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“Nobody Views It As a Negative Thing to Smoke”: A Qualitative Study of the Relationship
Between Military Culture and Tobacco Use

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Structured Summary

Introduction. Tobacco use has long been a part of military culture. While numerous tobacco-related policies have been implemented by the Department of Defense since 1975, rates of tobacco use remain higher among military personnel compared to civilians. The current study examines aspects of military tobacco culture in order to explain existing influences that encourage tobacco use.

Materials and Methods. We conducted 7 focus groups among Air Force Military Training Leaders (n=48) and 5 focus groups among Technical Training Instructors (n=33) from July 2018 to February 2019. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the 59th Medical Wing in San Antonio. Focus group recordings were transcribed, and transcripts coded.

Results. Tobacco use was seen as a core part of military culture and a low risk behavior, in contrast to other potential behaviors. Three themes of military culture that may facilitate tobacco use emerged: 1) opportunity for breaks; 2) finding common ground; and 3) stress during deployment. Smoke pits were seen as serving several functions that were not perceived to occur anywhere else: an opportunity for informal communication with leadership, a source of valuable information across all career stages, and a space for problem solving.

Conclusions. Understanding the roles that tobacco plays at a cultural level informs why tobacco use among military personnel continues to be more common than among civilians despite many anti-tobacco policies and programs. Airmen largely viewed these functional roles that tobacco plays to outweigh its harm. Future programs might try to address the functions fulfilled by tobacco in order to enhance their impact.

Introduction

Tobacco use has long been a part of military culture. The War Department began to include tobacco in rations in 1918.¹ As General Pershing stated, “You ask me what we need to win this war. I answer tobacco, as much as bullets.”² A stable supply of tobacco for the military was seen as so essential that, in 1918, the government took over the entire output of Bull Durham (an American Tobacco Company product).³ Despite science emerging since the 1950s about the negative health effects, tobacco was included in rations until 1975.⁴ While numerous tobacco-related policies have been implemented by the Department of Defense since 1975, the tobacco industry has continued to stay one step ahead of regulation with new strategies to reach the military population.⁴⁻⁶

Tobacco use prevalence in the Air Force among junior enlisted Airmen is higher than in the civilian population, with 6.3% using cigarettes, 5.7% using smokeless tobacco, 2.2% using hookah, and 15.3% using electronic cigarettes.⁷ Particularly vulnerable time points for tobacco initiation or re-initiation during the lifecycle of Air Force personnel appear to be during technical training, at their first duty station, and during deployment; specifically, despite enforced cessation during Basic Military Training and the first 4 weeks of Technical Training, 63% of Airmen who had previously used cigarettes reinitiated and 12% of never users initiated smoking,⁸ with re-initiation or initiation largely occurring during Technical Training or at their first duty station. Similarly, most initiation or re-initiation of smokeless tobacco use occurred during Technical Training or at their first duty station.⁹ Finally, 16.9% of Airmen initiated tobacco use or increased their tobacco use during active deployment in a combat zone.¹⁰ Thus, there may still be a military culture that supports tobacco use. The current study qualitatively

examines aspects of military tobacco culture as described by Air Force Military Training Leaders and Technical Training Instructors in order to explain existing influences that encourage tobacco use.

Methods

We present results from focus groups of Military Training Leaders (MTLs) and Technical Training Instructors (TTIs) across five Technical Training schools (Joint Base San Antonio – Fort Sam Houston and Lackland Air Force Base (AFB); Goodfellow AFB; Sheppard AFB; Keesler AFB). Data were collected as part of a larger study examining predictors of tobacco use among Airmen during Technical Training; this paper focuses specifically on aspects of military culture that may facilitate tobacco use among permanent party.

Participants and Recruitment

We conducted 7 focus groups among Air Force MTLs (n=48) and 5 focus groups among TTIs (n=33) from July 2018 to February 2019. MTLs supervise Airmen and dispense disciplinary action. TTIs teach specific skills required for each career field. The Senior MTL recruited MTL and TTI volunteers at each base. Participants could be either a tobacco or non-tobacco user.

Focus Group Procedures

One moderator and at least one note-taker, who were university-affiliated researchers, conducted focus groups in a private room with no leadership present. Participants received an informational consent letter and verbally consented to participate. Focus groups contained, on average, 7 participants (range: 4 to 10 participants) and lasted 45 minutes. Responses were anonymous and audio-recorded. The 59th Medical Wing Institutional Review Board approved the study.

Analysis

Focus groups were transcribed by Datagain; researchers checked the transcripts before coding. Two trained research staff members used a hybrid deductive-inductive approach to code each transcript in nVivo v12¹¹ software. A codebook was developed using the social ecological model, overarching research questions, and evidence from the literature. Meaning units within each discrete code and operational definitions were identified, including a “military culture” code, the focus for these analyses.

Results

Tobacco use was seen as a core part of military culture, “I just think that tobacco and alcohol are synonymous with the military,” as one MTL reported. Further, tobacco use was seen as a low risk behavior by a TTI, “So it's, it's not a negative thing to smoke. Nobody views it as a negative thing to smoke. Whereas, some people do view it as a negative thing to drink, especially irresponsibly. But how do you make a mistake with tobacco? There's no really no mistake there, besides your own personal...” Three themes of military culture that may facilitate tobacco use emerged: 1) opportunity for breaks; 2) finding common ground; and 3) stress during deployment. Each theme is detailed below, supported by quotations from participants.

Opportunity for breaks

MTLs and TTIs indicated smoking is the only way to receive a break during the duty day. One MTL reported, “You could not take a break if you didn’t smoke. [Laughs] So we would be out on the house floor and it was just like, ‘Hey, I want to go check my email.’ ’No, but let’s go smoke for 10 or 20 minutes.’ You are like, ‘How come you guys can go out there and smoke and I have to stay here on the floor?’ So I would just hang out at the smoke pits and smoke. ’I want a break.’” Another MTL revealed that other types of breaks are not encouraged, “[If you asked for]

a fresh air break, they would be like 'no.' We used to have a handful of people that would go around and give people breaks throughout the 12 and a half hour shift and then if you weren't a smoker or you didn't dip, you didn't take a break because nobody gave you one. They're like 'no, you're not going to go and stand outside with your hands in your pockets for ten minutes.'"

A TTI similarly stated smoking is viewed as a way to have a break, "I didn't really start smoking until maybe my first year in the military. It was like the only way to get a break. They don't care about...if you want to go eat, they won't let you go, but if you want to smoke a cigarette, they'll let you go. I picked it up that way." While another MTL recounted that he started smoking in order to receive a break, he ultimately found benefit did not outweigh the health effects, "My first duty station, I started smoking for about a month because that was the only way to get a break from where I worked. If you wanted to go out on break, you had to use the smoke pit and you had to smoke. So, I smoked for like, a month and then didn't like what it was doing to my lungs since I couldn't run as fast, so I quit."

MTLs indicated having breaks is also a reason to smoke during deployments, "On deployments, that's a big thing because if you're not working, it's acceptable to go sit at the smoke pit and have a cigarette. It's not acceptable to just sit there and watch everybody else do something, though. So I think people take up smoking as a way to kind of be like, "Oh, well, everybody else is doing it, so I want a break." Another MTL described his situation on deployment, "I definitely bought cigarettes when I was deployed just so that I could go to the smoke pit with people and be like 'Who needs a cigarette?' So I could just take a break. Because it's hot. Right? It's hot. The gear is heavy. And then you're like—you're up in trucks. You're out of trucks. If you're working a search pit you get kind of bored... You know what I mean? Like you'll be there with one or two people doing all of the work for six or seven people because

everyone's at the smoke pit. So yes, I went to the little mini mall. I didn't smoke, but I'd be like 'Oh, hey. Who needs a cigarette? I got a whole pack right here. I'll go with you.' You know? So I think people pick it up because that's an acceptable way to take a break."

Finding common ground

Visiting smoke pits was seen as a way of participating in military culture. Smoke pits were seen as a central way to break down barriers to communicating with leadership. One MTL recounted, "So in the military, there is workplace talk, and then there is different career field talk. But then there is smoke pit talk. It never leaves the smoke pit. It could range from the highest up down to the lowest bottom, rank-wise. It is just normal conversation, but there is something about the smokers' comradery that kind of just locks in a good conversation." Another MTL described, "You wouldn't just like email the group superintendent. But if you and him both smoked and you are in the smoke pit and you wanted to ask for some tutelage, there would be no problem at all to talk to him." One MTL indicated smoke pits help provide informal interactions with leadership, "We have a club on base, but you will be hard pressed to find anybody who is not living in base housing that goes there. So we are not having opportunity to talk with our leadership in just a relaxed sense."

Smoke pits were also seen as an important information source at various career stages, as one MTL described, "I have had a commander tell me when he wants to learn information, he goes to the smoke pit. Like when he wants to get stuff done, he goes to the smoke pit. Another MTL continued, "they called it the tree of knowledge because everyone goes to the smoking area and everyone goes out there shares their ideas, what is going on, and all that good stuff." A TTI indicated he felt at a disadvantage if he did not go to the smoke pit, "I never smoked really...But, I have spent a lot of time hanging around at smoke pits because yes, that is where the

information flows. It really is. Until my lung - because I have asthma or something, I don't know what, but until I have had enough that I couldn't tolerate it, yes, I was going to go hang out with the smokers when they are smoking, because otherwise you are out of the loop."

Smoke pits were seen as a less formal place where problems can be solved as one MTL put it, "The smoke pit isn't like you go out there and [say] 'Let me tell me about these things that offend me' and stuff... There is still a lot of business being handled and there is still a lot of... I couldn't tell you how many times we have drawn up network architecture and stuff out in the smoke pit. And we still had to deal with a really important task. We just had a place to do it that wasn't so...stuffy." In addition, one MTL reported he and his supervisor used going to smoke pit as a strategy to improve their working relationship, "My supervisor did not know how to communicate with me at all, but we did have the smoke pit in common. We would go out there. She would [say], 'Let's go take a smoke break. I can see that this is bothering you and we do not know how to talk about it. Let's go sit down and come to a mutual agreement over this cigarette.'" "

During deployments, smoking is seen as an especially important facilitator for social interaction and celebration. One MTL stated, "If you're on deployments and don't smoke, you're not part of the social life. No one hangs out with you." Another MTL reported, "And then being deployed... sometimes it's celebratory. You know, my job, aircraft weapons, we celebrate when the jet goes up with bombs and does not come back with bombs. So, it comes back and it's like, 'Oh, yeah, sweet. Let's have one.'" During deployments, hookah was also commonly used socially, "We did hookah every night. We all pitched in and bought an authentic hookah... we just passed it along to the team that took over. They carried on with it and carried on the tradition."

Stress during deployment

Finally, MTLs and TTIs described, in the deployment setting, that they viewed smoking as essential for stress management. One MTL reported smoking was a replacement for alcohol during deployment, “I think it's the stress. Most people like to have a beer or something like that after work, but you're someplace you can't have a beer, so you've got to have something to just relax a little bit.” A TTI revealed that tobacco may serve as a reminder of home, “It's a way to mentally kind of put yourself back in that mindset of home almost. I mean if you grew up around smoke, it puts you a little more at ease, not just with the nicotine aspect, but psychologically it has that effect. You know, it's something that you're familiar with.” Another TTI acknowledged both stress management benefits for smoking and the downsides of potential addiction when returning home, “In the deployment setting, it is strictly survival. Anything that helps to take the stress off of that survival is what you are going to do. But, then you end up bring those habits back.”

Discussion

Our qualitative study identified three themes related to the influence of military culture on tobacco use: opportunity for breaks, finding common ground, and stress relief during deployment. In each of these situations, tobacco is fulfilling a specific function for military personnel: breaking up their work day, providing opportunities for comradery, problem solving and mentorship, and relieving stress during difficult situations like deployment. By fulfilling these functions, tobacco use is perceived as a positive rationalized behavior within the military institution¹² and its use is perpetuated.

Understanding the roles that tobacco plays at a cultural level informs why tobacco use among military personnel continues to be more common than among civilians despite many anti-tobacco policies and programs. Tobacco use was not viewed as risky or harmful as excessive alcohol use,^{13,14} and Airmen largely viewed these functional roles that tobacco plays to outweigh its harm. These findings are consistent with previous studies which have also found that smoking is seen as a way to get breaks in the Army¹² and the Navy^{15,16} and among civilians¹⁷ and to relieve stress.^{14,16,18-20} Similarly, previous studies have documented the unique deployment environment is associated with increased tobacco consumption.^{10,19,20}

Unfortunately, previous individual-level tobacco interventions have not been as effective at preventing tobacco use as anticipated,²¹ while other evidence suggests existing tobacco policies are difficult to enforce.^{13,16,22,23} Programs have sought to prevent use among new Airmen, through brief interventions, such as social media campaigns²⁴ and educational programs,^{21,25} while large scale tobacco quit lines have provided pharmacological treatment and counseling to existing tobacco users.^{26,27} In addition, existing policies and programs have primarily focused on making tobacco use more difficult or providing resources to quit.²⁸ For instance, policies limit use to designated areas on base (e.g., a specific distance from buildings, removing smoke pits), while others prohibit Airmen from using tobacco in uniform.²⁸ However, these interventions and policies do not adequately address underlying functions served by tobacco, which may hinder their ability to successfully change culture and ultimately reduce tobacco use.

Our findings could inform recommendations for military tobacco policies and programs. In addition to continuing to enforce policies that make using tobacco difficult and prevention and treatment resources, programs might address functions fulfilled by tobacco in order to enhance

impact. For example, providing more standardized breaks that reduce the need to use tobacco to receive a sanctioned break during the duty day,^{16,17,29} with ensuring the break rooms are attractive and encourage social interaction (e.g., televisions, beverage options, seating). Second, our findings suggest a need for informal connection between military personnel. Creating alternative activities and venues (e.g., intramural sports, running or strength training groups outside of their squadron, watching televised sporting events, cookouts, family events) where these connections can organically occur, both on base and in the deployed environment, may reduce tobacco use for networking purposes. Creating attractive alternative activities or venues will likely be difficult and need to take into account aspects that have made smoke pits “successful”: 1) connections occur naturally; 2) opportunities for peer-to-peer and leadership connections; and 3) the activity can easily fit into the flow of the duty day. Third, to reduce tobacco use during deployment, alternative activities that have both direct or indirect impacts on stress should be explored. Additionally, because tobacco use does not require any planning or effort, these activities need to be simple and easy to engage in to make them more likely to be used as alternatives to the status quo.

Our study is not without limitations. Our sample may be limited in generalizability of the findings to other military branches; however, these findings are consistent with previous findings in other branches. In addition, since only current Air Force MTLs and TTIs took part in the focus groups, their perspectives may not be broadly generalizable to all permanent party. However, the age, service record, and personal tobacco experience of our participants was varied. Also, this is a secondary analysis of focus groups designed to understand tobacco behaviors of Technical Trainees, and as such the focus groups were not a priori designed to understand tobacco culture for permanent party in the Air Force.

Conclusion

By tailoring tobacco programs and policies to address the functions tobacco serves, the military will be better able to reduce tobacco use, regardless of the mode of tobacco delivery. This is important because the tobacco landscape is changing, especially among younger Airmen. E-cigarettes are growing in popularity, while traditional cigarettes are becoming less common.⁷ Given some of the unique characteristics of e-cigarettes (e.g., e-cigarettes are more easily concealed), policies that focus solely on making tobacco use more difficult may be less effective for e-cigarettes than traditional burnt tobacco products and may still allow e-cigarettes to be used with little hindrance.

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