

Managing Addiction:



A Grounded Theory study of an account of smoking

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Abstract

A grounded theory approach was used to explore the research question: How do young adult smokers account for their smoking habits? The study consists of the analysis of a semi-structured interview transcript of a female participant who was 25 years old at the time of the interview. Three main core categories emerged from the analysis: Reasons for smoking, Phases of smoking and Managing addiction. The latter emerged as the core process, linked with the negotiation of an identity separate from that of other smokers, thus rejecting the 'smoker' identity.

Introduction

A recent study by Levinson et al (2007) based on a survey of smoking habits conducted during 1999-2004 among university students in the US, aged 18-24, found that 56.3% of the respondents denied being smokers, despite engaging in what was described by the authors as *social* or *occasional smoking* – a term very much in popular usage but whose actual meaning among those who profess to it has not been studied (Levinson et al, 2007). What is it about the label 'smoker' that causes reluctance to the point of rejection?

More than the label itself, it appears to be the associated notion of *addiction*, or *being addicted* that is problematic; Levinson et al (2007) reported that those who denied smoking behaved similarly to non-smokers in most respects, but they disbelieved the addictiveness of smoking. This idea of the rejection of addiction is further strengthened by a qualitative study by Scheffels & Schou (2007) focusing on young smokers' accounts of continuing to smoke; it was found that the participants of the study tended to reject being controlled by physical addiction, preferring instead to highlight 'positive sides' as their motivation for smoking.

Addiction seems to be a highly complex, highly personal concept; yet despite this there has been little qualitative research on the processes underlying it, or indeed of the accounts of people who smoke. The present study seeks to add to this body of knowledge, while attempting to address the question: How do young adult smokers account for their smoking habits?

Method

This study is based on the analysis of a transcript of a semi-structured interview in the public domain. As a consequence we only know about the participant that she is female; at the time of the interview the participant was 25 years old, living in a university environment and had been smoking for three years.

The transcript was analysed by means of grounded theory techniques, with a similar focus as that proposed by Charmaz (1995, 2006), itself based on the original ideas of Glaser and Strauss (1965, 1967, 1968; Strauss and Glaser, 1970). Charmaz's approach emphasises the role of the researcher in *constructing* rather than *unearthing* the meanings in the data by their interaction with it.

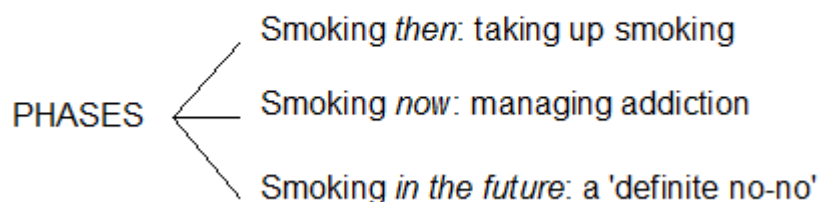
The analysis consisted of several iterations of line-by-line coding, followed by focused coding leading to the emergence of higher-level categories. The participant's *in vivo*¹ codes were preserved where possible. The emerging theory was then compared with the original data itself in order to fully incorporate the meanings that emerged.

Findings

Smoking as a phase: then, now, in the future

Throughout her account, the participant outlines three distinct phases of smoking. Using 'time' as a theoretical code, the three phases were equated with three time periods:

Figure 1 *Phases of smoking*



The demarcation of *then*, *now* and *future* is made mostly implicitly by the participant, by description of her past reasons for smoking, her present habits and her expectation of quitting in the future; however, in the excerpt below the break with the past occurs in a more explicit way:

I thought I was old enough not to get addicted to smoking, which was a bit of a foolish, arrogant sort of assumption. But I just assumed that I wasn't [...] I just assumed that I wouldn't be (sic) continue to smoke.

The participant's position towards having started smoking was not entirely clear from this transcript. However, the above excerpt indicates a rupture with her reasoning at the time, and hence with that 'phase' of her smoking life.

As an illustration of the demarcation between *now* and the *future*, the participant positions the act of giving up smoking firmly in the future, a position which is in clear contrast with her present attitude towards giving up:

I assume that it [giving up] would be quite easy but because at the moment I don't particularly want to. But yeah I would like to give up [...] because I'm 25 now and when I got a bit older, definitely, especially when I want to start thinking about having kids and stuff, and that'll be a definite no-no. But I assume that that's gonna come sort of hand in hand with like I said before about the changing in lifestyle.

During focused coding the 'now' phase - corresponding to the participant's present smoking habits - was raised to a category as 'Managing addiction', itself a core category which is discussed below.

Reasons for smoking: Lifestyle, personal and addiction

Three distinct reasons for the participant's smoking behaviour emerged at different points of the participant's account.

Lifestyle reasons are environmental, external to the participant; they are described by the participant as factors that ensure that she continues to smoke - chiefly living with heavy smokers and drinking 'a lot':

Well, partly my lifestyle at university facilitates smoking quite heavily [...] I mean I live with seven other people and everybody smokes all the time. And also I think if you drink a lot, smoking sort of goes hand in hand with that. So in order to stop smoking I think a lot of aspects of my lifestyle would have to change. Really.

Her motivation for quitting in the future is also attributed to lifestyle, more specifically to the

changes in lifestyle that would follow 'hand-in-hand' with the decision to form a family.

Personal (internal) motives emerge as similarly subdivided along a dimension of time; the participant's original motivation for smoking was as a means of 'breaking with the past'; despite arising from an external circumstance (a relationship break-up) the participant presents this event as something deliberate and controlled:

And the reason that made me start smoking was that I'd split up with a long-term boyfriend of mine, and I wanted to do something different to how I'd behaved before.

By the same token smoking in the present is assigned to a specific, personal function, that of an affective 'prop':

I've taken to using smoking as a bit of a prop. I think if you're feeling a bit (pause) awkward or you're not quite sure what to do with yourself (you have) a cigarette to kind of create that barrier. And I do firmly believe in that, I mean I do tend to use props quite a lot anyway, I think [...] if I feel a bit sort of out of place then I'll do something to kind of distract myself. And smoking's become quite a (big) part of that.

Addiction emerged as a core category in itself, but also as a reason for her continuing to smoke: as 'physical urges' that resulted in her resuming smoking after stopping temporarily (but not as an attempt to quit) on more than one occasion:

Well, if I don't smoke for a couple of days – which I've sort of tried, which wasn't really an attempt to give up [...] that I sort of do sort of quite fancy a cigarette, and will then have, you know, a couple. So there is that urge there to smoke.

Managing Addiction

The category of managing addiction emerged during focused coding as an amalgamation of codes referring to the acknowledgement and definition of addiction, differentiation between the participant's perceived degree of addiction and that attributed to her flatmates, as well as the definition of her flatmates as 'true smokers':

I'd like to that I wasn't addicted to it really. But I've really sort of decided that I am.

[...]

JD: So you think they're [her flatmates] more addicted than you?

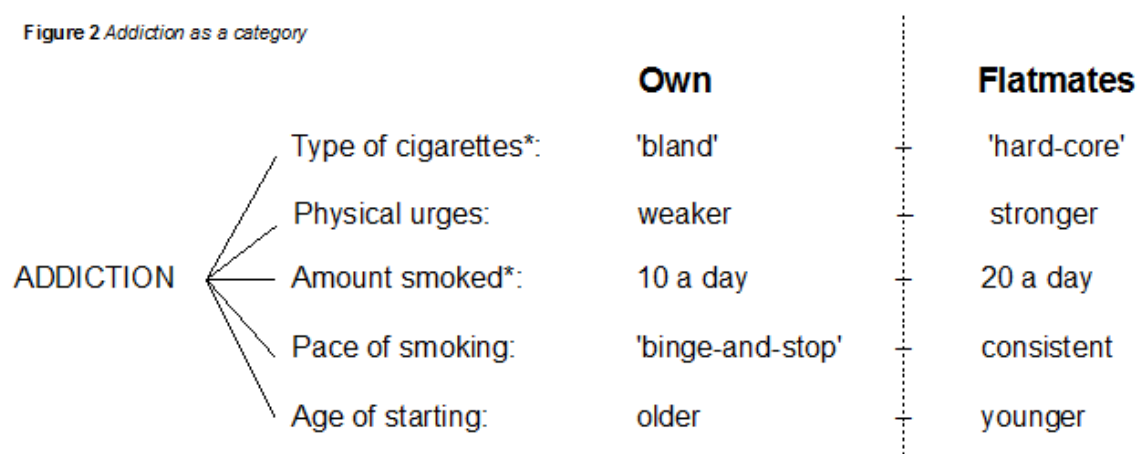
Int: Oh I know they are, yeah, cos *they started smoking when they were younger, and they smoke sort of 20 a day, whereas I'll smoke ten.*

[...]

I mean I haven't really come to terms with being a smoker as such. I don't consider myself a smoker. The cues that smokers do that I don't do, like *true smokers* will always have their cigarettes with them and a lighter. I notice that people I live with do that. (my italics).

The figure below shows the definition of addiction that emerges from the participant's account; the way in which she defines addiction creates a clear demarcation between her own level of addiction and that of her flatmates, whom she equates with 'true smokers'.

Figure 2 Addiction as a category



Thus in managing her addiction the participant is also creating an identity for herself which is diametrically opposed to that of a 'real smoker'; in fact, in the data the two processes are indistinguishable.

Nonetheless, for the two dimensions which are marked with an asterisk, there are overlaps between her own and her flatmates' characteristics; it appears that the line between smoker and something different is sometimes 'fuzzy' in the participant's account:

Everyone I know smokes either rollies or Benson & Hedges, more sort of hard-core cigarette. So I think, relatively as well I think, Oh well () it's not as strong as what they're smoking.

[...]

I tend to binge-smoke.[...] And I think that partly is because I need to go up to a higher brand, I'm not getting as much nicotine out of the cheaper cigarettes.

Discussion

The account of smoking that emerges from the aforementioned core categories is a complex one; the interplay between reasons for smoking, addiction and future expectations to quit reveal that the participant is negotiating an identity for herself which is necessarily distinct from that of a smoker. In the emergent theory, most of the participant's reasons for smoking are such that they are either internal to her (and hence within her control), or environmental, external reasons which she expects will disappear when her lifestyle changes in future. This leaves addiction as a reason for smoking that cannot be entirely rationalised; thus the participant manages the addiction in such a way that it does not appear to be 'as strong' as that of the smokers around her.

One aspect of the participant's account which could not be fully integrated into the emergent theory was the emergence of apparent contradictions in the differentiation between self and other smokers; some of the demarcations between own addiction and 'real' addiction appeared to be fuzzy and unclear. A possible explanation for this is the one put forward by Levinson et al (2007) – denial of being a smoker in the face of smoking behaviour more akin to a smoker could be evidence of cognitive dissonance among young smokers.

This is an area that requires further study, given that the present analysis was based on a single transcript, without the possibility of further theoretical sampling to 'saturate' the data.

Another area requiring further exploration is the distinction in the participant's account between *physical* and *psychological* addiction; this distinction is not evident in the participant's own language, but appears to be introduced by the researcher; further probing would be required to determine if this is a distinction that contributes to the negotiation of addiction.

The findings of this study, as well as the questions arising from it, can help towards forming a more complete picture of what smoking means to young adult smokers and of the processes of negotiation of identity and managing of addiction that take place in their accounts of smoking.

Word count: 1535 words (excluding excerpts).

Notes

[1] *In vivo* refers to codes of participants' special terms (Charmaz, 2006).

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Appendix A: Table of core categories

PHASES of smoking

Smoking *then*: taking up smoking

Smoking *now*: managing addiction

Smoking *in the future*: a definite no-no

REASONS for smoking behaviour

Lifestyle/external

Present: flatmates, alcohol

Future: having a family

Personal/internal

Past: smoking as a break with the past

Present: smoking as a prop

Addiction

ADDICTION

Type of cigarettes: 'bland' - 'hard-core'

Physical urges: lower - stronger

Amount smoked: 10 a day – 20 a day

Pace of smoking: 'binge-and-stop' - consistent

Age of starting: younger - older