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A social influence contribution to the understanding of smoking cessation:

Smoker identity and influence relationship

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[up to date]

Authors’ note

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From a theoretical and practical point of view, tobacco consumption can be considered one of the most challenging of human behaviors. Since the nineteen fifties, when studies first showed the damage smoking does to health (Doll & Hill, 1950), health authorities have kept trying to reduce tobacco-related damage in society. These efforts have focussed both on practices (mainly information campaigns aimed at discouraging people from smoking) and on theoretical research aimed at isolating the factors that may improve practical efforts. Given the nature of this social phenomenon, many sciences have been involved in the analysis of change. Social psychology has concentrated its applications on the study of social factors which incite and maintain the habit, as much as those which facilitate withdrawal from the habit.

Even though anti-tobacco information campaigns have succeeded in setting out the negative consequences of smoking, in establishing increasingly strong social norms against tobacco consumption, and indeed in convincing a large number of smokers to give up smoking, these successes appear less impressive when smoking rates are considered (cf. Etter, Perneger & Ronchi, 1997; ISPA, 1997; WHO, 1997; OFS, 1998). This relative failure is frequently attributed to the ineffectiveness of the social influence models which have inspired the campaigns (e.g., Leventhal & Cleary, 1980). These models assume that repetition of a message emitted by a high status source (e.g., experts or health authorities) will gain the attention of the recipient who will hence learn, and modify his/her attitude and behavior (cf. Kelman, 1958; McGuire, 1968). However, this assumption has proved to be overly simple and insufficient. In an attempt to increase the efficacy of interventions, other social psychological postulates relating to the use of drugs have been incorporated—e.g., training in social skills (Botvin, Eng, & Williams, 1980; Evans et al., 1978; Flay, 1985; Leventhal, Fleming, & Glyn, 1988; Lichtenstein et al., 1990).

The purpose of this chapter is to report a social influence approach to smoking cessation that may offer new elements of interest for anti-tobacco campaigns. Our main argument is that interventions intended to reduce tobacco consumption could also benefit from considering the threat to smokers’ identity, and thereby the creation of a stigmatized group, as a factor that potential reduces the efficacy of campaigns.
Tobacco consumption and smoker identity.

Nowadays, increasing consideration is given to the type of attitude or behavior that can be influenced. While some attitudes simply express an individual’s position with respect to an object without entailing any particular meaning for the individual (e.g., being for or against the use of seat belts), other attitudes define individuals’ identities, determining their social group or defining important aspects of their self-concept (e.g., being politically left or right wing, being for or against abortion; cf. Pérez & Mugny, 1996; Petty & Krosnick, 1995).

Smoking behavior has to be considered as definitive of an individual’s identity. The early development of smoking behavior is grounded in psychological, social and cultural factors (cf. Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1990) and needs to be seen in relation to the construction of an identity. In fact, the search for an image (e.g., being an adult) or for social recognition (e.g., being accepted by the peers), seem to be factors predicting the initial consumption of tobacco (e.g., Barton, Chassin, Presson, & Sherman, 1982). It follows that smoking should be regarded as a routine behavior or habit that contributes to the building of a part of a person’s identity. It locates smokers in the social field by placing them within a visible social category—i.e. that of smokers—which generates a strong feeling of group belonging. It has thus been observed that smokers show a strong identification with their category (Echebarría, Fernández & González, 1994). Finally, giving up smoking has to be considered not just as a modification of behavior but also as a change of identity. Indeed, changes in ‘smoker self-concept’ and in the ‘abstainer self-concept’ seem both to be related to the smoking cessation process (Shadel, Mermelstein, & Borrelli, 1996) and to moderate the efficacy of clinical smoking cessation programs (Shadel & Mermelstein, 1996).

Smoker identity—i.e. feelings of being a smoker or identification with the smokers group—is related to tobacco consumption and, therefore, must be considered to affect decisions about giving up smoking. People’s identity can affect their behavior for two reasons (Biddle et al., 1985). First, people may need to conform to their self-concepts as a way to make their behaviors consistent with the aspects that are relevant for self-definition (Heider, 1958). The difference between group phenomena and interpersonal phenomena as proposed in Social Identity Theory (SIT, cf. Abrams & Hogg, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986) offers a second explanation for the identity-behavior relationship. People will be motivated either to maintain a particular social identity—and behavior related to it—or to change it. SIT considers that the extent to which people define themselves in terms of a self inclusive social category, i.e.
identify themselves as members of their social group (e.g., as smokers), increases their tendency to act in terms of their group membership. Therefore, SIT leads to the prediction that the more people identify with smokers, the more they will act as smokers and the less committed they will be to quit smoking.

Just such a prediction is supported by research on attitude-behavior relationships. The Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1991; see also Fishbein & Ajzen, 1975), postulates three independent determinants of the intention to perform a behavior. First, the attitude toward the behavior concerns the person’s evaluation of performing the behavior. Second, the normative component (or subjective norm) refers to people’s perception of the extent to which others who are important to them think they should perform the behavior. Finally, perceived behavioral control refers to people’s perception of the ease or difficulty of performing the behavior. The more favorable the person’s attitude and the norm regarding the behavior and the greater the person’s perceived behavioral control, the more likely it is that the person will intend to perform the behavior. In spite of the generally strong support for this model (cf. Ajzen, 1991; Kraus, 1995), including its ability to explain both adolescents’ initiation of tobacco consumption (cf. Chassin et al., 1990) and smokers’ intentions to give up smoking (Eiser, Van der Pligt, Martin, & Sutton, 1985; Fishbein, 1980, 1982), several variables not included in the model, e.g., prior behavior (Triandis, 1980; Bentler & Speckart, 1981) and people’s identity (e.g., Biddle, Bank, & Slavings, 1987), have been considered as important factors in predicting behavioral intentions. Indeed, several studies show that identity contributes to the prediction of behavioral intentions independently of the other variables considered (e.g., Charn g et al., 1988; Granberg & Holmerg, 1990; Sparks & Shepherd, 1992).

Therefore, one can expect that smoker identity will predict a smoker’s intention to give up smoking. This idea has been tested in a study (Falomi r & Invernizzi, 1999) in which 153 secondary school students, all smokers, answered a questionnaire presenting a set of questions concerning several aspects of tobacco consumption, including attitudes (“What do you think about giving up smoking?” e.g., “I approve of it—I don’t approve of it”), subjective norms (e.g., “How many of your friends would prefer that you give up smoking?”), perceived behavioral control (e.g., “Do you feel able to give up smoking?”), smoker identity (e.g., “To what extent do you feel you are a real smoker?”), or “To what extent do you identify with smokers?”), smoking behavior (“How many cigarettes do you smoke a day (on average)?” and “How long have you been smoking?”) and finally intention to give up smoking (e.g., “Do
First, the results from a regression analysis showed that smoker identity played a direct and important role in explaining current smoking behavior as well as the intention to quit smoking (cf. Figure 1), even when the effect of perceived behavioral control, norm, and attitude were controlled. What are the implications of this for anti-tobacco campaigns? Several theoretical considerations lead us to expect that the notion of smoker identity notion will play an important role in explaining the lack of effectiveness of information campaigns.

**Figure 1 : Regression of intention to give up smoking on attitude, subjective norm, perceived control, current smoking and identity (* p < .05, **p < .01 ; from Falomir & Invernizzi, 1999).**

Anti-tobacco campaigns may have two options for dealing with the fact that smoker identity affects the intention to give up smoking. Unfortunately, neither of these two alternatives turns out to be simple. On the one hand, previous results suggest that reducing identity concerns—i.e., diminishing the salience of smoker identity—will result in a stronger intention to give up smoking (cf. Falomir & Invernizzi, 1999). This possibility requires that smoking behavior becomes less meaningful—i.e. looses its psychological and social functions—for young non-smokers willing to acquire a new identity. This is rather difficult since smoking behavior seems to be strongly functional for adolescents (cf. Chassin et al., 1990). As far as we can tell, this promising strategy has not been sufficiently considered in prevention programs, even though some related aspects have been explored (e.g., Leventhal et al., 1988). On the other hand, since a negative identity related to a behavior is supposed to be
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an undesired outcome and to lead people to quit that behavior (cf. McGuire, 1985), a second possibility would be to attack the smoker identity. This possibility requires that anti-tobacco campaigns focus not only on health-related arguments but also on identity-related arguments. Anti-tobacco campaigns are indeed decreasingly based on health arguments, since these are by now generally accepted by everybody, and increasingly based on disqualifying the smoker’s image, on regulating tobacco consumption in public places and on defending non-smokers by according them greater social legitimacy and by holding them up considering them as desirable social models. Campaigns in which a preference for non-smokers is blatant (e.g., “I love non-smokers”) are an example of this. The tobacco industry has sometimes criticized anti-tobacco action for increasingly moving from a war against cancer to a war against the cigarette and, more and more, against the smoker (Tobacco Institute, 1978). However, the problem here resides in the fact that threatening the smoker’s identity can activate a defensive motivation—i.e., smokers can be motivated to protect their identity, resisting anti-tobacco efforts and decreasing the campaigns’ effectiveness.

Smoker’s identity and defensive motivation

Defensive motivation appears to be a relevant reaction to persuasive attempts when a target’s identity is threatened, and resistance to change may be its outcome (Chaiken, Giner-Sorolla, & Chen, 1996; Falomir et al., 1993). Smokers may protect their identity by lack of attention, and by passive or defensive information processing. Such defensively motivated responses can therefore result in the preservation of smoking behavior. With these considerations in mind, together with the fact that smoker identity plays a role as a direct predictor of intentions, one can also anticipate that the effect of the smoker identity on intention to give up smoking is mediated by defensive motivation—i.e., stronger identity as a smoker will be positively related to more elevated defensive motivation, resulting in a decrease in intention to give up smoking. Let us consider this possibility.

Social Identity Theory (SIT, Tajfel & Turner, 1986) assumes that people are not just motivated to maintain a particular social identity but that they are motivated to achieve a positive social identity, and to do so through group enhancement. Thus, it has been observed that people typically evaluate their own group more positively than an out-group, and explain their behavior in a more flattering way than they do for out-group behavior. Since membership
of a high status group (e.g., non-smokers) provides a positive social identity and higher self-esteem, whereas membership of a low status group (e.g., smokers) provides a negative social identity and lower self-esteem, low status group members should be motivated to restore a positive identity. Identity can be improved by cognitive action (i.e., cognitive restructuring or social creativity), collective action (e.g., seeking greater tolerance of smokers), or individual action (e.g., quitting the social group and joining a more valued one, as smokers might achieve by giving up smoking and becoming ex-smokers). In addition, SIT predicts that greater social identification with the group increases the likelihood that the collective action strategy will be pursued (e.g., Simon et al., 1998) but decreases use of the individual action strategy. In-group bias is thus expected to be greater among group members who are high identified with the category than among those who are only weakly identified. Salience of identification with a group is one of the most important factors determining an individual’s defense of his or her social identity. In order to defend personal identity, the individual chooses to defend current social identity rather than changing it. In fact, the more strongly that individuals identify with a group, the more they are concerned with defending social identity (e.g., maintaining a positive image of the social group). Conversely, the less that individuals identify with the group, the greater their motivation to leave the group and to acquire a new and more positive social identity within a more highly valued group.

These considerations allow us to predict that behavioral intention will be affected by identity via mediator variables that lead people to enhance social identity. Terry and Hogg (1996) proposed that the role of other variables—i.e. norms—in attitude-behavior relationship may be usefully reconceptualized from the perspective of social identity theory. In two studies, these authors showed that the influence of behaviorally-relevant group norms on intentions was greater among subjects who identified strongly with the group. The opposite pattern of results was observed for personal determinants of intentions. The effect of perceived behavioral control (study 1) and attitudes (study 2) on intention increased at low rather than at high levels of group identification. The authors interpreted these results as consistent with identity/self-categorization theories. That is to say, social as opposed to personal determinants of behavioral choice are likely to have the greater impact on the choices of subjects for whom membership in the group is psychologically important. In other terms, smoker identity can affect the intention to give up smoking by increasing the perceived strength of the norm to smoke.
Let us consider how norms might play such a role. One may suppose that the weight of subjective norms such as social support in explaining intention will be greater when various contextual factors enhance the threat to a person’s behavior or identity. For instance, since recourse to social support can be regarded as a strategy of identity protection to the extent that it serves as a heuristic for the social validity of one’s position (cf. Chaiken, 1980; Festinger, 1950; Turner, 1991), smokers highly identified with the smokers’ group can elevate their perception of the degree of social support for smoking as a way of enhancing smoking behavior. Since social support has been shown to help individuals to resist change (cf. Allen, 1975) and since also perception of social support should assist in the preservation of identity (e.g., Agostinelli, Sherman, Presson, & Chassin, 1992; Goetals, 1987), social support can be considered as a mechanism of resistance to change. One can expect therefore that increases in perceived support for smoking—i.e. the subjective norm—can mediate the effect of smoker identity on the intention not to give up smoking; smokers with strong identities as smokers can resist the pressure to quit smoking by increasing the perceived support they have for smoking.

The question arises as to the aspects of the social context that may help activate such a defensive motivation. One such factor activating defensive motivation is the salience of social categorization in the social context. In other words, defensive reactions can occur when the context accentuates categorization into smokers and non-smokers. In this situation, defensive motivation is determined by, on the one hand, aspects of the social context (e.g., the salience of the smoker versus non-smokers categorization) and, on the other hand, the strength of smoker identity (Echebarría et al., 1994). A social context which reinforces categorization into smokers versus non-smokers heightens defensive motivation. The identification smokers have with their group seems to be the principal factor underlying their representations of smoking behavior. It is noteworthy that most anti-smoking campaigns tend to make this categorization salient.

A second factor increasing defensive motives is the salience of a persuasive message arguing against tobacco consumption and reinforcing the negative image of smokers. One can anticipate that smokers with a strong smoker identity will react to a persuasive message in a more defensive manner than smokers with a weak smoker identity. One way of testing these ideas involves exposing (or not) smokers with a weak or strong smoker identity to an anti-tobacco message. Results from the study presented previously (Falomir & Invernizzi, 1999) confirm such a hypothesis. In this study, before responding to the questionnaire, participants were either exposed to an anti-smoking message which originated from a high status source.
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(persuasive message condition) or were not exposed to any such message (control condition). The message, presented as “an analysis of the socio-economic reasons why people smoke”, described smokers as toys manipulated by the tobacco industry, victims and puppets of an over-production society that created in them an artificial need to smoke” (cf. Pérez & Mugny, 1990). Additionally, on the basis of their smoker identity scores, participants were split into two groups, weak- and strong- identity smokers. An analysis of variance was performed on perceived social support to smoke in which smoker identity (weak versus strong) and experimental induction (persuasive message condition versus control condition) were the independent factors. Results showed that smokers with a strong smoker identity perceive that they had higher support from friends for smoking if they were confronted with a persuasive message—i.e. they were defensively motivated to cope with the threat introduced by the message (see Figure 2). Partial correlations revealed that the relationship between smoker identity and intention to give up smoking were mediated by this defensive motivation—i.e. when strongly identified smokers were exposed to the persuasive message, perceived social support was stronger and intention to give up smoking was weaker. Taken together, these results indicate that when anti-tobacco campaigns are salient smoker identity can affect other variables (such as perception of social support for smoking), which can in turn reverse anti-tobacco efforts.

Figure 2: Perceived social support as a function of smoker identity and persuasive attempt (cf. Falomir & Invernizzi, 1999).
Defensive motivation and the influence relationship

What can anti-tobacco campaigns do in response to smokers’ defensive motivations? The answer we propose at this point is simple: they need to help smokers to deal with the identity threat they introduce. Indeed, the problem that smokers encounter is not just to cope with their threatened identity; they also have to deal with it in the context of a social relationship, since they are embedded in an influence relationship that constraints them to accept the threat to their identity. The social context of current anti-tobacco campaigns can indeed be considered as characterized by such persuasive constraint. Persuasive constraint is defined as any factor, internal or external to the recipient, which introduces a pressure to yield to an opposing position (Falomir, Butera & Mugny, 2002). As regards the internal factors of such a constraint, we assume that most smokers are likely already to have internalized the threat to their social identity and acknowledge the need to change their behavior. Thus, the problem resides in the fact that they have to cope with a threat they already accept and that is made salient in a persuasion attempt. With regard to the external conditions of such constraint, most of the interventions to reduce tobacco consumption are predicated on the assumption that high status sources, i.e. those with credibility such as doctors, experts, or scientists, or those with power such as health authorities, generate greater informational dependency (Deutsch & Gerard, 1955; Kelman, 1958). It is further assumed that on the basis of this dependency, the smokers will place more trust in high status sources, giving more credence to what they say, and yielding more to their influence than to that of low status sources. However, the features that seem to be the advantages possessed by high status sources can also become their handicaps. Along with greater informational dependence, high status sources can also introduce greater constraint to change, i.e., a threat to the freedom of smokers (cf. Brehm, 1966). Consider smokers’ perceptions of the interest the source has in exerting influence and how this perception might vary as a function of the superior (expert group) or non relevant status (ordinary citizens) status of the source to which they are exposed (cf. Falomir et al., 2002). A superior status source is perceived as more concerned with persuading the smoker, while a source lacking in status is perceived as more concerned to inform them—i.e. the superior status source is more likely to be perceived as an influence source than as an informational source. Threat introduced by the anti-tobacco message here becomes linked to the persuasive constraint introduced by the influence relationship. Thus, smokers are
motivated not only to defend their social identity but also to defend their freedom from the threat introduced by the persuasive attempt.

What are the consequences of an influence attempt interpreted by its target as an external persuasive constraint? On the one hand, research on reactance has clearly demonstrated that feelings of loss of freedom result in a decrease in influence (Brehm, 1966; Wicklund, 1974). Thus, it is not surprising in these situations that a superior status source fails to derive any benefit attained from this status. On the other hand, and it is the focus of the present contribution, since such external constraint is related to a threat to the smoker’s identity—i.e., smokers are constrained to recognize that in certain respects their social identity is being described negatively—one can anticipate that an increase in persuasive constraint will motivate smokers not only to reassert their autonomy but also to defend their social identity. The consequence of such persuasive constraint is therefore the activation of both a reluctance to yield to the source (i.e. resistance to accepting the source’s point of view) and motivation to defend social identity. This motivation is of particular interest since previous research has shown that it is related to a decline in intention to quit smoking (Falomir & Invernizzi, 1999).

This hypothesis has been tested in a study (Falomir & Mugny, 1999) of the effect of persuasive constraint based on the classic paradigm for the experimental induction of reactance (cf. Brehm & Brehm, 1981). A total of 43 smokers and 36 non-smokers were exposed (or not) to an anti-tobacco message attributed to an expert source (cf. previous study). It should be added that the smokers in this study defined themselves as current smokers, had been smoking for at least one year and consumed at least 5 cigarettes per day—i.e. they were strongly committed smokers. The message was formulated either in the form of an ‘optional’ rhetoric giving smokers the freedom to make their own choice (the weak persuasive constraint condition) or in the form of an ‘imperative’ rhetoric that does not give smokers the freedom of choice (the strong persuasive constraint condition). In the weak-persuasive-constraint condition, the message ended with a more compromising and less threatening appeal. “As University professors, our conclusion is that it would be desirable for every smoker to work through these ideas and agree at least to think about them. Nevertheless, it is for each smoker, personally and in complete freedom, to draw his/her own conclusions.” In the strong-persuasive-constraint condition the text concluded with a threatening and inflexible rhetoric denying subjects any freedom: “As University professors, our conclusion is that it is absolutely necessary that every smoker has these ideas put into his/her head, and that he/she
accepts them without discussion. There can be no question here of leaving to each smoker the freedom to draw conclusions as he/she chooses.”

Results relating to smokers’ agreement with arguments extracted from the anti-tobacco message (see Figure 3) showed that experts had influence only when rhetoric was optional. This condition differed significantly from a control condition in which no text was presented. As regards the non-smokers in this study, however, both optional and imperative rhetoric messages led to greater agreement than the control condition. These results support reactance predictions. Smokers were sensitive to the threat to their freedom introduced by the rhetorical style of the message while non-smokers were sensitive only to the persuasive content of the message. Furthermore, the same pattern of results was found with respect to smokers’ motivations to defend their habit—i.e. smokers maintained a favorable attitude to tobacco consumption and expressed a reduced intention to quit smoking when the message was formulated in an imperative rhetoric (i.e. strong persuasive constraint) than when it was formulated in an optional rhetoric (i.e. weak persuasive constraint).

Figure 3: Agreement with anti-tobacco arguments (cf. Falomir & Mugny, 1999).

How should we interpret the fact that smokers activate a defensive motivation when an external persuasive constraint is introduced? Is it just a consequence of smokers’ motivations to restore their freedom or is it a consequence of their motivation to preserve their social identity? Other results help provide an answer to these questions. At the end of the experiment participants were asked to describe the image of both smokers and non-smokers in terms of
negative characteristics (e.g., nervous, dependent). It was observed that, in the condition in which the message had been formulated in an imperative rhetoric, compared to the optional rhetoric condition and the condition without a message, negative characteristics were comparatively less often attributed to smokers by smokers themselves than by the non-smokers (see Figure 4). Further correlational analyses produced another interesting result. When the rhetoric was imperative, the tendency to avoid attribution of negative characteristics was related to a reduced intention to give up smoking, but not to lower agreement with the anti-tobacco arguments. These results support the conclusion that the motivation to protect identity (i.e., disinclination to attribute a negative image to smokers) is stronger when persuasive constraint (based on an influence relationship threatening their freedom) is present in the influence setting, and that it is this defensive motivation that results in a decrease in smokers’ intentions to give up smoking.

**Figure 4: Negative image attributed to smokers (cf. Falomir & Mugny, 1999).**

Social support as a mechanism for protection of smokers’ identities

Another study allowed us to test experimentally the causal relationship between an identity-defensive strategy and reduction in intention to give up smoking. As proposed earlier, social support seems to be an important concomitant of attitudes towards tobacco consumption and the use of social support is conceivably a mechanism for the protection of smoker’s identities. Therefore, if social support is an identity defense mechanism, one may expect that it inhibits influence upon intention to quit when persuasive constraint is strong, whereas the absence of such a support should facilitate such influence. Furthermore, appeal to
social support, as we define it here, should act at the level of the smoker’s identity and not necessarily at a level of overt acceptance of the source’s message. The previous study showed that agreement with an anti-tobacco message was affected by the persuasive constraint induced, but was unrelated to smokers’ motivation to defend their social identity. Therefore, social support should not affect smokers’ agreement with the anti-tobacco message. In this case, and according to reactance theory, only persuasive constraint is expected to have an impact upon smokers’ agreement with the message.

To test these predictions, 49 current smokers were exposed to the same anti-tobacco message as in the previous studies (cf. Falomir & Mugny, 1999), attributed to a high-status source in all the conditions (University professors; cf. Falomir, Mugny, & Invernizzi, 2002). Strong versus weak persuasive constraint was also manipulated as in the previous study: the source concluding its statement in an optional or imperative rhetoric style. Social support was also manipulated. In one condition subjects were given the results of several polls carried out in different countries about smoker’s opinion regarding compulsory social measures against tobacco consumption. In the condition “presence of support” subjects were informed that an average of 90% of smokers were opposed to this kind of measure. In the “absence of support” condition subjects were informed that the same percentage of smokers approved these measures. Then subjects expressed their position towards smokers on 6 items: “do you feel close to smokers?”, “do you look like them?”, “do you hold the same opinions?”, “do you feel the same way as the majority of smokers?”, “do you prefer smokers to non-smokers?” and “are you proud to be a smoker?” (ingroup identification scale). In the post-test, subjects expressed their degree of agreement with the source as well as their intention to give up smoking.

Concerning change in agreement with the anti-tobacco message, no significant effects were found. Detailed analyses showed nevertheless that strong persuasive constraint produced a negative change, but this effect was not present when subjects were told the majority of smokers opposed anti-tobacco campaigns (i.e., in the presence of social support). As regards the results with respect to changes in intention to give up smoking, an interaction effect was found (see Figure 5). When smokers had the support of their group, strong persuasive constraint resulted in less influence than weak constraint. This was particularly the case where in-group support was available; strong persuasive constraint resulted in greater influence when smokers did not have the support of their group—i.e. their social identity was more
vulnerable—than when they had such a support, and indeed resulted in even more influence than weak persuasive constraint. In addition, mediation analyses showed that the decrease in influence when persuasive constraint was strong and smokers had the support of their group was mediated by stronger identification with this in-group.

To summarize, these results show that a variety of motives can operate in the influence setting. When persuasive constraint is strong and smokers do not have the social support of their group, both a reactance effect (i.e., reduction in agreement with an anti-tobacco message) and an influence in intention to quit smoking were observed. On the one hand, smokers react against strong persuasive constraint but, on the other hand, difficulty in defending their social identity can lead them to increase their intention to give up smoking. However, both effects disappear when persuasive constraint is strong and smokers have social support. In this case, social support leads smokers to increase their identification with the in-group and thus to reduce their intention to abandon the group.

Figure 5: Change in intention to give up smoking as a function of persuasive constraint and in-group support (cf. Falomir, Mugny & Invernizzi, 2002).

General Discussion

Reducing the number of smokers in society seems to be a slow and difficult process (Hirsch & Karsenty, 1992), due as much to the large numbers of young people who are readily attracted to take up smoking as to the resistance displayed by those who already smoke (cf. OFS, 1998;
WHO, 1997). A large part of the ineffectiveness of interventions may be attributed to the limited nature of the models of social influence that have inspired anti-tobacco campaigns.

The present contribution illustrates how the identity of the smoker needs to be considered as an important factor in understanding the decreasing efficacy of such campaigns. On the one hand, smokers’ identities should be taken into account in anti-tobacco efforts since it has been shown that these identities predict both smoking behavior and smokers’ intention to give up smoking. On the other hand, identity as a smoker may have an indirect impact on anti-tobacco efforts since it contributes to the activation of defensive motivations which mediate the influence on intention to quit. For instance, it has been observed that smokers with a strong identity perceive that there is greater social support for smoking when they are confronted with a persuasive campaign and this perception has the effect of decreasing their intention to give up smoking.

The studies reported in the present chapter also illustrate how the activation of defensive motivations is moderated by the influence relationship. Indeed, we have shown that an external persuasive constraint that is linked to the source of anti-tobacco influence—e.g. an imperative rhetoric to impose a threat to smokers identity—may not only reduce agreement with anti-tobacco arguments but more particularly will increase the use of identity defensive strategies, thus reducing smokers’ intentions to give up smoking. The key to explaining these effects, we suggest, is that smokers are motivated not just to respond to the threat to their freedom activated by persuasive constraint but, more than this, to cope with the threat to their social identity. In consequence, smokers’ motivation to protect their identity brings mechanisms into play that prevent individual mobility. Or, in other words, anti-tobacco campaigns lose their impact since smokers become even less committed to quit smoking.

As a whole, our findings suggest that the persuasive constraint associated with the present anti-tobacco campaigns may actually be contributing to a decrease in their effectiveness. Anti-tobacco campaigns could benefit from considering the smoker’s group as a persecuted social group whose members are sensitive to identity threats. The reality is that most smokers have already internalized the elements describing smoking negatively (cf. the notion of the dissonant smoker, Joossens, 1992); they have internalized the conflict that has the potential to lead them to change. In order to help smokers to give up smoking, intervention programs need be designed to take into account the level of conflict or social debate they will produce, instead of confining action to the use of pressure. A suitable procedure, for instance,
might consist in providing smokers, as well as non-smokers, with elements that can prevent the social debate from turning into resistance. Instead of being faced with pressure to accept the position presented by the influence source, they need a more comfortable relationship, one that is not threatening to their identity, a social relationship with non-smokers that does not constrain them to accept the threat to their identity. That is, they would benefit from a relationship in which the non-smoker is not presented as a social model or a source of threat. In sum, we have been able confirmed that “consideration for the smoker, the care never to humiliate him holds more pleasant surprises than one might imagine” (Hirsch & Karsenty, 1992, 114).

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