Where there’s smoke there’s fire: Outdoor smoking bans and claims to public space

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Abstract

The Canadian city of Vancouver was very early to introduce extensive smokefree legislation. Smoking has been banned in all indoor locations for well over a decade and tobacco control advocates have also recently begun to push for the expansion of such legislation into outdoor spaces in the city. Drawing on a six-month period of observation of smokers and ‘not-smokers’ on their lunch breaks at office sites in downtown Vancouver, I examine the ways that smokers engage with outdoor public space. I show that while smokers continue to make material claims to such space, these claims have become increasingly tenuous. I argue that tobacco ‘denormalization’ strategies provide essential context for understanding outdoor smoking bans and raise ethical questions about the form of de-facto prohibition they appear to encourage.

Keywords: smoking, tobacco, smokefree legislation, public space, denormalization
Introduction

In May of 2010 I hopped on a bus in downtown Vancouver on a typically gloomy Friday morning. The bus driver, a white male in his mid thirties, said a pleasant hello as I fed my bus ticket into the automated machine and made my way to a seat. Still downtown, a few stops later we pulled up to a bus stop at a major intersection where there were four people lined up, including a young white guy in his mid twenties dressed in a bright orange jacket, who was standing to the left of the semi-enclosed bus shelter. This man (let’s call him ‘O.J.’) was holding a bike with one hand and had a lit cigarette in the other.

As the bus pulled up to the stop, O.J. wheeled his bike around to the front of the bus to load onto the bike rack, placing the lit cigarette in his mouth as he maneuvered it onto the rack with both hands. Meanwhile, the other commuters were lined up waiting to get on the bus but the driver hadn’t yet opened the door. Oblivious, O.J. finished loading his bike and continued smoking as he stood to the back of the line, waiting for the door to open—presumably planning to ditch his cigarette just before hopping on the bus. The driver then called loudly through the closed door: “I’m not opening the door until you put out the cigarette”. Only after the cigarette had been ground underfoot did the driver let the commuters on the bus. “So, you’re not allowed to smoke on the street anymore?” queried O.J. The driver responded loudly: “you’re not allowed to smoke on the bus out of consideration for your fellow passengers.” At that point everyone hopped on the bus, including O.J., who immediately headed to the exit doors in the middle of the bus,
bypassing a number of vacant seats. He put on his headphones and gazed intently at the scenery outside, steadfastly avoiding eye contact with fellow passengers.

This account provides some sense of the increasingly charged environment that smokers1 experience in Vancouver, Canada, a city notoriously unfriendly to people who smoke (well, cigarettes, at least2). In this paper, I examine the ways in which smokers and non-smokers engage with outdoor public space in the city of Vancouver, drawing on research conducted between 2008 and 2012. I am particularly interested in smokers’ navigation of public space in the face of extensive non-smoking bylaws. I treat these bylaws not just as technical rules governing the use of public space, but as socio-political phenomena in their own right. Thus, in the second half of the paper, I expand its focus to consider the larger social, cultural and political context in which smoking in outdoor public space has been problematized.

**Smoking, social class and public space**

In 1961, the philosopher Henri Lefebvre (1991, p. 55) observed that “today more than ever, the class struggle is inscribed in space.” Although the concept of ‘public’ space is ostensibly democratic, implying the possibility of unfettered access, for this reason it has often been conceived of as dangerous. Because it allows the possibility of unregulated mingling between classes, groups and ideas, assaults on the public realm have become increasingly common over the past few hundred years (Lofland, 1989). However, while some scholars evoke a past of relative openness, others have suggested that urban public space has always been contested. According to Listerborn (2005, p. 382), “There is no
‘point zero’ in urban history when public spaces were truly and essentially ‘public’, or ‘open for all’.” Today, public space continues to be the site of competing class interests and values (Crawford, 1995; Mitchell, 1995; Staeheli & Thompson, 1997; Goheen, 2003). As Van Deusen Jr (2002, p. 150) notes, “public space is always a space of conflict; it is a site of struggle over who controls and who has access to it, who determines its constitution and how it is reproduced.”

Local bylaws play a central role in the contemporary constitution of public space and the governance of bodies within it. However, although considerable scholarly attention has focused on legal mechanisms such as criminal law that act on persons directly, more mundane mechanisms such as zoning laws and bylaws have been far less studied (Valverde, 2005, 2009). While these local laws generally act in an indirect manner, they have the effect of fundamentally shaping the spaces within which human interaction takes place. To quote Valverde (2009, p. 898), “Municipalities sometimes govern persons—individuals and groups—directly, but more often than not persons are governed indirectly through rules about physical form, about buildings, property, activities, temporalities, and uses.”

Smokefree legislation exemplifies Valverde’s point, as the dramatic changes to the smoking landscape over the past two decades have stemmed primarily from ordinances enacted at the municipal level. For example, using California as a case study, Waterstone (2010) illustrates the instrumental role of non-smokers’ rights groups in developing ordinances, and then utilizing local activists to work the political machinery in their
communities to ensure their implementation. It was the enactment of hundreds of these local ordinances that eventually led to the implementation of statewide smokefree legislation (CDHS, 1998, p. 4)—a pattern that also occurred in Canada (Asbridge, 2004; Nykiforuk et al., 2007).

Based on research conducted in Ontario and Alberta, Nykiforuk and colleagues (2007) have shown the class dimension to the enactment of such bylaws, with municipalities containing more educated populations significantly more likely to have strong bylaws in place. This is hardly surprising when we consider the growing social distance between smokers and non-smokers. Today, smoking is a practice that increasingly articulates social fault lines. Now most prevalent amongst the working class and people who are socially and economically disenfranchised, smoking-related morbidity and mortality have become a growing source of health inequalities between rich and poor (Jha et al., 2006).

Despite the dramatic transformations smoking restrictions have engendered in the arrangement of public space, and the potentially class-based consequences of these arrangements, they have been the focus of relatively little study. The available research mostly takes the form of surveys that aim to evaluate the acceptability and effectiveness of such policies with the larger goal of supporting their expanded implementation (Bell et al., 2009). However, a small body of social science research suggests that smokefree legislation doesn’t necessarily reduce smoking prevalence in the intended fashion; instead, its stigmatizing sub-text may actually serve to inure the habit (Poland, 2000; Thompson et al., 2007; Bell et al., 2010a; Ritchie et al., 2010). Thompson and colleagues
(2007) have specifically highlighted the class-based effects of such legislation, pointing out that “Those who continue to smoke tend to be clustered in socio-economically deprived areas that are themselves stigmatised and within these areas poor smokers can be subject to dual stigmatisation…” (p. 508).

Studies involving observation of the ways smokers actually engage with public space are rarer still and the available research has been primarily concerned with ensuring that smoking bans operate as intended. For example, Chapman and colleagues (1997) compared smokers outside of Sydney office buildings and those in social settings and they found evidence that people smoked differently in each location, with those outside of worksites smoking ‘harder’, presumably because they were ‘on the clock’. They concluded that employers may be misguided in allowing their employees to take smoking breaks, because of the more dangerous ways the employees smoke on their breaks. More recently, Kaufman and colleagues (2010) carried out observations at various types of worksites in downtown Toronto to explore smokers’ compliance with local legislation, highlighting problem areas such as smoking at building entrances and suggesting ways that compliance might be enhanced. In the present study I aim to step away from such questions of compliance to examine the ways smokefree legislation in Vancouver mediates and transforms interactions between smokers and non-smokers.
The study

Located in southwest Canada, the City of Vancouver has a population of approximately 578,000 and is the most densely populated municipality in the country, with the population density reaching its peak in the downtown core (City of Vancouver, 2010a). Vancouver’s temperate climate and geographic location situated close to both mountains and the sea have created a reputation for a healthy, outdoorsy lifestyle; tourist brochures boast that it’s “the only city in the world where you can ski, sail and golf on the same day”, and the province’s slogan is “Super. Natural. British Columbia” (Ristovski-Slijepcevic et al., 2010; Haines-Saah et al., under review).

This emphasis on health, nature and lifestyle as a way of ‘selling’ Vancouver and British Columbia (BC) has been accompanied by a variety of initiatives to promote healthy living, including extensive smoking restrictions (Haines-Saah et al., under review). Since 1996, smoking has been banned in most indoor locations in Vancouver, with the ban extended to bars and nightclubs in 2000. Having conquered the city’s indoor spaces, tobacco control advocates have also pushed for the expansion of smokefree legislation into outdoor environs. In 2007, the enactment of a City Health Bylaw saw smoking banned at semi-enclosed bus stops and on restaurant and café patios. In 2008, the bylaw was extended to smoking within six meters of commercial building entrances and exits. As of September 2010, smoking has been banned at all City beaches and parks. In consequence, there are now a very limited number of public spaces where smokers can legally light up. Although those found to be in breach of local bylaws are theoretically subject to a $250 fine, in reality there is little formal policing of smokefree ordinances in
Vancouver. In fact, the City Council states quite explicitly that it won’t ticket individual smokers for breaking the 6-meter rule. Rather, the onus is placed on business operators to “be responsible for ensuring employees or patrons don’t break the City by-law” (City of Vancouver, 2010b).

This legislation, in combination with a variety of other restrictions on the promotion and sale of cigarettes, has solidified BC’s reputation as a global leader in tobacco control. It is also deemed to be responsible for the low smoking prevalence in the province, which at 14% is the lowest in the country (CTUMS, 2010). However, this figure fails to reflect the substantial socio-economic variations in smoking in the province: people with a high school education are twice as likely to smoke as those who are university educated (Ipsos Reid, 2003) and the prevalence of smoking amongst Aboriginal communities in the province is over 50% (BC Ministry of Health Services, 2004).

In this paper I draw primarily on a six-month period (August 2011-January 2012) of unobtrusive naturalistic observation of smokers and not-smokers on their lunch breaks. Observation took place two to three times per week outside of office sites in downtown Vancouver. Although I conducted naturalistic observation as opposed to participant observation, my fieldwork was influenced by ethnographic methods rather than the quantitative approaches typical of prior research on this topic (e.g., Chapman et al., 1997; Kaufman et al., 2010). Initially I was relatively mobile, and focused on the main office blocks, stopping whenever I encountered someone smoking. However, over time my observations began to focus on several areas where I came to learn that encounters
between smokers and not-smokers were most likely, including: a busy intersection in the central office district and several outdoor seating areas popular with office workers. To a lesser extent, I incorporate longer-term observation (since 2010) of encounters between smokers and not-smokers in public places witnessed as a resident living in the downtown area. I also draw on interviews conducted as part of an earlier study of smokers’ experiences of smokefree legislation in Vancouver (see Bell et al., 2010a for further details). The present study provides an important counterpoint to my earlier interview-based research, fleshing out—and to some extent moderating—the picture of smokers’ engagement with public space in a city with extensive and expanding legislation in place.

**Negotiating public space in downtown Vancouver**

Smoking is not a particularly visible activity in Vancouver’s downtown area during regular work hours. For example, during my fieldwork period, I regularly passed up to eight minutes in sunny weather without seeing a single smoker and in cold, damp weather smokers were an even rarer sight.⁶ However, smoking amongst downtown office workers on their lunch breaks exhibited several distinct features worth highlighting. First, there was no smoking sociality to speak of along the lines of what has commonly been observed in leisure settings, where striking up a conversation with a stranger over a cigarette is apparently so common it now has its own term: ‘smirting’.⁷ In Vancouver’s downtown area, unless several colleagues went outside for a smoke together, it was generally a solitary activity. The only exception I saw to this general pattern occurred out the front of English language institutes in the downtown area, where I frequently observed groups of young Asian men chatting and smoking on breaks between classes.
Office workers I observed also often came outside for a smoke and went back inside as soon as they were finished their cigarette, regardless of the weather. Also, people rarely just sat around smoking a leisurely cigarette. Mostly they were doing something: texting, checking their phone, reading a book, etc. It was an activity that tended to take place concurrently with other activities, which may have something to do with a desire to minimize one’s visibility—a concern reported by Toronto smokers interviewed in Kaufman and colleagues’ (2010) observational study, who were acutely aware of the negative image of smoking.

However, in these spaces non-smokers’ rights to outdoor public space didn’t always trump the rights of smokers. Instead, claims to space were constantly negotiated; space was not fixed or static, but continuously produced and transformed (c.f. Moore, 1996). For example, if a non-smoker entered a priorly unpopulated space, it became, by definition, non-smoking space. A smoker who entered that space and lit up was likely to be treated with a certain degree of annoyance—especially if other space was available. But the opposite also held true. If someone was in an isolated outdoor area having a solitary cigarette and a non-smoker entered the vicinity of the smoker, he or she could hardly complain about the smoke. Thus, smoking space and non-smoking space tended to reproduce themselves over any given temporal period (e.g., the course of a lunch hour) as smokers went to areas already occupied by other smokers, the initial smokers left, new ones entered, etc.
These dynamics were particularly apparent at a large outdoor seating area popular during pleasant weather amongst smokers and not-smokers alike (see figure 1). Bracketed on one end by a tree-lined church, the area also featured a water fountain along the back wall and numerous banks of seats scattered somewhat haphazardly throughout the space. Several freestanding grey posts also dotted the area; although bearing no markings, they were ashtrays provided for the use of smokers (and likely designed to reduce cigarette butt litter). The following observations are typical of the interactions I witnessed between smokers and not-smokers.

12.05pm, 16 August 2011: There are people scattered on the park benches but I see only one person smoking: a woman in her mid-30s who looks to be Filipino.
She is sitting on a bench alone near the fountain – there is no one near her and she looks at her phone as she smokes. The smoke she expels is clearly visible. A guy in a suit (white, 60s) walks past me and stubs out his cigarette in the ashtray near where I am sitting. Two blonde women arrive and sit on a bench near the smoking woman. Both light up as they chat. Shortly afterwards, they are followed by the arrival of a not-smoker, who sits on a middle bench between the two sets of smokers [the lone woman checking her phone and the blonde white women]. Because of the wind direction she is soon copping smoke from the Filipino woman but doesn’t noticeably react to it.

In light of these patterns, for the most part, smokers I observed made what looked to be conscious decisions about where they smoked, generally choosing to smoke in areas away from not-smokers, thereby minimizing bystanders’ involuntary exposure to ambient smoke (see also Kaufman et al. 2010). For example, I regularly saw the same two blonde women at the outdoor seating area. Over time, I began to notice a clear pattern in their behavior as they chose a place to sit down. On one particularly sunny day, I recorded the following fieldnote:

12.15pm, 18 August 2011: The two blonde women then come out of the building. What happens next is interesting. They visibly look around trying to figure out where to sit. Given that the park area is relatively full, this takes a few moments. They eventually decide on a relatively isolated area over near the bus stop. It seems clear to me (knowing that they both smoke and likely want a fag) that they
are looking for an uncrowded area where their smoke will not bother anyone. They then go and sit down, light up and chat.

I also regularly observed smokers attempting to expel their smoke away from non-smokers or smoking downwind from them. These observations are borne out by interview studies with smokers, who frequently invoke discourses of consideration and responsibility as a central organizing logic in accounts of their smoking. These include practices such as asking permission to smoke, smoking away from non-smokers in public places, and not smoking around children (Poland, 2000; Thompson et al., 2009; Bell et al., 2010a).

The main alteration of these dynamics occurred in outdoor areas more overtly configured as smoking space in downtown Vancouver. One of the most prominent of these is the ‘Smoker’s Pole’ area on Burrard Street, a busy road bisecting the downtown area. This space consists of a bank of benches with clearly demarcated “smoker’s poles” (freestanding black ashtrays) placed at regular intervals (see figures 2 and 3). There is also a discreet metal sign posted in the bushes behind the benches that says: “Please respect our gardens. Please use the ashtrays to dispose of your cigarette when you are finished” (see figure 3). Taken together, the smoker’s poles and the sign suggest that this is an area where smoking is permissible. In my experience, if you sit in this area, the assumption is that you smoke, even if you are not currently smoking, and are comfortable with someone lighting up next to you. Therefore, in this space I did not witness the same sorts of calculated smoking that I observed at other downtown sites.
Figure 2. ‘Smoker’s Pole’ area on Burrard Street (property of the author)

Figure 3. Close up of smoker’s pole and discreet sign posted in the bushes (property of the author)
Close encounters

My observations in Vancouver’s downtown area suggested that outdoor smokers at a physical remove from bystanders, and who could be actively avoided, were not generally the targets of visible censure. Incidents were more common in interstitial spaces where smokers and not-smokers were forced into closer physical proximity, such as bus stops and sidewalks. However, as several examples illustrate, encounters between smokers and not-smokers often took the form of subtle non-verbal reactions rather than overt verbal reproaches.

5.45pm, 21 November 2010. It’s a cold and dreary afternoon and I come up to a downtown intersection in tandem with a young Asian woman smoking a cigarette. An older Asian woman who looks to be in her 60s comes up beside her just as the younger woman blows smoke from her mouth—the smoke itself is highly visible in the evening air. The older woman grimaces and covers her nose with her gloved hand. This happens over a matter of seconds. The light then changes and we go our separate ways.

12.50pm, 11 August 2011. It’s a sunny albeit cool afternoon and I’m at one of my favorite haunts: the steps outside of an office building overlooking a busy four-way intersection. Two men walk past, both white, middle-aged and wearing tags around their neck, suggesting their likely attendance at one of the many conferences that seem to be the bread and butter of downtown hotels. As they chat animatedly, one pulls out a pack of cigarettes and lights up—the smoke trails behind him in a visible stream. A middle-aged white woman wearing a mini-
backpack walking directly behind them immediately begins to wave her hand in front of her face and then holds her nose. This behavior continues as she reaches the intersection and waits for the light to change.

12.35pm, 15 September 2011. I’m standing outside a large office building—a frequent smokers’ hangout. It’s a cold, drizzly day and a couple of South Asian office workers—a man in his 30s wearing a janitorial uniform and a middle-aged woman—come outside for a smoke and a chat. In the cold air, their cigarettes produce a visible cloud of smoke as they stand and talk. Several pedestrians glance at the couple in an annoyed fashion as they walk by. As a young Asian woman with a parka on walks through the smoke she immediately ducks her head so that her parka collar covers her nose.

Vancouver smokers interviewed in my previous research reported responses very similar to those I observed, including: a) the fake coughing fit, b) nose holding, and c) frantic hand waving, and were acutely aware of the implicit censure they entailed. For example, Eve, an unemployed white woman in her early 30s, lived in Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside and was a very heavy smoker at the time of interview. Eve had long struggled with a variety of addictions, all of which she’d managed to overcome except smoking. According to Eve, non-verbal censure was an inevitable accompaniment to smoking in public. “Everybody looks at me funny. People walk by, they clear their noses, they cover their faces while I’m smoking”. She continued, “If I light a cigarette, even off the side of the bus stop, whoever’s at the bench will get up and move the other way. I’ve had
people do that. They’ll get up and move and give me the worst look in the world because I’m a smoker” (see Bell et al., 2010a).

Smokers also reported occasional instances of overt reproach by not-smokers. I interviewed Mary, a quietly spoken white secretary in her fifties, in 2008, shortly after the rule banning smoking within six meters of building entrances and exits came into effect. Mary, who had smoked for over thirty years, noted that comments had increased dramatically since the implementation of the six-meter bylaw in the City of Vancouver, something she particularly noticed on the weekends when she was out more in public. “People look at you and comment. You’ll hear someone say, ‘they’re still smoking here.’” She noted that people made comments even when she was “15 feet from the door!” Comparing Vancouver with the neighboring province where she grew up, Mary stated: “I don’t want to say they’re unfriendly but people are not courteous.” Unhappy with this characterization she explained, “If someone doesn’t like smoking then they say it. They’re very direct.”

Although smokers readily recounted verbal comments and attacks, I only witnessed overt confrontations between smokers and not-smokers on rare occasions. Notably, none of the encounters occurred during the six-month period of naturalistic observation at downtown office sites, but were all witnessed during the earlier fieldwork period when I was specifically focusing on such incidents. One such encounter occurred in May 2010 at a central bus depot where there were nine people waiting for the bus, including a young white guy (late teens or early twenties) who was standing and smoking at the back of the
orderly line that Vancouver commuters generally gravitate towards. My initial inclination was to get in line behind him as it looked like he was part of the queue, but standing back to minimize the smoke ingested by fellow commuters. However, a well-dressed Middle Eastern woman in her mid forties arrived at the same time and quite deliberately moved to stand in front of him in line. She muttered under her breath and then turned to the guy and declared, “You’re not allowed to smoke here.” The guy responded, “Where am I supposed to smoke, then?” The woman gestured to the ‘no-smoking’ sign affixed to the sheltered area, which we weren’t actually in, and repeated: “well, you’re not allowed to smoke here. Anyway, I have allergies.” The guy looked annoyed but moved about eight meters away to the end of the platform. He returned when he finished his cigarette and the woman checked to make sure that he didn’t still have it in his hand.

Transitive substances, risk and bodily boundaries

How are we to understand these dynamics? The obvious explanation for non-smokers’ responses is that they are reacting to exposure to a known health hazard and are taking steps to minimize this exposure. However, while outdoor smoking bans are generally justified in terms of protecting non-smokers from the harmful effects of secondhand smoke (evidenced in their enactment under the guise of health bylaws), the harms of cigarette smoke in outdoor settings are not comparable to those experienced in enclosed spaces. Chapman (2008) has challenged the evidentiary basis of health claims, arguing that:
Secondhand smoke is not so uniquely noxious that it justifies extraordinary controls of such stringency that zero tolerance outdoors is the only acceptable policy. Park barbecues aren’t banned for the obvious reason that the amount of smoke involved is trivial. Zero tolerance of tobacco smoke in outdoor public settings is nakedly paternalistic (p. 77).

For example, one of the few studies to actually measure outdoor tobacco smoke (OTS) particulates produced highly equivocal findings, concluding: “it is possible for OTS to present a nuisance or hazard under certain conditions of wind and smoker proximity” (Klepeis et al., 2007, p. 522, emphasis added). Although OTS concentrations are higher at outdoor sites where smokers congregate (Klepeis et al., 2007; Kaufman et al., 2011), it is unclear whether they cause harm. After all, in these settings, cigarette smoke competes with a variety of other pollutants we are regularly exposed to from anthropogenic and natural sources.

Smokers readily point to the contradictions embedded in non-smokers’ responses to such outdoor exposure. For example, in 2008 I interviewed Wade, a white guy in his late twenties who had moved to Vancouver three months earlier. Like Eve, Wade had previously struggled with several other addictions, although he was now a relatively light smoker. Having recently dropped out of university, Wade was currently in a part-time sales position and struggling to find full-time employment in the city. During our conversation at a downtown coffee shop, I asked him whether there were any environments where he felt uncomfortable smoking. He thought about it for a few moments and responded,
I try to just keep it away from people that would seem to be bothered by it. But there’s a fine line, right? Like, some people, like, they’ll smell it and they’ll give, like, from, like, straight away, they’ll give you this really crazy face. And you know, like, ‘Ma’am, you’re standing behind a vehicle and you’re breathing in exhaust, maybe that’s what’s bothering you’.

There are undoubtedly a number of people who suffer from allergies to cigarette smoke, and in the encounter I witnessed at the bus depot the woman specifically invoked such allergies to force the young male smoker to move. However, in Wade’s view, non-smokers tended to single out cigarette smoke in contexts where they were also being exposed to a variety of other pollutants—especially exhaust fumes.

It’s clear that some non-smokers do use these cues as a way of signaling their broader disapproval of smoking, expecting smokers to respond ‘appropriately’ to them (Poland, 2000; Kaufman et al., 2010). For example, the exaggerated nature of the gestures of the woman in the mini-backpack mentioned above seemed designed to display her general displeasure. But in other instances, not-smokers’ responses appeared to be embodied reactions to the perceived invasion of the smoke, rather than deliberate signifiers of displeasure. In other words, not all non-verbal gestures are intended to display censure, although they are generally perceived as such by smokers (those I’ve interviewed, at least).

As I’ve elsewhere noted, cigarette smoke highlights the permeability of bodily boundaries (Bell, 2011; see also Dennis, 2006). Cigarette smoke is abject: both visually
and olfactorily, it distorts the boundaries between what is ‘me’ and what is ‘not me’ (c.f. Kristeva, 1982). It’s thus a mimetic sign perceived by the body; the smell of smoke “acts on our bodies before we are conscious of it” (Marks, 2002, p. 115). This sense of bodily invasion at least partially accounts for the responses cigarette smoke engenders. In this conceptualization, ‘where there’s smoke there’s fire’ (to quote a common idiom), with smoke signifying danger, contamination and disease (Bell, 2011). But this alone does not explain the contemporary reactions cigarette smoke engenders in Vancouver. After all, the naturalization of this view of cigarette smoke as universally ‘bad’ is both relatively new and culturally specific.

**Denormalization, deputization and the ‘no smoking’ sign**

Over the past fifteen years, as direct appeals to smokers have failed to have the desired effect, a number of governments have increasingly turned to denormalization strategies. Denormalization has been embraced at a policy level in Canada and represents the fourth pillar of both the provincial and national tobacco control strategies (Steering Committee, 1999; BC Ministry of Health Services, 2004). First pioneered in California (CDHS, 1998), tobacco denormalization aims to invoke the power of social pressure to make smoking “less desirable, less acceptable and less accessible” (CDHS, 1993, p. 3). In other words, it involves an ambitious attempt to transform social norms through “intentional human intervention” (CDHS, 1993, p. 3).

Location restrictions on smoking, although ostensibly aimed at protecting non-smokers from the effects of secondhand smoke, form the lynchpin of tobacco denormalization
strategies, because the idea is that reducing the visibility of smoking is integral to making it less socially acceptable (Bell et al., 2010a). Thus, a reduction in overall smoking prevalence is seen to be an explicit benefit of such legislation, because of the assumption that inconvenienced and vilified smokers will eventually be induced to quit (CDHS, 1998). Importantly, under the logic of denormalization strategies, “cessation is the outcome rather than the intervention” (CDHS, 1998, p. 9).

The perceived benefits of spatial restrictions on the incidence and prevalence of smoking becomes particularly prominent in the context of outdoor smoking bans, where, as previously noted, the health argument carries less weight. However, even more important than the spatial restrictions themselves are the ‘no smoking’ signs that accompany them. As Poland (2000) has observed, although restrictions on smoking in public places are legally binding, formal authorities rarely enforce them—an observation that holds equally true in Vancouver. Instead, “These authorities, using signage, mark spaces of permission and denial, but mostly leave the policing of conduct in these spaces to the lay public” (p. 1). Signs are therefore a key non-human ‘actor’ in encounters between smokers and non-smokers (c.f. Latour, 2005).

Indeed, ‘no smoking’ signs perform a distinctive function under a denormalization environment, a point articulated in a sketch by the comedian Jim Jefferies. In his words:

> Why do we still have ‘no smoking’ signs up? That makes no sense. We used to have to have ‘no smoking’ signs. We used to have to know where we could or could not smoke. Now we can’t fucking smoke anywhere, so why are there
As Jefferies asks: why are ‘no smoking’ signs still so prominent today? According to Jefferies, the ‘no smoking’ sign implies its inverse—an area where smoking is permissible. But permissible spaces have become increasingly ambiguous in cities like Vancouver. As previously noted, areas where smoking is allowed (e.g., the ‘Smokers’ Pole’ area on Burrard Street) proclaim this status coyly, through subtle rather than overt signifiers of smoking’s permissibility. This relative absence of sanctioned smoking spaces in Vancouver becomes particularly apparent when contrasted with other regions of the world with indoor smoking bans in place, but where smoking is less denormalized at a policy or social level. For example, England has not formally embraced denormalization strategies, although its three central pillars of prevention, cessation and protection closely echo the national Canadian strategy in other respects (see HM Government, 2010). Although England has had a comprehensive smoking ban since 2007 in enclosed and semi-enclosed spaces, a variety of formal outdoor spaces for smokers still exist. One such example is the designated smoking areas at London’s Heathrow International Airport, accompanied by the friendly injunction to “Please feel free to smoke in this area” (see figure 4).
In light of these differing contexts, the meanings of the ‘no-smoking’ sign in Vancouver and London therefore appear rather different. As Jefferies’ sketch alludes, contemporary ‘no smoking’ signs are far from straightforward at a semiotic level. Read iconically, their message is simple, direct and aimed at smokers: don’t smoke here. However, they are also symbolic phenomena, with culture- and context-dependent meanings. For example, based on fieldwork in Kunming, China, Kohrman (2004) has discussed the connection between the upgrading of ‘no smoking’ signage and the city’s hosting of the 1999 International Horticultural Exposition. He argues that the production of countless numbers of brass signs was seen as an opportunity to showcase the city as a modern, cultured metropolis. In effect, they became symbolic capital: signifers of worldly sophistication. Kohrman’s work thus demonstrates the ways in which “cessation has also been connected with notions of progress, civilisation and cleanliness” (Thompson et al. 2007, p. 511).

In a city like Vancouver, where their function is no longer strictly to delineate those spaces where smoking is permissible and those where it isn’t, the signs become primarily ideological devices: assertions of a broader anti-smoking ethos. Moreover, arguably the signs are aimed as much at non-smokers as they are at smokers, acting as authorizations—exhortations, even—to action. This is precisely what happened in the case of the woman at the bus depot, who invoked the ‘no smoking’ sign to force the male smoker to move. In the face of such authorization, even though he wasn’t technically breaking the bus shelter bylaw, the smoker was powerless to argue. The same is also true
of O.J., who was not in violation of the bus stop bylaw either, given that it pertains to smoking *within* the bus shelter itself.

Arguably, the goal of denormalization is to encourage non-smokers to speak up whenever they are exposed to cigarette smoke, regardless of the context. This intent becomes explicit in Canada’s national tobacco control strategy, which states that one of the potential benefits of denormalization is that: “People using tobacco products in places where others are affected by smoke will attract adverse attention” (Steering Committee, 1999, p. 25). The vagueness of the term “affected by smoke” suggests that any instance where a non-smoker is annoyed by smoke, regardless of its legality, they should subject the smoker to “adverse attention”, in essence advocating a zero tolerance policy. In this framework, individual citizens are effectively “deputized” as agents of the state (Brandt, 1998); they are transformed into “private enforcement agents” (Kagan & Scholnick, 1993). This deputization effect is exemplified in the actions of the bus driver described at the beginning of this paper, although his sense of authorization was undoubtedly influenced by his status as a uniformed City employee.¹²

**Denormalization, smoking bans and the neo-liberal state**

The cost effectiveness of this strategy has not been lost on policy makers. Indeed, it appears to be quite fundamental to the embrace of denormalization. Thus, the national Canadian Tobacco Control Strategy states that denormalization “can help ensure that people behave in appropriate ways, including making efforts to quit, *without the need for a lot of policing or enforcement*” (Steering Committee, 1999, p. 25, emphasis added).
The original California strategy similarly noted that: “This population-based approach to cessation is far more cost effective and much less labor intensive than providing cessation assistance services to individuals” (CDHS, 1998, p. 9, emphasis added). In other words, making it intolerable for people to smoke is far more cost-effective than actively supporting them to quit.

Denormalization strategies exemplify the process of ‘governing from a distance’ that characterizes contemporary forms of neoliberal governance. Neoliberal rationality emphasizes the entrepreneurial individual called upon to enter into his or her own self-governance, taking responsibility to protect him or herself from ‘risk’ (Petersen 1997; Petersen & Lupton, 1997; Rose, 1999). As Poland (2000) observes:

To the extent that this is the case, the State is mostly relieved of the need for recourse to a more authoritarian and punitive exercise of power… Further, to the extent that individuals can be convinced that the apprehension and management of risk requires their participation through a mastery of the self, the (welfare) state will have been absolved of some of their responsibility for guaranteeing the current and future well-being of its citizens (p. 6).

Smokers themselves are actively implicated in the purification of public space (Poland, 2000). Importantly, however, denormalization strategies move beyond self-responsibilization: in this context, managing risks to the self involves policing others. While bylaws often rely on citizens to police the conduct of others (Rock, in press), denormalization appears to amplify this sense of authorization, so that citizens feel (to
varying degrees) comfortable in policing others well beyond the legal limits of the legislation. Thus, despite the fact that smoking is an ostensibly legal activity, smokers in Vancouver appear to have lost epistemic claims to public space; people smoking in public seem to be outside the *polis*, the public realm of the political community (Arendt, 1958). Denormalization strategies thus participate in the reduction of citizenship (*bios*) to ‘bare life’ (*zoe*): biological life without socio-political agency (Arendt, 1958; Agamben, 1998; Diprose, 2008).

**Conclusion**

In 1998, Brandt observed that the degree to which public space was being reconfigured to segregate smokers from non-smokers hadn’t been seen since the Jim Crow era in the South. And, of course, this reconfiguration of public space has intensified dramatically over the past 25 years. Today in the city of Vancouver, smokers have witnessed a dramatic shrinkage of the public spaces where they can legally light up. In a few short years, smoking in outdoor environs has been heavily curtailed. However, for the most part, confrontations between smokers and not-smokers are rare, with smokers generally ‘doing the right thing’ by taking steps to minimize others’ exposure to ambient smoke (c.f. Poland, 2000). It is in those transient spaces—bus stops, sidewalks and intersections—where encounters are more likely to occur.

These new arrangements of outdoor public space established through local non-smoking ordinances are not neutral or disinterested. Although often enacted under the guise of public health, health claims are being used to justify interventions where such claims
become very tenuous indeed. In this framing, health becomes infused with the moral obligations of responsible citizenship and promoted to the status of an absolute value, disguising the distinctively middle class stamp it bears (Crawford, 1980). This has the effect of demonizing those who “fail to aspire to a specific preferred image of the future self” (Diprose, 2008, p. 144; see also Haines-Saah, this volume, for similar points).

While smokers in Vancouver continue to successfully make material claims to outdoor space if they remain physically segregated from non/not-smokers, one wonders how long this situation will last. Under the logic of denormalization there can be no public spaces for smokers; such spaces undermine the intent to make smoking socially unacceptable. Recent comments by the Health Commissioner of New York City, a municipality that banned smoking in parks, beaches and outdoor pedestrian malls in 2011, exemplify this logic. When asked whether he believed people should be allowed to smoke in New York City, the Commissioner responded, “I'm not prepared to answer that” (Colgrove et al., 2011, p. 2377). Outdoor smoking bans thus seem designed to promote a form of de facto prohibition (Zimring, 1993; Colgrove et al., 2011), but one that has the advantage of transforming citizens into private enforcement agents at no cost to the state (and enabling it to continue to benefit from the revenues that cigarette taxes generate). Ongoing ethical discussion is therefore needed about the state’s deliberate use of informal social sanctions to censure its citizenry (Bayer, 2008; Burris, 2008; Bell et al., 2010b). As Burris (2008) observes, “A liberal society simply ought not to be in the business of shaming its citizens, even those who violate its laws, and certainly not people whose denunciation is unconnected to any illegal act...” (p. 474, emphasis added).
Author’s Note

Earlier versions of this paper were presented at the 2011 American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting and the 2012 Department of Anthropology Colloquia Series at the University of British Columbia. I am indebted to the three anonymous CDP reviewers for their helpful feedback and here also keep my promise to acknowledge Derek—a bloke I met in a London pub who introduced me to the concept of ‘smirting’ (not literally, but in a conversation about the impacts of the English smoking ban).

The interviews drawn on in this paper were conducted as part of a study funded by an Ethics seed grant titled ‘Rights, Risks and Smoking’ from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research and institutional ethics approval (H08-01170-A003) was obtained from the University of British Columbia prior to the conduct of the research. The naturalistic observation was unfunded and not subject to institutional ethics approval under Article 2.3 of Canada’s national human research ethics guidelines, the *Tri Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans*.

Notes

1 Although I agree with the reservations Robinson and Holdsworth and Haines-Saah express about the term ‘smoker’ in their papers in this volume, I have used the term throughout this paper. It’s worth noting that virtually all of the smokers I have interviewed in Vancouver identify themselves as such, unlike the participants in
Robinson et al.’s study. This, I suspect, is one of the consequences of living in an environment where smoking is highly ‘denormalized’.

2 Smokers regularly point to the far more tolerant reception afforded to those who smoke cannabis in Vancouver, where the smell of marijuana is a ubiquitous feature of the city’s olfactoscape.

3 Many people both live and work in the downtown core, which is reflected in the relatively high percentage of Vancouverites who walk to work (almost nine per cent – see CNW Telbec, 2008).

4 I have characterized people who respond negatively to smoking in public space as “not-smokers” rather than “non-smokers” because it’s entirely possible that some of these people smoked (although they weren’t currently smoking) or were ex-smokers. I thank one of the anonymous reviewers for this suggestion.

5 I made this decision primarily because the study was unfunded and I did not want to go through the headache of applying for institutional ethics approval, which is often particularly challenging in the context of ethnographic research (see Lederman, 2006; Katz, 2006). For example, the UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board’s stated preference at the time of the research was that participants be given a 24-hour period to decide on study participation, making it difficult to obtain ethics approval for casual, on-the-spot conversations with smokers.

6 This is reflected in my fieldnotes. As the weather became colder, the number of visible smokers diminished, along with interactions between smokers and not-smokers.
‘Smirting’ is a mash-up of ‘smoking’ and ‘flirting’, and the term’s origins appear to be directly connected with the growing sense of kinship amongst smokers in the face of smoking bans (see Henley, 2005).

In some respects, this may reflect broader norms regarding personal space as much as it entails a reaction to the smoke itself.

Known for its open-air drug trade, the Downtown Eastside is Canada’s poorest postal code.

See Haines-Saah’s paper in this volume for a first-person perspective on such reproaches.

Perhaps relatedly, the social denormalization of tobacco use is far lower in the UK than in Canada (see Hammond et al., 2006).

My prior research suggests that O.J.’s experience is not atypical, as other smokers report being penalized in a similar fashion by bus drivers for legally smoking near bus stops (for example, see the account of ‘Aisha’, in Bell et al., 2010a).

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