the University of South Florida campus, at Gray's College Bookstore™ and a park in the Plaza in Santa Fe.

While it does appear common for Americans that are defined by spaces, such as elevators, to strike up casual conversations with strangers, I have observed that smokers tend to congregate in larger groups, thus leading to casual conversations amongst more strangers. The strangers that one smokes with may become friends after a few smoke breaks, if the strangers continue to take smoke breaks at the same time.

The laws passed banning smoking from inside buildings have done more than lead smokers to smoke outside in defined spaces. Another result of the laws has been for smokers to have an excuse to go outside, out of earshot of other people. I found this to be particularly important at Gray's College Bookstore™. Most of the directors, managers, and assistant managers in the store smoke. I have observed on many occasions the management asking one another if they want to smoke. This is known throughout the store as a code for, "I have something I need to talk to you about, alone". It is assumed that uninvited people will not go out with them. The excuse to go outside and smoke makes private conversations easier to have. Non-smokers can excuse themselves from a group to converse privately by going to the break room for a cup of coffee, or the ever-famous girls' trip to the bathroom. However, these activities may not put them out of earshot of everyone.

Here is an example of management using smoking breaks as a way to talk about work that came from a conversation at Four Green Fields (SHOW SLIDE)¹.

Another aspect that appears to be common to the smokers I observed and spoke with, is that smokers do not like to smoke alone. This is perhaps why strangers that smoke in the same defined areas at the same time strike up a conversation, although I think that the conversations between strangers in defined spaces is not unique to smokers. Smoking gives smokers an opportunity to meet other people easily because they are constantly moving to defined spaces. In every place that I observed the activities of smokers, someone who wanted to smoke would ask another smoker if they wanted to go outside with them. A lot of smokers admit that they do not like to smoke alone, however, no themes of *why* emerged from the data I collected

Smoking also gives smokers a way to pass time. While walking around the USF campus in Tampa, I noticed a lot of people sitting by themselves. People who were not smoking were preoccupied doing something to pass the time. Most students were reading, listening to music, writing, or most popularly talking on their cell phone. Sitting and waiting is usually an awkward situation; what do you do with yourself? Smokers have the option of smoking to occupy themselves while waiting. In a very informal interview, one of my informants shared with me what he thought the main difference between smokers and non-smokers is (SHOW SLIDE)².

Smoking gives smokers a chance to converse with other smokers, which, if the smoker is a social person, also gives them a chance to participate in an activity they would enjoy. Also, by smoking, a smoker can keep up with the gossip of what's going on in school or work. There was an episode of a TV sitcom *Friends* in

¹ Right now... I have a peer in management... and the both of us, the only time we get to talk about strategy is when we go out and have a cigarette. ##### Because in the building we're constantly slammed with projects and issues going on.. it's like.. I do one of these (holds two fingers to lips to signify a cigarette break) and she says okay! And in that 15-20 minutes we get more accomplished that we do in four hours in the building.

² Jen: What do you think is the main difference between smokers and non-smokers?

Dave: ... uh, ..smokers want to quit, but smokers, uh... typically... I think anyway are more <relaxed>. Relaxed only because they have something going on, versus other people who don't, their mind is moving a little quicker.

which one of the main characters, Rachel gets a new job. At her new job her boss and coworker both smoke. During their smoke breaks they talked about important decisions and topics. Once Rachel figured out that she was missing out on business discussion, she pretended to be a smoker so that she could be included in the discussions. If a smoker stops smoking, they will face the difficulties of overcoming nicotine addiction. However, there are many potential social factors to face as well. A smoker trying to quit smoking will have to find another place to take a break at, another way to get the gossip or confidential information shared at school or work, and another way to pass the time.

Another theme that emerged from the data suggests that smokers may make up a subculture in America. There appears to be a camaraderie amongst smokers that is noticeable by the use of verbal and non-verbal cues during smoke breaks, shared behavior during smoke breaks, and words commonly used among smokers. These aspects can be found among members of various subcultures.

An interesting point to smokers taking a smoke break together, be them friends or strangers, is the length of the conversation. Smokers that are breaking, be it to get away from whatever they are doing or to converse, appear to regulate the length of their conversations by the time it takes to smoke a cigarette. From what I have observed, it takes most smokers five to six minutes to smoke. When the last smoker of the group is finished with his or her cigarettes, the group seems to take it as a non-verbal cue to get back to whatever they were doing prior to smoking. If the smokers want to break longer or converse more, then one or more will hold their pack of cigarettes in their hands or sometimes ask if anyone wants to smoke another. It appears that the end of a cigarette signifies the end of the break or conversation. The length of conversation and the signal of the conversation being over, with the putting out of a cigarette, is a cue that most non-smokers do not appear to understand. While I was collecting data, I experienced as well as witnessed conversations with non-smokers where the last cigarette was put out and the non-smoker appeared slightly confused when everyone walked away without announcing they were walking away.

Of the smokers that I observed and spoke with most appeared to be both social and generous. The generosity is demonstrated in part by an important part of smoking culture, “cigarette karma”. Cigarette karma is giving (or as a smoker would say, “bumming”) a cigarette to a smoker that does not have any cigarettes, and thereby justifying asking someone else for a cigarette when you are out of smokes (cigarettes). Another aspect of cigarette karma that is interesting, yet usually not talked about, is that the receiver of the free cigarette usually hangs out with the giver of the cigarette for the time span of smoking. If someone asks for a cigarette, gets one, and walks away, the giver usually is confused. The receiver owes the giver five to six minutes of conversation in exchange for a cigarette. This exchange is also seen when someone asks for the use of a lighter, but to a lesser extent.

My data suggests that smokers create a subculture in America because they are a small, somewhat stigmatized group of people that can identify with other smokers. The bond that smokers have with each other is reinforced through “bumming” cigarettes to another smoker that is out of smokes, conversing with strangers and passing time together. Moreover, smoking can be viewed as a social tool in that it gives smokers a way to meet other smokers, have an excuse to take a break, converse privately or to pass the time. The use of smoking as a social tool and the other aspects of smoking behaviors can be combined to explain the subculture of smokers.

Given that this research was conducted for a linguistics course, linguistic concepts helped to guide what was “seen” and “noticed” during observation and analysis. Because of the assigned articles and the discussions throughout the course I was more inclined to notice the verbal and non-verbal cues used by smokers. I noticed the “slang” of smokers, such as ‘bumming a cigarette’ and ‘cigarette karma’ and the non-verbal cues such as putting two fingers up to your lips. Quite a few of the articles that we read in our Language and Culture course focused on the use of a focal vocabulary amongst members of a subculture or culture, such as “Hip-Hop Nation Language” by Alim and Fordham’s article “Dissin’ ‘the Standard’: Ebonics as Guerrilla Warfare at Capital

High. Both of these articles portrayed the usage of such language as strengthening the camaraderie of the people and strengthened their identity as a member of the culture.

In the stage of analysis I noticed smokers' conversations tend to end with the end of the cigarette. I'm a smoker, so I knew this and participated unconsciously with it, but it became clear during analysis because I had written down the actions of the individuals and actually consciously realized that this happens. Regardless of the fact that this had to be a project conducted from a linguistic framework because it was for a linguistics course, linguistics was beneficial to the study because aspects of smoking such as non-verbal cues, "slang", and actual conversations help to form camaraderie amongst smokers. Another approach may not have led to such conclusions. This knowledge is useful because it shows us that there is more to smoking than chemical dependency; smoking occurs in a social context. After doing my research, I have found that smokers may have an equal dependency to the social aspects and functions of smoking.

Areas where this research could be expanded include: to what extent does smoking contribute to the identity of the individual, how do individuals cope with not being able to smoke in terms of taking breaks, meeting people, and passing the time- what can people do instead of smoking that would satisfy these needs. Additionally, this and future research could be applied towards making a more culturally relative and therefore more successful smoking cessation campaign and smoking cessation program.

There are anthropologists working in smoking cessation campaigns currently. Mark Nichter, Mimi Nichter, and Muramoto have been participating in Project Quit Tobacco International in which they have been using ethnography to better inform culturally appropriate smoking cessation programs. At the SfAA meetings last year in Vancouver I saw Mark Nichter speak about how the project has considered patterns of tobacco use, reasons to quit, tobacco facts that catch attention and how risks are perceived and understood. In fact, one of the points he spoke to was that in Indonesia one of the social concerns for people that want to quit is that they will lose friends and also gain weight.

So, the next time you notice a group of smokers huddled in the constructed, defined spaces near an ashtray, I hope you take a minute to ponder some of these points I've raised today.