



Smoking as intoxication: A qualitative study of queer youth in the SF Bay Area

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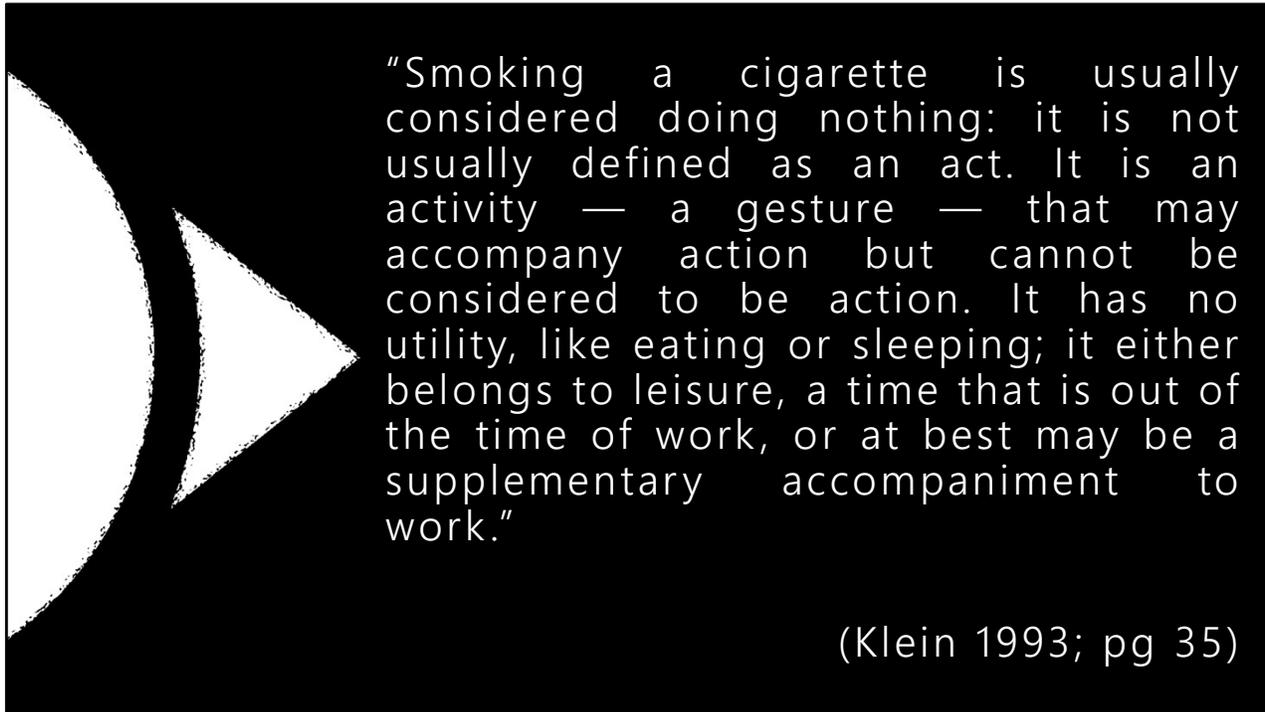
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Smoking a cigarette is considered a mundane part of everyday life -- unless of course you are a public health zealot and/or anti-tobacco activist and then tobacco use is simply and unquestioningly the root of all evil. Yes, people are concerned about the effects of smoking on health, but generally the act of smoking cigarettes, the most common form of tobacco consumption, is uninteresting, banal, ordinary. Smoking instead is considered a consort to the activities that make up everyday life.

Here's a great excerpt from Klein's elegy to the cigarette -- a book titled "Smoking is Sublime," where he says: "Smoking a cigarette is usually considered doing nothing: it is not usually defined as an act. It is an activity -- a gesture -- that may accompany action but cannot be considered to be action. It has no utility, like eating or sleeping; it either belongs to leisure, a time that is out of the time of work, or at best may be a supplementary accompaniment to work."

In contemporary studies of intoxication, which typically focus on alcohol and/or illicit drugs, when smoking is acknowledged, it tends to be discussed in terms of how it complements the intoxicating effects of other substances. For example, numerous studies have highlighted participant's perspectives on the synergistic effect of smoking while drinking or using cannabis, for example—like discussions of boosting one's high when drinking or controlling one's high when smoking weed...but often smoking is sidelined and considered only in relationship to the "real" intoxicants of alcohol, cannabis, or illicit drugs.

I would be remiss if I didn't acknowledge that important exceptions to this exist, but when considering studies of intoxication specifically, tobacco is typically marginalized. Critical studies of tobacco use, especially smoking, exist but they remain largely independent from the literature on other intoxicating substances and they tend not to emphasize smoking as intoxication. Also, just an aside, these studies remain underappreciated or unknown even in the mainstream tobacco field, particularly in the United States where epidemiology and medicine rule the roost and where talking about any potential benefits from smoking is potentially career suicide. Researchers who do this have been accused of collusion with the tobacco industry or disregarding the severe health ramifications of smoking. Even harm reduction is generally taboo in the tobacco field in the US, especially in California where I live, where I've heard prominent tobacco researchers joke about the absurdity of the notion of tobacco harm reduction.



The important question that I want to address today is: Why isn't smoking cigarettes talked about in terms of intoxication? Smoking just isn't typically considered something that's used to alter one's consciousness. But it's not entirely clear why this is case. For example, Jason Hughes, in his book, *Learning to Smoke: Tobacco Use in the West*, argued tobacco use was, in fact, an intoxicant for Native populations prior to and around the time of European colonization of the Americas. It was a way to lose control through intoxication, it was a way to access the spirits worlds, and as a primarily male pursuit, it was a sign of warrior masculinity, a sign of being a man. However, Hughes goes on to argue that through the commodification and regulation of tobacco and as Hughes argues, the development of milder forms of tobacco, meanings of tobacco shifted.... And it "increasingly [became] understood as a supplementary activity" (Hughes 2003; pg 138).

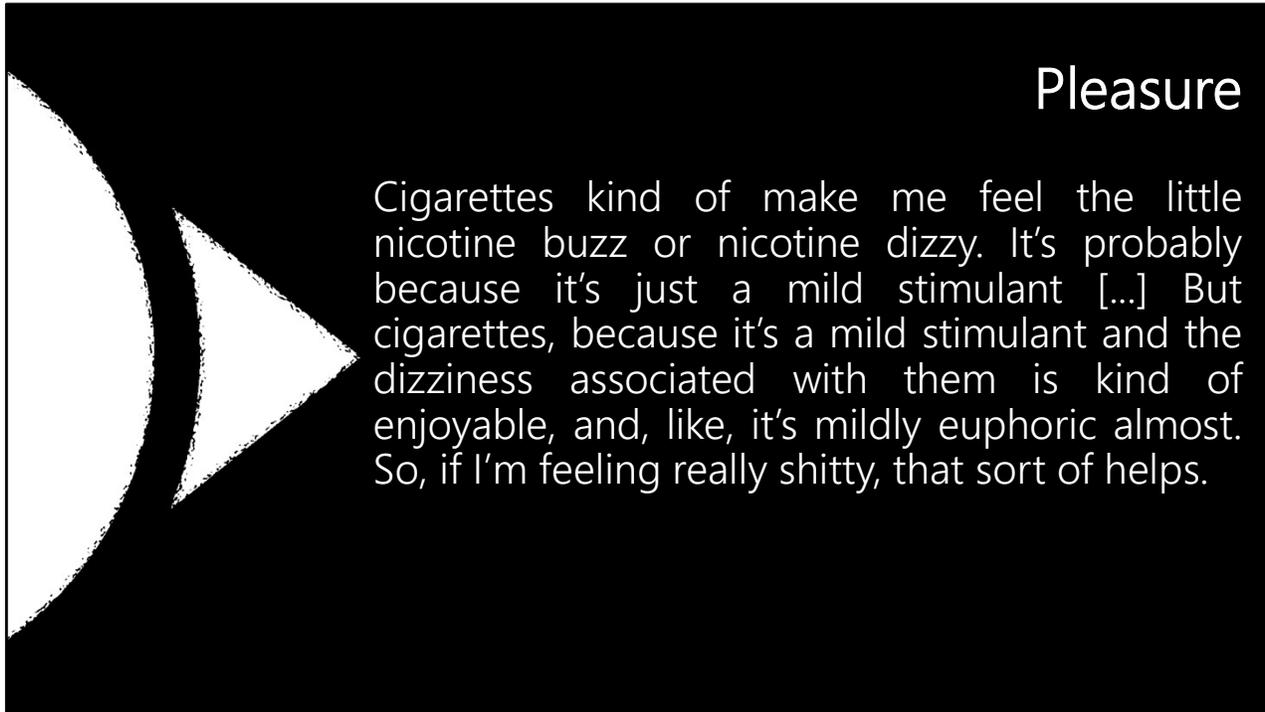
But, even if contemporary tobacco is "milder," a meaningful alteration of consciousness nevertheless occurs when a person consumes tobacco, and equally as important, people's experiences of tobacco's intoxicating effects are shaped by the social and cultural contexts in which the intoxication occurs. By applying what we've learned about intoxication from social and cultural approaches to studies of alcohol and drugs, I hope to emphasize today how tobacco, when examined from a lens of intoxication, highlights both the sought-after psychoactive experience one gets by smoking and also opens, as Dwight Heath said of alcohol, "a window through which to look at other aspects of life, [and] we can see how parts of a sociocultural system work in relation to other parts."



To do this, I'll be drawing on an analysis based on our study of sexual and gender minority adults and smoking-related stigma. This was a study funded by the National Cancer Institute in the US that was designed to consider to what extent the tobacco control policy environment in California may have unintended consequences for sexual and gender minorities, who have among the highest prevalence of smoking in the state. Just a bit of context, the California public health strategy for tobacco explicitly mobilizes stigma as a strategy to discourage tobacco use—they want to make smoking socially unacceptable. In our proposal we were suggesting that people who already experience a tremendous amount of stigma—in this case due to being a sexual and/or gender minority—may be harmed by public health efforts that use stigma as a tool.

I don't want to spend a lot of time describing the methods for the study, but let's at least say this was a qualitative study designed to investigate experiences with and perceptions of smoking-related stigma among 201 sexual and gender minority adults living in the San Francisco Bay Area. The analysis I'm presenting today is based on the narratives of the 58 queer youth who participated in the study, ages 19-25. Interviews were extensive, 2.5 hours long on average—a typical open-ended question format with some alternative elicitation strategies thrown in, including photo prompts and vignettes. We were lucky to have excellent ethnographers conducting interviews—Malisa Young, Emile Sanders, and Camille Dollinger—who elicited tremendously rich narratives from participants about their identities, experiences with stigma, smoking experiences, and meanings and roles of smoking their lives.

Three themes, illustrative of smoking as a form of intoxication, emerged from interviews which are themes common in qualitative studies of intoxication. I do want to note that other scholars [e.g. 7,9,10,13,20–33] have highlighted similar themes of tobacco use but that typically these themes aren't discussed from a lens of intoxication, nor tend to draw on literature from studies of intoxication more generally.



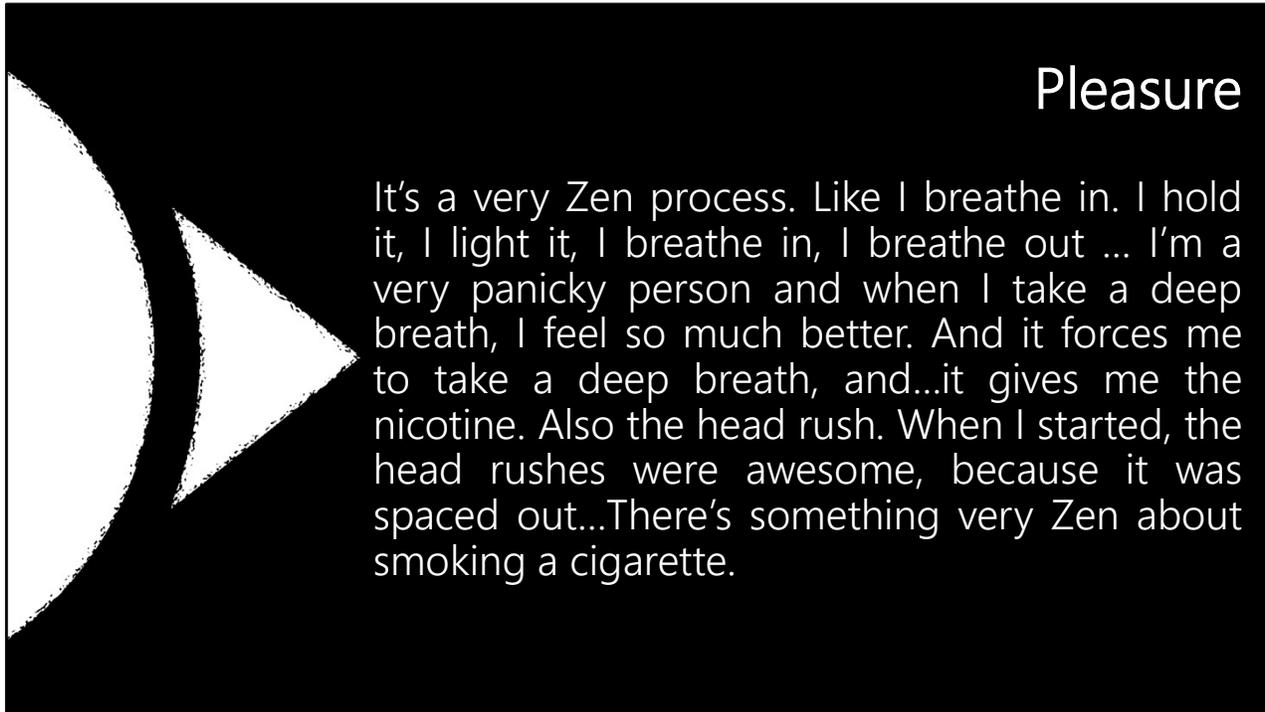
The first theme that I'd like to discuss is one of pleasure. In the literature on smoking, pleasure is a rarely discussed attribute of smoking in spite of its tremendous importance for people who smoke. Perhaps this is due to our failure to sufficiently recognize the importance of smoking's intoxicating effects. In the 1980s and 1990s, critical scholars of alcohol and drugs, as we know, began to investigate pleasure and youth subcultures, where pleasure was sought as a way to avoid or overcome the mundane nature of everyday life [89–92]. However, our participants narratives of smoking as pleasure goes beyond just overcoming the mundane nature or routinization of everyday life, but also was emphasized as a tool for experiencing some pleasure within an inequitable and oppressive society that felt out of one's control.

Smoking feels good, and for many participants that was the point of smoking. I mentioned earlier Jason Hughes' book "Learning To Smoke," there he argues that as smoking became milder and more regulated, the use of tobacco among individuals also became more regulated and began to signify self-control, instead of the loss of control it had originally implied. Perhaps this suggests why smoking is no longer considered an intoxicating substance, as intoxication is typically associated with a loss of control.

But loss of control is not necessarily what ultimately defines altered states of consciousness or intoxication. When considering the narratives of the queer young adults who smoke in our studies, the purposeful alteration of consciousness through smoking cigarettes pervades interviews. Not always in the same ways as other intoxicating substances but nevertheless participants in our studies emphasized how smoking cigarettes changes how they feel and, for some people, that was the point of smoking.

Often this was discussed in terms of wanting to feel pleasure, as Vincent, a 25-year-old, genderfluid participant who prefers he/him pronouns, said:

"Cigarettes kind of make me feel the little nicotine buzz or nicotine dizzy. It's probably because it's just a mild stimulant [...] But cigarettes, because it's a mild stimulant and the dizziness associated with them is kind of enjoyable, and, like, it's mildly euphoric almost. So, if I'm feeling really shitty, that sort of helps."

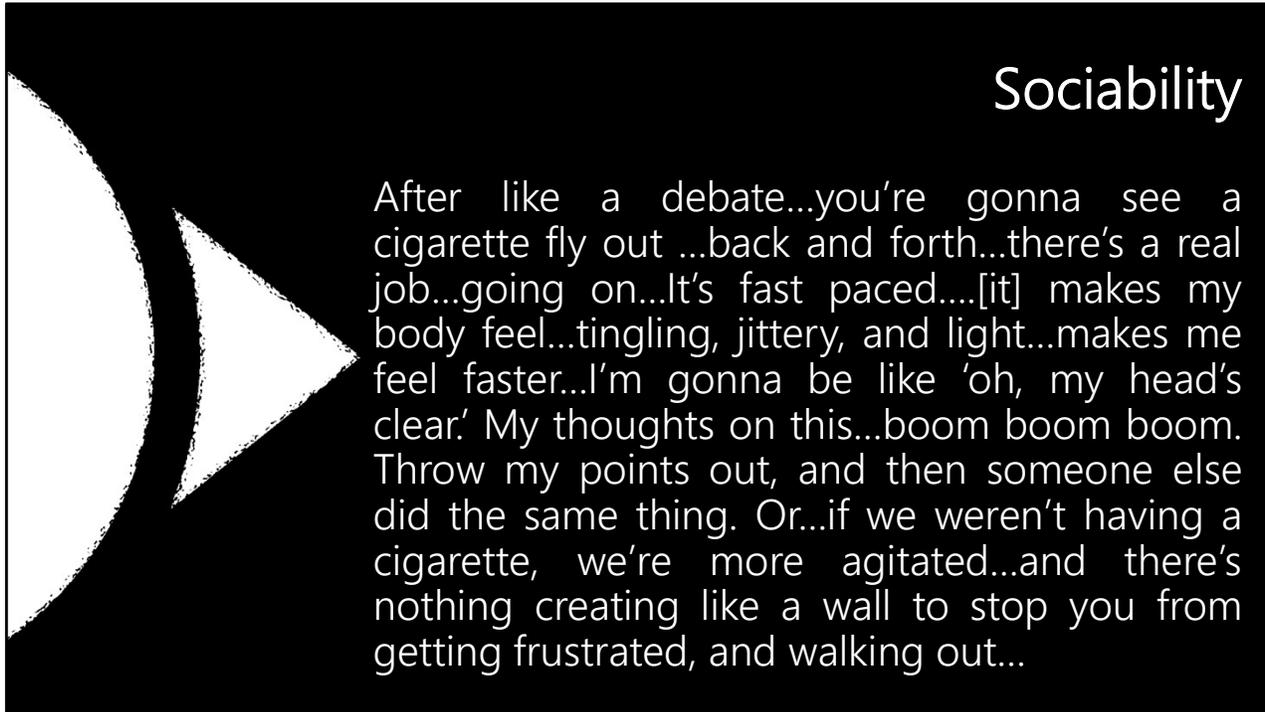


Similarly, Doc, a 20-year-old genderqueer participant who prefers they/them pronouns, talked about their smoking as a pleasurable embodied practice and alluded to smoking as a spiritual practice of sorts

Doc said:

“It's a very Zen process. Like I breathe in. I hold it, I light it, I breathe in, I breathe out ... I'm a very panicky person and when I take a deep breath, I feel so much better. And it forces me to take a deep breath, and...it gives me the nicotine. Also the head rush. When I started, the head rushes were awesome, because it was spaced out...There's something very Zen about smoking a cigarette.” (403)

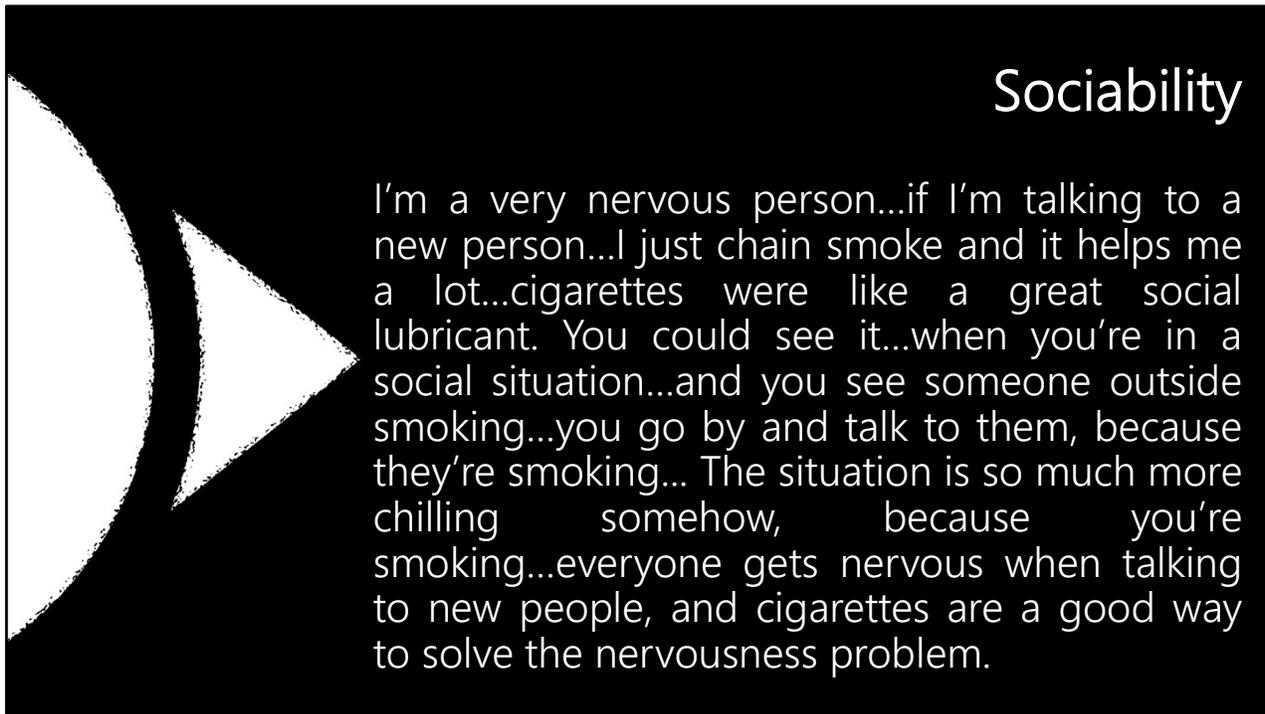
Just like in the mainstream alcohol and drugs fields, the mainstream tobacco field completely overlooks the fact that people smoke to feel the pleasurable, or intoxicating effects, of tobacco. While desires for pleasure are legitimate in their own right, notably for some groups of people with intersectional identities, like many of our participants who have multiple intersecting identities that intensify their inequality and oppression, experiencing pleasure was crucial for surviving in a structure that operates to disenfranchise and oppress them. As Bancroft has said “as intoxicants, that will numb the mind and and reinforce the spirit, they are necessary for those who are bruised by the world.” (pg 185)



The next theme – long acknowledged as an important contribution of psychoactive substance use of all kinds—is Sociability. The notion of sociability goes beyond just being social but instead is created when people transcend their respective selves, including personal experiences, jobs, reputations, and emotions (Simmel, 1949) to create an interaction between people that is uncomplicated and maybe, even, inauthentic, thus based on what Toronnen and Maunu have called “playing and acting” (Törönnen & Maunu, 2005). (From Antin et al 2010 pg 241). Just as Partenen (1991) in his studies of alcohol argued that “drinks delineate and articulate a world in which the expression of sociability becomes possible” (pg 27), the same goes for smoking.

For example, Mike, a 23-year-old gay man, talked about how smoking moderates a heated discussions amongst friends. He said:

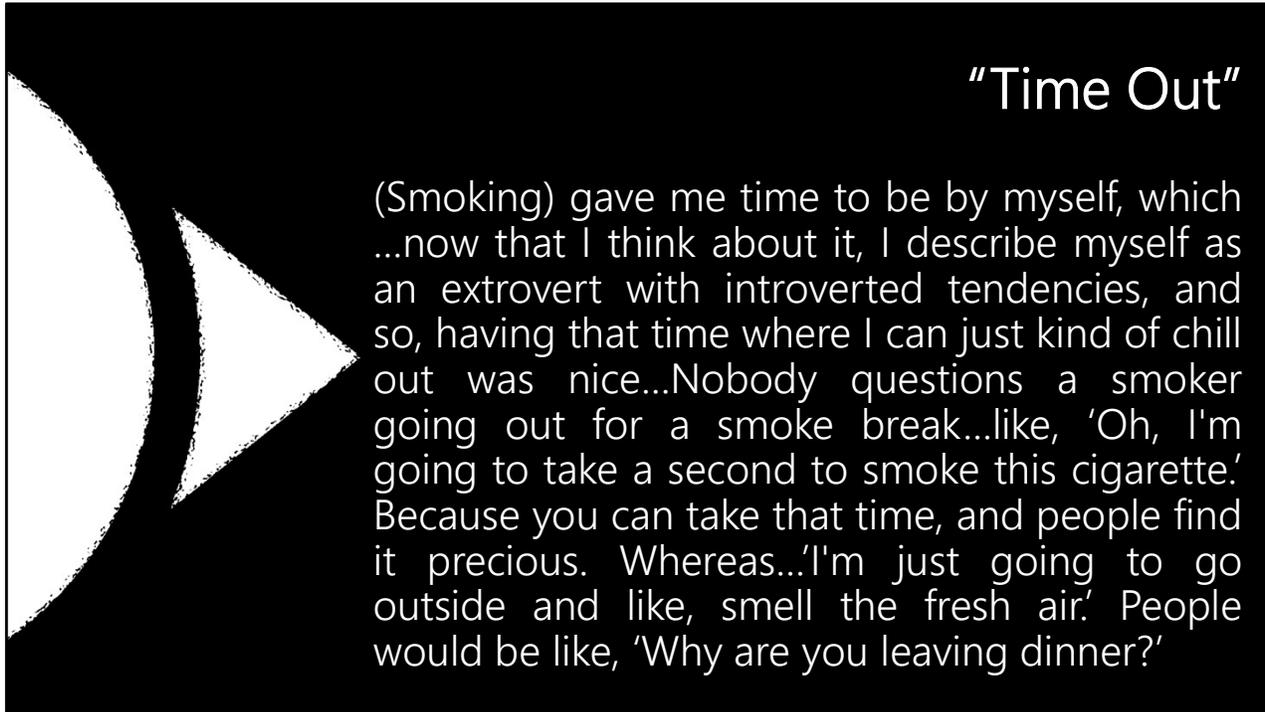
“After like a debate...you're gonna see a cigarette fly out ...back and forth...there's a real job...going on...It's fast paced....[it] makes my body feel...tingling, jittery, and light...makes me feel faster...I'm gonna be like 'oh, my head's clear.' My thoughts on this...boom boom boom. Throw my points out, and then someone else did the same thing. Or...if we weren't having a cigarette, we're more agitated...and there's nothing creating like a wall to stop you from getting frustrated, and walking out...”



In another manifestation of sociability, here is a quote from Doc again, the 20-year-old genderqueer participant, who said:

"I'm a very nervous person...if I'm talking to a new person...I just chain smoke and it helps me a lot...cigarettes were like a great social lubricant. You could see it...when you're in a social situation...and you see someone outside smoking...you go by and talk to them, because they're smoking... The situation is so much more chilling somehow, because you're smoking...everyone gets nervous when talking to new people, and cigarettes are a good way to solve the nervousness problem."

Anyone who has smoked can identify with this scenario, smoking to ease social anxiety or nervousness in social interactions or simply to legitimize a social interaction, by asking for a light. Some participants in our study commented that due to the deviant status of cigarettes in California, seeing other people who smoke signified a person's connectedness to deviancy and/or social exclusion, and therefore an assumption could be made about the person as accepting and understanding. George Simmel argued in 1949 that "fundamentally, sociability is considered a democratic notion where all members of a group are equal". Interviews with our participants suggest that many perceive that smoking created this democratic notion of sociability, and perhaps that's particularly important for groups of people, like our participants, who may be subject to social exclusion and oppression.



The last theme is related to MacAndrew and Edgerton's notion of Time Out. MacAndrew and Edgerton used the phrase "time out" in their book "Drunken Comportment" as an alternative to what was at the time—which was 1969— "the conventional understanding of alcohol's role in producing changes in comportment." (MacAndrew and Edgerton 1969 Pg 83) In other words they questioned to what extent drunkenness from alcohol was solely determined by the physiological effects of alcohol on the body. Instead they argued that people learn how to "do drunkenness" and that doing drunkenness "...takes on the flavor of "time out" from many of the otherwise imperative demands of everyday life." Pg 90 Though they tended to emphasize how people were typically excused for their behaviors while intoxicated, let's take this notion of time out and consider it within the context of a timeout from the demands of everyday life". In this regard, narratives from participants in our study illustrate the ways in which smoking allowed them a "break" or a respite from responsibilities of life, from work, school, expected self-presentation, a break from the chaos of life.

Here's a quote from Janet, a 25-year-old queer-identified woman, who said:

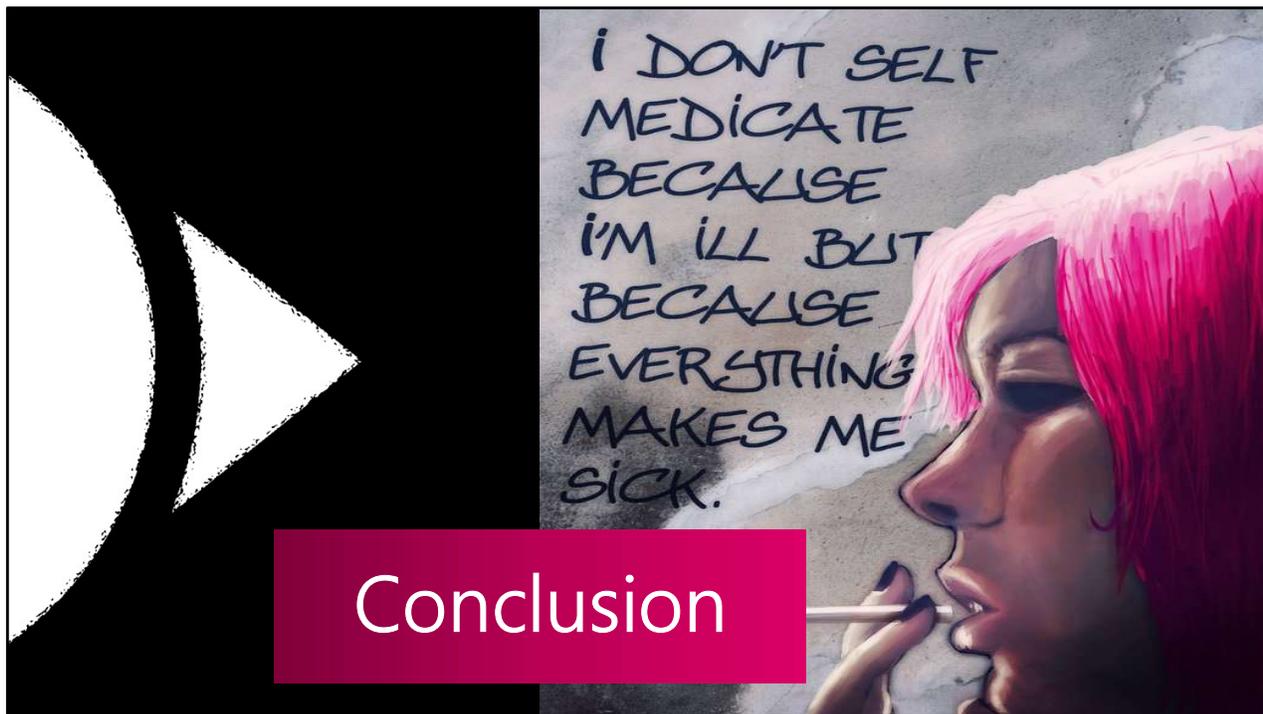
"(Smoking) gave me time to be by myself, which ...now that I think about it, I describe myself as an extrovert with introverted tendencies, and so, having that time where I can just kind of chill out was nice...Nobody questions a smoker going out for a smoke break...like, 'Oh, I'm going to take a second to smoke this cigarette.' Because you can take that time, and people find it precious. Whereas...'I'm just going to go outside and like, smell the fresh air.' People would be like, 'Why are you leaving dinner?'"



Whether narratives emphasized smoking as pleasure, sociability, or 'time out', these themes were typically connected, sometimes explicitly by participants, to the oppressive structures shaping queer people's everyday lives. Smoking was a useful tool to transform the everyday.

As Bancroft wrote in his book *Drugs, Intoxication and Society*, "chemical substances", in which he included tobacco, "are used to manage, maintain or change the experience of the self in the world by working on a direct relationship between internal states and external experiences." (pg 5)

Participants in our study overwhelmingly highlighted how smoking was especially important for precisely this reason. Specifically to exert control over internal states in order to survive external experiences that are shaped by oppressive structures. The ways in which people talked about this manifested in very different ways, but the goal was often the same. Bancroft has called this form of intoxication "functional intoxication" where intoxication becomes fundamentally about "chang(ing) the self in the world, to alter, manage and enhance an individual's efficacy in the the social world. These are dispassionate drugs, which are used to moderate the self into the rhythms of modern life and to blunt the edge of stresses and strains cause by its conflicting demans on the individual" (pg 147). Though Bancroft was talking about pharmaceutical drugs, this notion of functional intoxication is useful for illustrating the meanings of smoking as intoxication for participants in our study.



It is not rocket science to suggest that tobacco is an intoxicating substance. But to date, studies of tobacco remain largely omitted from the alcohol and drugs fields which dominate the literature on intoxication. I hope these examples from our study of queer youth and smoking highlight what we can be learned about the roles and meanings of smoking when examined from a lens of intoxication. Hunt and Barker, in 2001, criticized anthropologists in the alcohol and drugs fields for operating in silos (and by the way for primarily pursuing a problem-orientation to studies of alcohol and of drugs) and instead they called for “a unified model of ingested substances” which they felt would allow for comparison across substances, (which would) avoid the “reification of substances” by shifting focus towards what is revealed about social and cultural processes when examining intoxication more broadly and, consequently, would highlight power in relation to “the moral economy of substances in society” (pg 177-178).

We argue for the need to include tobacco in this “unified model of ingested substances.” There is a need for substantially more critically-oriented studies of tobacco use, which do exist but are comparatively rare and of those that exist are mostly overlooked, especially in the United States. As Bancroft has said “The prevailing view of substance-use problems is that they inhere either in the malignant properties of the substance...or the weak and inadequate body and mind of the users...The predominant ways in which these problems are defined and dealt with constitute major barriers to an effective and sympathetic approach to those who suffer from substance-related harms. The reason that substance-use problems continue to defined in this way...is that they are ‘useful problems’, they serve the purpose of directing our attention away from difficulties created by the prevailing social order and on to the temporary solutions people find for them.” (pg 77). And this couldn’t be more true of tobacco and the tobacco field.