

What does smoke do? Actors and Agency in Cigarette Use

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Beginning writing: moving from the cigarette to the pen and onto the keyboard, I can see my encounters in a new light. There is no main angle, except in searching for social life through the smoke; the focus of my fieldwork seems to have been refracted through a glass prism into a multitude of directions. I have seen my life mediated through material things, through a lighter, a packet, a cigarette and a puff of smoke and seen the lives of others going through the same motions. I have now become hypersensitive to the ways in which objects and our ideas about objects translates to our social lives and the way we regard other people. Upon entering the field, which consisted of finding a bench or a cafe terrace and initiating a ritual with the flick of my thumb, I felt the dynamics of relations change. The people of my study were all student age, some frequent smokers and some infrequent smokers¹. The words and theories of the people I talked to made my own opinions and ideas take twists and turns as well as some nosedives, and in some cases the feeling of asking ridiculous questions pervaded. I also found that the notebook was the first thing that had to go if my conversations were going to be in any way 'normal' or 'natural', and the wearing of sunglasses was also discontinued.

Remember?

I will begin with an encounter, documented in my notebook quite thoroughly, between myself and a friend which took place on 31st of March 2010, and in which no cigarettes were consumed. Over a macchiato, in a clean-aired and trendy cafe above a bookshop in Belfast, I sat with Steph who after some awkward smiles and unproductive questions began to tell me about her relationships to and through cigarettes. A point that hit me upon rereading my notes was 'I couldn't force myself to be addicted', which seems to imply a will or control behind addiction and consumption of cigarettes. Her personal theory and ethos of cigarettes is one of invoking memory, of times that she has experienced as well

¹ Where does the distinction 'smoker' begin and end? This came to the fore in some of my conversations and was always in my mind as I partook in the activity but did not identify myself with smokers or as a smoker.

as historical periods in time that imagination can only reach. She mentions Muriel's Bar in Belfast, where fashionable images of the 1920s come to mind; the cafe-bar, based on a 1920s hat shop, has stars and starlets of the era lining the walls and the ceiling as well as glass cabinets of paraphernalia from the time that are meant to encapsulate the era. From the conversation we had cigarettes seem to play a large part in imaging that time. She tells me such things are like 'subliminal messages'. Steph seems to have outlined the theory of cigarettes portraying coolness and ultimate sophistication, but which resides in another time; cigarettes being less acceptable in the present environment and being associated with a feeling of guilt. She goes on to say such places as Muriel's bar 'make me want to smoke' and are connected to 'older... more vintage' times. She defines that time, the 1920s, as 'the era of smoking', which tells me that history still seems to be playing a part in why some of us smoke, and the associations we draw with every inhalation.

Going back to that telling phrase, which I did not appreciate before now, 'I couldn't force myself to be addicted'. This remark seems to mean something important; there could be implications of free will in terms of addiction that is raised here, as well as someone making the choice to become addicted rather than addiction just occurring physiologically. It also brings up an idea of addiction being cultural rather than natural, as Steph sees addiction in the power of the person. Perhaps contrary to this, Steph mentions that sometimes one may 'feel the need', due to boredom and 'feeling morbid or depressed makes it easier to smoke'. From talking to Steph I also found that smoking invokes memories from personal experience, she describes that smoking 'makes me think of good times, good days, good friends, Bangor (Co. Down, Northern Ireland), memories that are good'. In addition, an interesting point is that smoking is 'never done on a bad day' which means that 'the good times [associated with cigarettes] will continue' and she brings up the point of superstitious cigarette smoking. Looking at Adam Reed's article *Smuk is King* (2006) the impact of cigarettes in a New Guinea prison seems to be contrary to Steph's experiences. Reed explains that the inmates, suffering from 'worry' or *wari* (Reed 2006:35), believe that worries create more worries and have therefore found 'relieving capacities' (Reed 2006:35) in cigarettes. These capacities are the dissolution of memories and cessation of thinking, and the idea is brought up that cigarettes have agency, in smoking the inmates are acted upon. This idea of agency and being acted upon by the cigarettes goes against Steph's

theory of addiction being almost a choice; however, I put this finding down to the fact that Steph is an infrequent smoker, only smoking in specific situations.

Smoke at the altar

I sat on a creaky beach chair, which I feared would disintegrate, I watched Bryde rock on a low slung hammock carefully and attentively roll her cigarette. Perhaps it was the very sacrosanct way that she was rolling and the calm in the air beneath the blue sky that caused the topic of religion and ritual to emerge. Bryde told me that she hadn't been brought up with religion and she found the ritual of rolling a cigarette the closest thing to religion that she experienced in her daily life. Klein describes smoking as being able to 'initiate a transcendent perspective' (Klein 1993: 144), which came up a lot in our conversations, relating world view during or after smoking as being clearer and 'more artistic'. Steph not smoking on a bad day, due to the associations this would create for the next cigarette could also be tied into ideas of sanctity and ritual. An ethnohistoric study of American Aborigines stated that the people had many rules and prohibitions surrounding the growth and use of tobacco to assure its 'ritual potency' (Springer 1981:218), tying in to Steph's prohibitions on a 'bad day' which would damage the function and effectiveness of the cigarette.

Image: 'Epic Smokers' and the idea of 'coolness'

Interviewing Stefan as to why he smokes I was given a humorous reply in that he was smoking to be like Al Pacino, the 'epic smoker', and that by smoking he is tapping to his 'coolness'. This answer being on the sarcastic side gave me an idea into the concept of smoking and 'cool'; that it was now something so ingrained in popular culture perhaps so much that it has become an almost ridiculous idea.

Upon designing my poster I soon became hyperaware of the images people were portraying of themselves just as I was so aware of my own presence during an encounter. Thinking back to my experiences on the field and social stories that people were telling, the ideas portrayed in popular culture were almost always dissolved, and it made me question "Is smoking still cool?" An encounter with Steph brought up the point of how people smoking in public are portrayed, this also ties into the fact that Steph wanted to be kept out

of the public eye in fear of being spotted by those she know with a cigarette in hand². I asked if the cool image didn't count in her ideas of smoking; 'it's the wrong image, smoking should be private more than wanting people to see me smoke' (hence our encounter in an empty side-street). It also came up that other people smoking in the street were almost 'annoying' or 'offensive', Steph accentuates the point that with a cigarette you must 'savour, sit down, relax' and that in walking and smoking people are depicting the idea of the 'stressed smoker'. Perhaps there is a dichotomy arising in terms of how a smoker sees themselves compared to how they view other smokers, and seems to be existent only among infrequent and those who would not call themselves a smoker.

Academia, Anxiety and Concentration: The cigarette break

Catching people taking a 'cigarette break' from studying was fairly easy during my fieldwork. Cigarettes are for some of the people in my encounters a way to get away from their stress and anxiety over academic work. When studying with Bryde we took a break outside and shared a cigarette. She confessed to me that with the emergence of stress the cigarette is the first thing she reaches for. I was also told in an encounter outside the Old Union Diner, lasting the length of a cigarette (like most of my encounters), that the concentration of smokers is lower than non-smokers before a smoke and significantly higher after smoking. According to Klein the easing of anxiety due to a cigarette is quite paradoxical; he says that the cigarette is 'acerbating ... tense displeasure' and binds anxiety 'to a specific, determined cause' so that it becomes 'in the hand' (Klein 1993:142). Perhaps the anxiety is bound and dissolved in the act of smoking and finally cast aside with the butt of the cigarette. Cigarettes seem to have a double effect: to stimulate and 'steel one's concentration' (Klein 1993:144) or to relax, 'take a breather', 'to encourage daydreaming' (Klein 1993: 144). Smokers put this down to the situation (library vs. outside a bar) in which you smoke in and the way in which you smoke; smoking slowly is calming, smoking quickly is stimulating. Sitting on the Melville bench I found that people were smoking at times when they had essays to write or to-do lists they wished to escape from, wanting to forget the sensible and take part in a social ritual. There was also a lot of talk about how with a

² Mainly a concern with parents and authority, tied in with feelings of guilt.

cigarette you are 'not alone'³, and I quite often saw people pace alone but also engrossed with their cigarette.

Just smoking and being a smoker

From my experiences in the field I found distinctions in naming between all of the people who smoked; there were people who admitted to being 'addicts', there were those who denied the term 'smoker' and emphasised that they were only 'smoking'. Talking to a few people about this issue, as well as when having a cigarette becomes an addiction or habit and the person becomes a 'smoker', I found that people very much dislike labels, and only those who had been smoking for a considerable amount of time called themselves 'smoker' or 'addict'. From just beginning to smoke and being a habitual smoker there seems to be very different ideas and reasons as to why people smoke. The people who smoked only by situation or 'social smokers', even that term was avoided, people preferring 'having a cigarette with friends or on a night out', rather than a generalisation as 'social smoker'. The ideas I got from new smokers or infrequent smokers were almost romanticised images of smoking, such as Steph's ideas of cigarettes on sunny days beside 'pretty beaches'. There seems to be a different train of thought occurring amongst different types of smokers. In *Smuk is King* cigarettes are recognised as being 'historically contingent' (Reed 2006:42), quitting occurring with new situations are relationships which relates to the ideas of 'situational smoking' evoked in my fieldwork.

It seems that the act cannot be divorced from being; people who have a cigarette are not just 'people having a cigarette' but smokers, which implies it is inherent in their identity. One article I found that backs up this idea is called 'Smoking, but not smokers' (Levinson et al. 2007), which studies those who smoke in college in America and how more than 50% are "deniers", being more likely to deny the term 'smoker' and to a certain extent 'social smoker'. Also, over half of the people said they wanted to quit before graduation. People who admitted to being smokers were 34 times more likely to use "because I'm addicted" as their reason for smoking (Levinson et al. 2007:848). Another interesting piece

³ "It like drowns all your worries... It's just like it releases all my problems. I don't think about them while I'm doing it... the cigarette is your friend. It's like you don't have a friend in the world or something, and then you just go and you light up the cigarette and it's like everybody's your friend." (Quintero and Davis 2002:448-449)

of information that complements my findings is that infrequent or social smokers were more likely to deny “people who smoke cigarettes are addicted” (Levinson et al. 2007:848). Cigarettes are also heavily tied up with friendship and social groups. One encounter that highlights this was when talking to Scott; both of us cowering beneath an umbrella, sat outside Muriel’s Bar and Cafe, referenced previously as a ‘perfect’ place to smoke, if only it wasn’t illegal to do so inside. Despite the gruesome conditions we sat adamantly with a cigarette in hand, sharing a black coffee⁴. Scott’s ideas and reasons focused on differentiation between groups of people, mainly focusing on memories of secondary school and smoking then. He even notes the difference between two Grammar schools he attended; that the one he did attend had people who smoked ‘just to look cool’ but in his second school the people genuinely focused on friends, being ‘more accepting ... more about conversation’. Again, the distinction arises between smokers’ ideas of other smokers, which seems to be prevalent in or exclusive to the ideas of people who have just started or smoke infrequently. The idea of smoking influencing social groups is also echoes in *Smuk is King* as the gangs of inmates are composed depending on ‘the way these objects flow’ (Reed 2006:37). From talking to various people about smoking in secondary school there was generally one person who provided or was paid and bought cigarettes for others due to age restrictions moving up to 18.

Hilton (2004) highlights the sociability of smoking by asking the question ‘Who really learns to smoke on their own?’ (Hilton 2004:126). However, he goes on to say that smoking, although a collective pleasure, is ultimately an individual affair with the cigarettes alone being ‘ones remembered, provoking the thoughts and reflections’ (Hilton 2004:128) that become part of the smoker’s idea of self. Hilton as well as Richard Klein (1993) talk about the fact that cigarettes are not generally smoked on their own but so to ‘complement the multitude of other experiences’ (Hilton 2004: 128) in life.

One short and sharp encounter I had outside the library in St Andrews quickly disintegrated by romanticised angle I was coming from. I wanted to gain perspectives from

⁴ Perhaps there are no two addictions better suited to one another than coffee and cigarettes, which was also discussed as being a highly socially accepted pair and seemingly geared to the Western world’s stressed, fatigued and overworked people. Also, Jim Jarmusch’s *Coffee and Cigarettes* investigates the substances in a very telling and comically apt way.

people who smoke outside the library, at the time I was thinking of the geography of smoking and whether this changes people's relations to others and reasons as to why they are smoking at that particular time and place. It was 10.30am and the sun was glaring down, exaggerating the smoke as I walked past people crouching with books and coffee, or kneeling down with a friend, engrossed in discussing a play or a translation. I approach one person, feeling very "WhatamIdoing?!" after a while of giving myself a courageous, 'Just do it', speech. For some reason, having a question to ask and even some vague idea of what the reply might be (which I found to be a fundamentally bad strategy) was making me extra nervous; I had not yet grasped the idea of 'letting the field speak' as this encounter was relatively early. I approached, the person who was quickly inhaling on the end of a cigarette, kneeling down I ask: "Excuse me, are you very busy?" After a few glances from my face to the book and back to me again I was given a blunt "Yes". I proceeded anyway, as he still seemed moderately interested as to what I wanted; telling him it was only one quick question. I asked him why he smoked outside the library, "Because I can't smoke inside". Going on to "Does it help you concentrate?", "No" and after a thinking pause, "Well, I'm addicted". It was the first encounter I had had that was so blunt and honest. It gave me many thoughts on how to approach people (take off sunglasses, being the main one) and how to let people talk rather than having a pre-constructed question and answer in my head, life does *not* work like that.

Increasingly, tobacco control literature is investigating the idea of social influences in starting and stopping smoking: social context may be key to understanding (and, ultimately, addressing) diverse sources of resistance to tobacco control (Poland et al. 2005:59). I think that from my encounters tobacco and social life are interdependent when one smokes, one seems to exacerbate the other. Perhaps cigarettes start off with a social addiction and end up in the domain of a physical addiction. In researching the literature on smoking I was confronted with mainly anti-smoking and health journals warning about the physical dangers with social factors being ignored and undermined. From my encounters very few people mentioned health concerned; usually it was about doing something that felt appropriate in the present rather than future thought. The only person who mentioned the future was trying to give up cigarettes and they also were forward thinking in the dangers of

cigarettes. There seems to be a duality: the pleasures of the now and the dangers of the future, both being in significant opposition to one another.

Conclusion: The objectivity of clean air and the subjectivity of smoke

Through my fieldwork, my experience has been a dualistic one; on the one hand I had a cigarette with these people, the 'ethnographic subjects', feeling closer to them in some way and more open to talk whether about issues from my personal life or launching into some absurdist story of no meaning or consequence. Sharing a physical experience seemed to set up a rapport that can be physically seen, and perhaps we were on some level united in making a statement through smoking. It all felt very close, intimate and highly subjective. On the other hand, in not having a cigarette with the people I chose to talk to I felt a lot farther from what they were experiencing, on a completely different train of thought, almost on a different plane of existence (albeit a temporary one). The encounters felt a lot more removed and objective in a way, I felt more of a question-answer/subject-object dichotomy emerge. I always came away feeling that in an interview without a cigarette there was some missed potential that was just waiting to be revealed through the smoke.

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