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ABSTRACT

This study extends earlier work (Campbell, et al., 2000) which documented discriminatory attitudes towards college students who smoke by exploring personality stereotypes associated with student smoking, using a sample of students (N=222) from the Northeastern United States and Australia. Findings of this study corroborate those of other researchers who have found that perceptions of smokers are generally more negative than perceptions of nonsmokers. Nonsmokers were more likely to be viewed as conscientious, ambitious, and having good judgment. Smokers were seen, except by other smokers, as less intelligent and more hostile. A striking disparity in differential perceptions was noted on the dimension of independence. While smokers saw their own group as significantly more independent, nonsmokers saw their groups as being more highly independent. The observed tendency for smokers to think of other smokers as independent and artistically creative may contribute to their own decision to engage in smoking behavior. The paper suggests that education efforts be directed towards informing young adults that the general population does not share this positive view of smokers. (Contains 3 tables and 10 references.) (JDM)

# Prejudice Against Cigarette Smokers in Higher Education

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2000

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**Abstract:** Previous research (Campbell et al., 2000) has documented discriminatory attitudes toward college students who smoke cigarettes in public. The present study extended this earlier work by exploring personality stereotypes associated with student smoking, using a sample of 222 respondents drawn from both the U.S. and Australia. The findings of this study are consistent with earlier work. Perceptions of smokers are generally more negative on a variety of dimensions. Interestingly, one exception to the generally negative characterization of smokers was found: smokers perceived their own group as significantly more independent than the group of students who do not smoke.

### **Introduction**

College students who elect to smoke in public places on campus may be compromising their reputations with many of their peers. Evidence from previous studies (Campbell, et al., 2000) has shown that nonsmokers perceive those who choose to smoke cigarettes in a variety of unflattering ways. There seems to be a negative stigma associated with smoking cigarettes on college campuses. Despite this stigma, researchers suggest that public smoking on campus is rising (Wechsler, et al., 1998). In order to explicate why more students are choosing to smoke, despite prevalent negative attitudes toward smoking, it is important to investigate attitudinal differences between smokers and nonsmokers, and to assess the cross-cultural consistency of the negative attitudes previously reported.

Those who smoke often are penalized for their choice in subtle ways. Greater understanding of the discriminatory attitudes of those in education settings may help students make more informed choices about whether to smoke, especially in public contexts. It has been shown that smokers' are generally devalued on a number of

characteristics, including intelligence, sophistication, consideration, health, and maturity (Gibson, 1997). This negative stereotype was found for almost all personality characteristics investigated. This bias has led many smokers to hide their habit in order to avoid these negative reactions.

Despite all of this, evidence suggests that the prevalence of cigarette smoking is actually rising among college students (Wechsler, et.al., 1998). Between 1993 and 1997, the prevalence of cigarette smoking among college students rose by 27.8%, from 22.3% to 28.5% (Wechsler, et.al., 1998). This statistic is alarming because it may reverse the current decline in adult smoking prevalence. In an attempt to combat this increase in college smoking, many colleges are now prohibiting smoking in all dorms and apartments (Davis, 1999).

The present study was conducted in an attempt to uncover college students' psychological reactions to smoking restrictions, revolving around a possible perceived threat to their freedom. It also addressed the negative stereotypes associated with smokers. A survey was distributed to an Introductory Psychology class, addressing students' perceived attributes of smokers and nonsmokers in an attempt to uncover differences and stereotypes.

## Methods

### Participants

This cross-cultural study was conducted by obtaining a sample of U.S. undergraduates through an introductory psychology course at a small liberal arts college located in southeastern Pennsylvania, and a sample of Australian undergraduates at an urban university. A total of 222 students participated, 195 from the U.S. and 27 from

Australia, including 139 females and 83 males. Seventy-nine of the participants were smokers. This was determined by whether they indicated use of cigarettes within the past 30 days. The remaining participants were nonsmokers. Their ages ranged from 17 to 25 years. All major areas of undergraduate study were proportionally represented.

### Survey Instrument

The experimenters devised a 129-item questionnaire divided into three sections. Using a 5-point Likert scale (1= extremely low, 2= somewhat low, 3= neutral, 4= somewhat high, and 5= extremely high), participants were asked to indicate their impressions of students who smoke and students who do not smoke cigarettes on seven personality dimensions (intelligence, hostility, judgment, artistic creativity, conscientiousness, ambition, and independence). The first section consisted of three parts assessing frequency of use of various psychoactive substances, likelihood of using particular substances in eight specific situational contexts, and motivation for use of substances. Next, participants completed an 8-item checklist indicating reasons why they used or refrained from using certain substances. Last, participants completed 42 Likert-format items designed to measure participants' perceptions of smokers and their self esteem (the Rosenberg Self Esteem Scale, 1965). The items relating to substance use that were selected for inclusion were derived from instruments used in research by Wechsler, et.al. (1998), Hodges, et.al. (1999), and Campbell, et.al. (2000).

## Results

Within-subject t-tests were performed on the seven personality dimension scores. Significant differences between perceptions of smokers and nonsmokers emerged on five of the seven personality measures (see Table A). No significant differences were observed for artistic creativity or independence.

When the responses from all participants were considered collectively, 40% of nonsmokers were characterized as highly intelligent, while only 14% of smokers were so described. Nonsmokers were four times as likely as smokers to be seen as conscientious (40% versus 9%). Similarly, nonsmokers were more frequently rated as being high in ambition (35% versus 9%). On ratings of hostility, only 7% of nonsmokers were seen as highly hostile, while over three times (22%) as many smokers were seen this way. When asked to describe their impression of the judgement of students, only a minority (9%) saw smokers as showing high levels of judgment, while 31% saw nonsmokers as showing high judgement. There was little difference between how smokers and nonsmokers were perceived in terms of artistic creativity and independence.

When responses from nonsmokers were considered separately, their impressions largely paralleled those of the entire sample (see Table B). The data indicated that nonsmokers viewed fellow nonsmokers as high in intelligence 44% of the time, while only 10% of them perceived smokers as being highly intelligent. Nonsmokers saw fellow nonsmokers as rarely being hostile (6%), while they rated a quarter of the smokers this way. Thirty-six percent of nonsmokers perceived other nonsmokers as high in judgement while only 7% of nonsmokers observed smokers this way. In evaluating the independence of students who don't smoke, nonsmokers perceived their fellow

nonsmokers as high in independence 34% of the time, while they viewed smokers as high in independence only 28% of the time. Forty-two percent of nonsmokers thought that other nonsmokers were conscientious, while only 4% of nonsmokers viewed smokers as conscientious. Nonsmokers also perceived smokers as less ambitious (5%) than nonsmokers (39%). There was little difference between how nonsmokers rated smokers and nonsmokers in terms of artistic creativity.

Disparities between the overall sample's differential perceptions of smokers and nonsmokers and the smoking subgroup were noted when the smokers' responses were analyzed separately (see Table C). Paralleling the responses of the overall sample, 36% of the smokers saw nonsmokers as being conscientious, while they saw only 16% of fellow smokers as being conscientious. In addition, smokers viewed 28% of nonsmokers as being ambitious, but when compared to smokers only 17% were seen as ambitious. However, smokers perceived other smokers as being significantly more independent than nonsmokers, (44% of smokers versus 20% of nonsmokers were seen this way). Although the difference did not reach statistical significance, smokers also rated other smokers as being higher in artistic creativity than their nonsmoking peers. Unlike the nonsmoking subgroup, the smokers did not perceive significant differences between smokers and nonsmokers on the dimensions of intelligence and hostility.

Table A

	Perceptions of Smokers		Perceptions of Nonsmokers		t	df	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Intelligence	2.99	.73	3.41	.82	6.73	221	.000
Hostility	3.07	.76	2.88	.72	3.04	221	.003
Judgement	2.77	.81	3.29	.77	7.45	221	.000
Artistic Creativity	3.13	.79	3.16	.72	.42	221	.677
Independence	3.22	.87	3.27	.77	.74	221	.463
Conscientiousness	2.78	.79	3.41	.81	8.84	221	.000
Ambition	2.82	.82	3.40	.79	8.24	221	.000

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Table B

	Perceptions of Smokers		Perceptions of Nonsmokers		t	df	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Intelligence	2.95	.61	3.50	.67	7.39	142	.000
Hostility	3.17	.63	2.86	.63	3.78	142	.000
Judgement	2.69	.75	3.39	.66	7.60	142	.000
Artistic Creativity	3.08	.66	3.20	.59	1.59	142	.115
Independence	3.10	.77	3.34	.69	2.61	142	.010
Conscientiousness	2.66	.69	3.50	.65	9.53	142	.000
Ambition	2.73	.72	3.46	.65	8.13	142	.000

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Table C

	Perceptions of Smokers		Perceptions of Nonsmokers		t	df	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Intelligence	3.05	.90	3.24	1.02	1.73	78	.087
Hostility	2.90	.94	2.91	.85	1.29	78	.897
Judgement	2.91	.89	3.10	.90	2.06	78	.042
Artistic Creativity	3.23	.99	3.08	.92	1.38	78	.170
Independence	3.43	.98	3.14	.89	2.69	78	.009
Conscientiousness	3.00	.92	3.25	1.02	2.30	78	.024
Ambition	2.97	.96	3.28	.99	2.88	78	.005

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## Discussion

The findings of this study corroborate those of other researchers who have found that perceptions of smokers are generally more negative than perceptions of nonsmokers. Nonsmokers were more likely than smokers to be viewed as conscientious, ambitious, and as having good judgement. Smokers were seen as less intelligent and more hostile than nonsmokers, except by other smokers. A striking disparity in differential perceptions was noted on the dimension of independence. While smokers saw their own group as significantly more independent, nonsmokers disagreed, perceiving their own group of nonsmokers as being more highly independent. The observed tendency for smokers to think of other smokers as independent and artistically creative may contribute to their own decision to engage in smoking behavior. It may be helpful for education efforts to be directed at informing young adults that the general population does not share this positive view of smokers.

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