

# Health and Liberation Crossroads: Cigarette Smoking among Students at a South African University

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## Abstract

University students find themselves in an exceptional space where new freedoms are experienced and promoted. Generally subjected to stringent control mechanisms in schools and homes, young women are likely to experience these freedoms more profoundly than young men. In the context of greater freedom, risk taking through largely prohibited activities such as smoking may be viewed as an enactment of new-found women power and as a performance of personal autonomy.

This paper draws on a qualitative study carried out with a selected group of female smokers on the Edgewood campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal. It explores the crossroads of health and liberation by interrogating the meanings that female student smokers attach to cigarette smoking within the university space. The meanings attached to this practice and the significance of a non-incriminating space in the production and appropriation of youthful femininities are viewed against the negative health implications.

Data presented here are based on focus group discussions and individual interviews with an initial sample of 12 female smokers between the ages of 18 and 22 years. Findings are discussed in relation to three themes: *university as a transitional space*, *university as an enabling space* and *university as a free space*. The data show the university to be a space where conventional femininity can be challenged and new forms of subjectivity enacted. This paper argues that while some young women claim to be expressing their freedom and independence by exercising free choice, they are ironically entrapping themselves within their notions of freedom and, more detrimentally, within a poorly understood addiction to nicotine in cigarettes.

**Keywords:** smoking, health, female students, university space

## **Introduction**

The transition from high school to university is a time of personal growth and expressions of freedom and independence for male and female students. It is a time when they are no longer under direct parental supervision, are faced with new social and academic pressures and opportunities, and are entering an environment where the use of intoxicating substances is normative (Prendergast 1994). Away from the watchful gaze of schools and family, the university campus provides a kind of ‘blank-cheque’ space where moral imperatives appear to be more relaxed. Furthermore, universities are also adult spaces and by their very nature, as institutions of higher education, are spaces where freedom of thought and expression is not just tolerated, but actively promoted.

For young women who continue to be subjected to stricter regulation and policing mechanisms by schools and families, the transition from school to university may be more profoundly experienced as entry into a liberating space than it would be for men. According to Fletcher and Camblin (2008), leaving home to attend university provides women with the opportunity to make many of their own decisions, particularly with respect to their health behaviours.

I use the word ‘liberation’ in this paper to refer to female university students’ notions of freedom to choose and to act, with particular emphasis on their attempts to challenge perceived gender inequalities. Gender equality is high on the transformation agenda in South Africa and, as Bhana and Pillay (2011) note, the legal framework in the country supporting gender equality has produced new possibilities for the expansion of girls’ freedoms. This is undoubtedly an important goal, the outcomes of which are anticipated to be empowering and emancipatory.

This paper arises from a concern about the visible increase in female student smokers on the Edgewood campus of the University of KwaZulu-Natal (UKZN) over the past few years. This could be due either to a straightforward increase in the number of female student smokers, or to more female students being willing to smoke in public/visible spaces on the university campus, or to a combination of the two. Either way, given the

context of widely disseminated public awareness regarding the health risks associated with cigarette smoking, the phenomenon of a visible increase in female student smoking appeared to be worthy of attention. This paper explores the gendered meanings attached to the practice of cigarette smoking among female students, while focusing on the university as a space within which their notions of liberation intersect with the known health risks of cigarette smoking.

This paper proceeds with a brief review of the literature on university space and on women and smoking. The context of the study and the methodology are then outlined and this is followed by an analysis and discussion of the findings under three organising themes: *University as a transitional space*, *University as an enabling space*, and *University as a free space*.

## **University Space**

Although metaphors of space are very powerful in educational discourse, research and theorising on the relationship between space and learning have only recently gained momentum (Cox 2011). The growing interest in virtual universities has prompted increased research into virtual learning environments (Guasch, Alvarez & Espasa 2010; Shahtalebi, Shahtalebi & Shahtalebi 2011). Alongside this, there has been a revival of interest in the physical space and built environment of universities (Cox 2011).

Since space is understood as being more than the three dimensional physical realm, studies focusing on university space have been varied, giving attention to social space (Straus 2009), personal space (Khan & Kamal 2010), and to ways in which constructed space recursively moulds social practice (Cox 2011).

Lefebvre (1991) and Massey (2005), in theorising about space, have challenged the idea of space in education as bounded and simply a backdrop for action, and propose space as an outcome of continuous contested productive processes. Along similar lines, Wilson and Cervero (2003) assert that knowledge, power, space/place closely intertwine to frame our social practices. This paper explores the significance of the university as a space for the production and appropriation of student femininities through the gendered

meanings that female students attach to the practice of cigarette smoking at university.

## **Women and Smoking**

Globally the number of male smokers exceeds that of female smokers (Koura *et al.* 2011), and this difference varies dramatically across different countries. The relatively lower rates of smoking among women compared to men have been attributed to social disapproval of women smokers and to women's lower social and economic status (Waldron 1991). But increasing tolerance towards women smokers together with increasing economic independence among women have contributed to changing patterns in the gender profiles of smokers.

Studies on women and cigarette smoking have emphasised that smoking has dire health consequences that are unique to women, such as reduced fertility rates, increased spontaneous abortion rates and complications in pregnancy (Koura, Al-Dossary & Bahnassy 2011). According to Mackay (2001), smoking has come to be regarded as an important gender and health issue and therefore has to be seen as a women's issue. The studies under discussion may be criticised for positioning women primarily as reproducers with their reproductive health being the chief concern. Still, it is rarely contested that smoking is a serious health concern and the most significant avoidable cause of premature morbidity and mortality in the world.

In South Africa, as in most societies, smoking is by and large regarded as a masculine activity, and has traditionally been seen as a socially unacceptable one for females and at odds with conventional views of femininity. Studies have shown that in most societies women outlive men, and this has in part been attributed to health-promoting behaviours. The impression that men engage in health-risking behaviours, while women incline to health-promoting ones is aligned with cultural notions of masculinity and femininity (Soffer 2010). Soffer (2010) further argues that femininity, culturally speaking, is equated with health; consequently, women are encouraged and socialised to avoid risk by embracing health-promoting behaviours.

In investigating gender empowerment and male-to-female smoking ratios, Hitchman and Fong (2011) found that in countries with higher female empowerment (measured by economic participation and decision making, political participation and decision making, and access to economic resources), female and male smoking rates are closer to being equal. Their findings further suggest that while women's smoking-prevalence rates are currently lower than men's, they may be expected to rise in many low- and middle-income countries. Arguably, these shifts are reflected on the Edgewood campus of UKZN, where an increasing number of female student smokers have become visible in public spaces. It is evident that many female students are challenging traditional notions of femininity associated with health-preserving desiderata and are constructing new grammars of female behaviour with potentially hazardous outcomes. The focus of this paper is not on health risks specific to women but on the meanings that female students attach to the risky practice of cigarette smoking, in this case within a university setting.

## **The Context**

The study was carried out at the Edgewood campus of UKZN whose specific focus is Education. The campus has a diverse student population in terms of race, gender, social, cultural and economic backgrounds. There is a large population of full-time undergraduate students studying towards a teaching qualification, and a growing number of full- and part-time postgraduate students. Since teaching continues to be a largely feminised profession, there are more female than male students enrolled at the Edgewood campus. With anti-smoking legislation having been in force in South Africa for a number of years, smoking in buildings, enclosed spaces and public spaces is prohibited. Certain open spaces are however unrestricted, and female student smokers, often congregating in groups, have become increasingly visible in these areas of the university campus.

## **Methodology**

This study was undertaken within a qualitative framework, which provides useful opportunities for exploring how social experiences are given meaning.

Participants were a selected group of undergraduate female students enrolled for an Education degree. The findings discussed in this paper draws on the opinions of an initial sample of 12 female smokers aged between 18 and 22 years who were purposely selected on the basis of being observed smoking in the open spaces on the university campus. These were full-time undergraduate students, the category that accounts for most of the students on the campus.

The research was approved by the appropriate university ethics committee and gatekeeper permission was granted by the Dean of the Faculty. The participants were fully informed about the nature of the research and were made aware that they were free to withdraw from participation at any time. They were guaranteed confidentiality, and in order to ensure anonymity all names have been replaced by pseudonyms. Data were generated by means of focus group discussions (FGDs) combined with in-depth individual interviews, methods that provided opportunities for listening to the participants' views and seeing the world from their perspective. As a full-time staff member at the university, I am aware of the spaces within which students smoke and I am sure that I am a familiar sight to many of them. Gaining access to the participants was easy and they participated enthusiastically in the group discussions. I conducted three FGDs (two groups of three and one group of four participants) in the open spaces within which they were observed smoking. The FGDs provided a safe and comfortable way for the participants to talk about the phenomenon of female student smoking in ways that both included and excluded their personal views and practices. It allowed the participants to talk about themselves, if they chose to, and also to offer explanations relating to their peers.

Some pre-planned questions were asked to 'kick-start' the interviews whose shape was, however, chiefly determined by the direction(s) in which the participants steered discussion. Some of the questions used to get the FGDs going were: 'When and why do you think females begin smoking?'; 'Within which spaces do female students mainly smoke?'; 'What meanings do female students attach to cigarette smoking?'; 'How does knowledge of the health risks associated with smoking affect the decision to begin and continue smoking?'

A further two participants volunteered to be interviewed individually in my office. The questions asked were similar to those in the FGDs except that they now focused on the participants' personal views and experiences.

The discussions and interviews were tape-recorded with the consent of the participants and later transcribed verbatim.

The data from the FGDs and the individual interviews are discussed in terms of the three main themes that emerged from the participants' opinions and observations. The first is 'University as a transitional space'. This theme examines the crossroads of liberation and health within a construction of the University's offering a space perceived as temporary, transitional and experimental. The second theme, 'University as an enabling space', discusses the ways in which the university setting enables a challenge to gender norms, and highlights the potential health risks associated with particular expressions of liberation. The final theme, 'University as a free space', puts to the question the participants' understandings of freedom at the university, as that freedom intersects with their health choices.

## **Findings**

Overall, an array of interpersonal and psychosocial factors was offered by the young women as influences on their decision to begin and to continue smoking. These explanations included curiosity, using smoking as a stress reliever, for image construction, for weight control, and just because it is allowed. The presentation below is based on a selection of the data collected. The three heads under which they are distributed are manifestly interconnected, so the division arrived at is an uneasy one and is adhered to chiefly in the interests of clarity.

### **University as a Transitional Space**

A number of the young women in the study perceived the period in their lives spent as university students as unique and transitory. They foresaw a transition to a relatively stable adulthood upon completion of their studies. From the discussions it was clear that the young women were aware of the harmful effects of cigarette smoking, and many seemingly had a clear intention to quit once they transitioned into 'adulthood'. For example, Priyanka said: *'Maybe it's a phase that I'll get out of and I'll stop completely because I know that I'll want to start a family and I won't want to do that [smoke] for the sake of my children and myself'*. Similarly, positioning this

period in her life as a transitory phase preceding a more stable, responsible one, Justine stated: *'I have decided that if I am married and have a child, I'm going to stop. If I become pregnant I will stop but for now while I still can do it, I'm gonna do it'*.

There was only one participant who stated that she intended neither to have babies nor to quit smoking. In an exchange with Justine, Celine declared: *'Not me. I don't plan to get married or have children so I don't have to quit'*. The rest signalled an intention to stop smoking once they planned to have babies. All of the participants, in their intention either to quit or continue smoking, perpetuate a biological essentialisation of women as reproducers, in terms of which their health is assessed not from an inclusive point of view but solely in relation to their reproductive function and capacity.

Constructing the university as a transitional space also fosters understandings that promote experimentation with self-expression through forms of behaviour that prior to arrival at the university would have been regarded as transgressive. What some of the young women who spoke about image enhancement through engaging in practices that were forbidden at school actually meant, even if they did not say it, was the construction of identity as a commodity that can be purchased from a marketplace of ideas and images (Finklestein 1991). This is reflected in Gugu's explanation of why she smokes at university: *'I think it looks cool and sophisticated and shows that I am my own person.'* Her words point to the projection of an identity that is perceived as both stylish and liberated.

## **University as an Enabling Space**

Viewing the university as an arena in which critical, independent thought is promoted, a number of the participants in consequence viewed it as encouraging challenges to established practices and orthodoxies. Asserting themselves as empowered, independent thinkers, they portrayed smoking as one of the ways in which they enacted their liberation. Pinky, for example, claimed that her choices were independent, without any peer influence: *'Well, we are encouraged to be individuals and make our own decisions – I don't do it because of my friends'*.

Some participants traced their decision to smoke to a wish to chall-

enge the gender norm; for example, in commenting on the kind of image she wanted to portray, Lorraine said: *'It's not that we want to be seen, it's like if boys don't have to hide it why do we have to hide it? It's not like 'Oh I'm smoking', it's more like if it's allowed on campus, we gonna do it on campus.'*

Others boldly interpret risk taking through smoking as a flaunting of new-found power and an enactment of personal autonomy: *'To me it does make me feel powerful and independent because when I have that cig and just like "Yeh!"'* (Zama) and *'just because I can!'* (Priyanka). The data suggest that inasmuch as smoking defies traditional versions of femininity, it served for some of the participants as a means of enacting their liberation from the fetters of tradition.

While at one level smoking for some of the participants represented an active challenge to traditional gender norms, at another it contradictorily betrayed complicity with them. For instance, there was general agreement in the FGDs around the notion that smoking causes weight loss (To quote Zama: *'it's fine, 'cos I want to and they also say that it keeps the weight down'*.), indicating that the majority of the young women in the study viewed body size as being closely connected to female attractiveness, a view in conformity with the stereotypical notion that women are more preoccupied with their weight, their body image and their appearance than men are. The focus on body shape and size becomes salient in the context where young women's physical appearance is pivotal to the enactment of femininity (Bhana & Pillay 2011). In claiming independence and liberation on the one hand while on the other hand conforming to conventional norms of femininity relating to body size (Bordo 1993), the positions presented here clearly pose a paradox. Furthermore, it is a paradox with serious implications since young women who use cigarette smoking means to lose weight show that they value body image and appearance above good health.

## **University as a Free Space**

While a few of the participants mentioned that they had begun smoking while at school, the majority indicated that they had started at university. This accords with evidence from the United States of America showing that although the majority of smokers experiment with tobacco use during their

teenage years, many only begin smoking seriously in college (Everette & Husten 1999; Wechsler, Rigotti, Gledhill-Hoyt & Lee 1998).

In response to the question about the reasons for taking up smoking, a typical remark was *'it's allowed'* or *'freedom away from home'*. Many of the participants indicated, moreover, that the only place where they smoked freely was the university campus, a stance reflected in Simmi's statement: *'No one worries about what you do at the university, I only smoke on campus'*. But the emancipatory freedom bestowed by the university campus has proved insufficient to overcome Janet's cultural conditioning which tethers her to traditional notions of femininity; and so when she smokes on the campus, she does so secretly: *'I tend to become very shy and conscious about who sees me smoking because I think it's a very unfeminine thing. Because I don't think it's very attractive to be a young female smoking so I try to hide it as much as possible, even on campus they'll know that I really only smoke if passages are quieter and people have gone to lectures'*.

Reena suggested that she smokes to relieve stress, but admitted that that is just an excuse: *'I'm not addicted- it's basically like a stress reliever but it's not really a stress reliever- but when you get agitated then we go smoke, especially when we in our social group then we like "lets smoke" and we go'*. For her part, Pinky insists upon her ability to resist group pressure and to assert independent agency: *I think I started smoking because all my friends were smoking on campus, and I said 'let me try it'. But I would give it up just like that! I won't worry that I have to fit in, and stuff.*

While many of the participants portrayed smoking as an expression of personal liberation, some brushed it off with the comment that it was insignificant and had not cost them much thought. Simmi said: *'I don't think about it, I don't know why I smoke, I just do it'*; and when asked about her awareness of the health risks, she was equally dismissive: *'Yes, I know, but so what? If I have to die, I'll die'*. It is important to explore further why people continue to engage in behaviours that they know to be risky instead of rejecting them in favour of those that protect and promote health

The opinions and reflections grouped under this theme, like those mustered under the preceding two, convey the impression that many of the participants took to smoking (and continue to smoke) of their own free will. But should this portrayal be accepted at face value? Perhaps not. For in suggesting that they took up smoking voluntarily, are not the young ladies in question deluding themselves? Despite believing themselves to have acted as

free agents when they took up smoking, were they not in fact captives – captives in thrall to the seductive but contestable notion that smoking symbolised freedom, empowerment, independent agency, autonomy?

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper has explored some of the meanings that female student smokers attach to cigarette smoking in a university setting. A university campus, by its very nature, offers young people opportunities for cultivating new tastes, fashioning new forms of subjectivity, exploring new modes of behaviour, all seemingly exempt from the control of family and the enviroing society. The data from this study suggest that the presiding discourse at university underwrites direct and indirect messages about independence, liberation and decision making upon one's own responsibility, and that these beliefs encourage active challenges to existing traditional frameworks. And so, despite well-documented research proving the detrimental effects of smoking, because the university is viewed as a space where freedom of choice is valued, a blind eye is turned to smokers while they cause harm to themselves as well as others. This suggests that the ways in which freedoms are understood and expressed at university have to be interrogated, and their valuable outcomes weighed against undesirable ones.

The meanings that the participants in this study attach to the practice of cigarette smoking within the university space are not without contradictions. For example, it is well known that what keeps smokers hooked is a nicotine addiction. Hence, the free-will discourse in the participants' pronouncements, asserting an ability to start and stop smoking at will is clearly at odds with the facts relating to addiction. Another contradiction concerns participants' claims to have taken up smoking through choice, not coercion; however, their willingness to be swayed by the voguish belief prevalent on many university campuses that smoking symbolises freedom, empowerment and independent agency bespeaks a subtle form of coercion after all.

While young females at university may be equating smoking with the pursuit of personal emancipation and independence, the associated health risks have drawn attention to the question of feminine agency. The issue becomes particularly significant when the striving for greater agency tempts

young females into adopting risky forms of behaviour whose association with freedom and empowerment is as illusory as it is seductive. This paper has argued that while the university is a space where freedom of thought and self-expression are, and should be, esteemed, and that while it is critical for women's empowerment to continue, the ways in which young women understand and express their freedoms have to be weighed against possible harmful consequences both for themselves and others.

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