THINK PIECES

No smoking within nine metres of discipline limits

Simone Dennis

Abstract

I seek to open the social practice of smoking to anthropological enquiry that has been largely caught up in the agenda of cessation – to the point that it is difficult to examine it outside this frame without being accused of advancing the interests of Big Tobacco. Analysis has also been foreclosed by adherence to frames that privilege rationality. Smoking behaviour becomes understandable and translatable via explanations of addiction or ignorance: it is rational for the addict to source her drug, and rational for the smoker ignorant of its harms to continue smoking. Equally, using a rational frame anthropologists might explain smoking practice in relation to pleasure – if they are not wedded to a cessation agenda – as maximising pleasure might also be rational, as might any practice if only one can understand the agent's motivations. I argue for an anthropological analysis of smoking that permits more than translation.

Keywords

anthropology, disciplinary boundaries, rationality, smoking

Introduction

For well over a decade now, I have been in charge of teaching first-year anthropology, and for most of that time I also have been researching the practice of smoking as it is undertaken by a cross-section of Australian city dwellers. My educational responsibilities and my primary research interest often coalesce in my teaching activity, as I use ethnographic work to illustrate analytic or practical points.

I also teach a course called 'Social Animals', billed not as a topical course for students with an interest in animals, but as a theory course in which students might acquire a sense of the main

disciplinary tenets. If one begins with the discipline's dark historical speculations about what constitutes the human, for instance, the operations of Agamben's anthropological machine become evident (see Agamben 2004, 37). The main functionalist positions are perfectly evident through the lens of the cow in Evans-Pritchard's 1940 classic *The Nuer*; animals take a central place in structuralist analyses (see for example Levi-Strauss 1971, 1955); and Geertz's (1973) cockfight provides an excellent orientation to culturalist ideas about meaning, especially when contrasted with materialist analyses of the religious valence of Indian cows (see Harris 1974). Ideas about nature and culture can be explored and challenged by examining how human demands on space push animals and humans together; in new encounters with animals in 'the anthropocene', the era of profound human impact on the planet; and in Haraway's (2008) claims about the tenuousness of pure 'humanness' in her Latourian-inspired claims that we have never been, fully, human.

One would think that looking at the discipline through the lens of cigarette smoking would also permit access to all those same main schools of thought, as well as provide insights into politics, space, pollution, danger, inequity, class, and gendered practices. And one could – but one would also have to be comfortable with undermining a range of anthropological tenets. The real advantage of using smoking as a frame for characterizing anthropological approaches is that it tells us where the discipline's limits are in respect of smoking specifically, and other dangerous and contentious practices more generally.

I now proceed to detail some of these limits in respect of decisions anthropologists have made about the smoking agent, the lie of the smoke-free landscape, and public health agendas, and what I regard as a thriving colonial-esque stance on smoking and its consequences. Each of these is threaded through with particular notions of 'the rational' that produce a foreclosed field of anthropological enquiry that would be robustly critiqued, if the area of inquiry didn't happen to be smoking. I examine here two related questions put to me as an anthropologist interested in cigarette smoking and an introductory anthropology teacher charged with the responsibility for giving undergraduates their first impressions of anthropology: 'Why is it important to research smoking?' and 'Do you smoke yourself?'

Decisions we take about the smoking agent

In the first-year anthropology class, we discuss agency at length. Part of the discussion takes in Keane's (2003) urging that anthropologists better recognise and take responsibility for the key concepts they use and promote, such as agency. Having put forth to students the idea that anthropologists probe everyday concepts, even those in regular use within the discipline, the students are in a position to understand that the notion of the agent is up for grabs, just like other disciplinary concepts, and to also understand that critical questioning is fundamental to anthropology and its development.

However, analyses of smoking in anthropology routinely fail to retain such critical regard for agency and in fact turn to a notion of agency favoured by functionalist analysts that anthropologists are fond of declaring outmoded in terms of accounting for agency. Recall for example Malinowski's insistence on how we should understand the Trobriand person: as a rational person. 'Magic' rituals, derided as the height of irrationality at the time of Malinowski's fieldwork, were revealed under his hand to be highly sensible, a basis that disallowed from that time on the anthropological distinction between the 'primitive' and the 'civilized' person. Malinowski was determined to enter the rational Trobriand agent into the ethnographic record – an agent whose rationality was hitherto obscured by the oppressive force of disciplinary knowledge prior to his own offering (see Malinowski 1954).

Today, this 'rational agent' who responds appropriately to her circumstances is clearly present in anthropological analyses of smoking. Kohrman and Benson (2011), two prominent figures in the anthropology of smoking, recently called for anthropologists to attend in greater ethnographic detail than ever before to 'the subjective experience' of smokers. They then used this fine ethnographic detail to illuminate the lives of smokers that they had already decided were 'dependent consumers' (2011, 330). For these analysts, consumption of tobacco is explained prior to any ethnographic detailing by reference to the powerful addictive effects of 'tobacco' on users. Sourcing the drug makes smokers' otherwise inexplicable behaviour intelligible, rational. Other anthropologists have used different terms to account for smoker behaviour – the pleasures that are to be drawn from it, the way it facilitates social interaction, its entailment in complex systems of material and social exchanges. I myself once decided that my pregnant teen informants who smoked did so because, as they told me, they were frightened about giving birth to large infants,

and they knew from packages that smoking could reduce that risk and help them deliver a stunted, smaller infant – just what they desired to allay their great fear of giving birth (see Dennis 2011). Each of these explanations, mine most certainly included, is a variant of the rational agent – anthropologists can ascertain why smokers smoke by deciding on the terms that render smoking rational, a condition almost always determined externally by the anthropological (or other) expert.

What's wrong with such assertions of the rational agent, who acts as she does in direct response to the need to be social, the need for nicotine, or the need to ensure a baby with a low birth weight? Kapferer (2003) urges us to rethink our focus on rationality on the grounds that it permits only narrow analyses decided by the authoring anthropologist. Arguing that rationality lies at the explanatory centre of analyses of magic, witchcraft, and sorcery – in the sense that witchcraft becomes intelligible in dominant functionalist analyses as a rational mechanism for releasing social tensions, explaining misfortune, expressing desire, or trying to control that which is out of one's hands – Kapferer called on anthropologists to see witchcraft as something more: a site of invention, a hybrid form to be associated not only with formations of power but also with cosmological fusion and religious innovation. Such avenues of enquiry remain closed when the anthropologist insists on maintaining authorship of the rational. But why has the rational got such a grip on analyses of smoking?

Dealing with smoking as innovative praxis that has its own internal logic might easily be construed as opposed to public health aims that explicitly seek to deliver 'dependent consumers' from their harmful activities, and such analyses may well be pressed into the service of pro-tobacco interests. As Bell (2013) has explained, the danger of playing into the hands of Big Tobacco has been sufficient to ensure that the analytic range for the examination of tobacco use remains narrow.

This narrowness is highly consequential for the discipline since, as I explain to my first-year students, one key tenet of anthropological thought and practice is that it ought not to become handmaiden to any agenda, irrespective of that agenda's laudability, since this would involve the loss of anthropology's capacity to take a critical stance on that which appears to be unquestionably right. As Hunt and Barker (2001) note, the failure to take such a critical stance has already had great and negative impact on research on alcohol and illicit drugs. They argue that such research does not come 'from a mixture of critical developments within particular academic

disciplines but instead … from specific policy requirements often determined by moral, salvation and government entrepreneurs and channeled through the major funding agencies' (2001, 171). Hunt and Barker (2001, 171) further note that such conditions dictate how particular fields of expertise ought be pressed into service and warn that anthropology is increasingly obliged to forego its capacity to question ostensible rightness.

The colonial anthropologist

It's not just smokers who need rescuing in the political, moral, ethical, and social climate of smoking denormalization – whole publics require protection from the dangerous waft of toxic killer fumes. Anthropologists are present in the fight to protect publics from such menace, too. Whether focusing on smoker practices or the harm smoking does to publics, anthropologists of smoking are deeply implicated in the work of eradicating its scourge. We would be naïve to think of these analysts as fundamentally different from the 'scientists of empire', as we might have called them in colonial times, like Reed and Gorgas, who were involved in the occupation of Cuba during the Spanish-American War. As Nading (2013, 63) notes, these men made mosquito eradication the focus of public health science for the better part of the twentieth century. Their aggressive stance against mosquitoes, and the current disciplinary stance taken against smoking now, fit beautifully into a narrative of Western colonial triumphalism, predicated on the idea that through 'scientific rationality and technical prowess', disciplinary experts could civilize and clean up sullied landscapes (Nading 2013, 63).

In each of these cases there is a priority placed on insulating human bodies from dangerous (tropical or smoky) environments paralleled with the recognition of the inherent porosity of human bodies (the circulation of blood, parasites, and dangerous smoke). This could be quite interesting, anthropologically speaking. For instance, on the porosity of bodies, one might analyse the ways in which the air itself has been pressed into service in the creation of a new smoke-free 'atmosphere'. Once backgrounded atmospheric, the air itself, with its capacity to cross bodily bounds and create communities of breathers sharing the same substance, is worthy of foregrounded anthropological attention, especially when the presence of smoke marks up its capacity to connect bodies.

We could go further: smoke-free atmosphere becomes legislatively and practically manifest in rules about where smoking can take place in public. Given that smokers are now concentrated in the

lowest socioeconomic registers, now that the war on smoking has been won amongst the middle classes in the West, and smoking is now impermissible in most areas designated 'public', smokers are relegated to interstitial spaces, smoke-free policies effectively relegate the poor to the margins of embodied public participation. Such a pattern might alert anthropologists to the importance of attending to the category of 'the public', as opposed to dealing with the 'health of the public', as one might if one was wedded to eliminating smoking practice in public space. To return momentarily to mosquitoes – Nading (2013, 63) discusses the findings of Sutter, an environmental historian who:

> recounts a debate between Gorgas's mosquito team and the Quartermaster's Department in the Canal Zone. Gorgas believed that the Quartermaster was preferentially cutting grass in the '(white) married quarters while neglecting other important sanitary cutting in areas that bred and harbored vector mosquitoes' (Sutter 2007:749). … For the early mosquito hunters, bent though they were on 'eradicating' the insect scourge, health would arise not just from careful insulation of bodies from insects but also from careful governance of how those bodies moved through space.

Similarly, the health of the population does not arise simply from eradicating smoking, which has largely been done in respect of the middle classes, but depends equally on limiting how smoke can move through space when it emits from those who continue the practice. In the West, that means marginalising the poor. This, surely, requires anthropological attention. So far, scant attention has been paid because environments conducive to malaria or filled with smoke are presently public health menaces to be dealt by the state with the full support of researchers, as opposed to being opened to all manner of questions, including those which depart from the premise of eradicating the problem.

Conclusion

Smoking is good for showing students the ongoing entailments anthropology has with agendas that bear uncomfortably close resemblance to colonialist practices and associated assertions of the rational – over persons, landscapes, and health outcomes. The first thing students ask me when they come to know of my research interest in tobacco is whether or not I smoke. If I answer 'no', their automatic assumption is that I'm fighting the good fight, the public health fight. If I answer 'yes', I'm advocating for smoker rights. It's a good opportunity to introduce ideas about the researcher's relation to those we research, and in my own case, I reject an anthropology of smoking that flouts many of the discipline's foundational ideas and practices. So, correctly recognising their question for

what it is: 'Are you for smoking or against it?', I answer their 'Do you smoke, or not?' with 'I neither smoke nor do I not smoke'. I hope that by the end of first-year anthropology, students will understand why I answer as I do.

About the author

Dr Simone Dennis is a social anthropologist trained at the University of Adelaide. She is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the Australian National University, Canberra, Australia, where she convenes the Honours and foundational programs in social anthropology and teaches upper-level undergraduate courses. In an ongoing project, Dennis examines the social and sensory aspects of cigarette smoking among smokers living in several Australian cities and looks closely at the legislation pertaining to it, and its effects. Her fourth monograph, entitled *Smokefree: Purity, Pollution and the Politics of Tobacco*, is due out in 2015, from Bloomsbury.

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