The Objective and Subjective Social Climates of Smokers and Non-Smokers

Robert McMillen, Liesel Ritchie, Ashley Robinson, and Arthur Cosby, Social Science Research Center, Mississippi State University

ABSTRACT

Abstract

This study compared the objective and subjective social climates of smokers and non-smokers based on data from the 2000 National Social Climate Survey of Tobacco Use and Tobacco Control. We developed the Social Climate Survey in order to monitor the social context in which tobacco prevention efforts occur. Hypotheses concerning variations in the social climates of smokers and non-smokers were based on two of the most fundamental principles of social science -- the tendency to associate with people who share similar attitudes and beliefs **and** idea that reality is socially constructed. Social climate is broadly viewed within an institutional framework that structures the social and cultural context within which tobacco behaviors and beliefs occur. The realization that there is considerable variation amidst these settings was hypothesized as an important element in terms of understanding tobacco use and as a means of studying the change in social and cultural norms.

INTRODUCTION

Background

In the spring of 1999, the Mississippi State Department of Health contracted with the Social Science Research Center (SSRC) to conduct an evaluation of the Mississippi Tobacco Pilot Program. As one element of the evaluation activities, we developed the Social Climate Survey as a theoretical construct for tobacco control research. Specifically, the 2000 National Social Climate Survey was designed to measure, and ultimately monitor the fundamental position of tobacco control and tobacco use in the United States.

Social Climate

In recent years, researchers have recognized the need for theory driven research on the social context in which tobacco use and tobacco control efforts take place (e.g., Duncan, Duncan, Biglan, & Ary, 1998; Tyas & Pederson, 1998). We have attempted to contribute to the understanding of tobacco control and tobacco use by introducing the Social Climate Survey as a measure of the social context in which tobacco prevention efforts occur. This institutional-based perspective stresses not individual variations in behaviors and attitudes, but rather attempts to use cross-sectional survey data for the measurement of societal norms, practices, and beliefs. The goal of this research was to identify variations in these social norms, and to link these variations to both tobacco use and responses to tobacco control efforts.

It has been well-established that changing people's perceptions of social norms can lead to behavioral change, at least under certain conditions (Aronson and O'Leary, 1982-83; Cialdini, Reno, and Kallgren, 1990). Indeed, much of the research on tobacco control and prevention over the past two decades has addressed, in some manner, the social norms that influence the initiation, maintenance and cessation of tobacco use (Evans et al., 1978; Flay, d'Avernas, Best, Kersell, & Ryan, 1983; Glynn, 1989; Moskowitz, 1983). These efforts may be further improved with the recognition that there is substantial variation in the social norms surrounding tobacco use among smokers and non-smokers.

Based upon research on the role of similarity on interpersonal attraction (Byrne, 1971) and also the impact of social influence, we hypothesized that there would be objective differences in the social climates of smokers and non-smokers. Specifically, smokers were predicted to report a higher percentage of close friends, household members, and co-workers who smoke than non-smokers report. Smokers were also expected to live in households with more relaxed rules concerning the use of tobacco..

The importance of the objective social climate is reflected in its impact on people's beliefs and behaviors concerning tobacco -- the subjective social climate. We further hypothesized that there would be many subjective differences in the social climates of smokers and non-smokers as well. Smokers and non-smokers were hypothesized to have different perceptions of the degree to which public places in the community were smoke-free, the veracity of various claims by the tobacco industry, the prevalence of tobacco ads and anti-tobacco messages in the community and the media, and the health risks of tobacco. Finally, smokers and non-smokers were expected to hold different opinions on issues of tobacco control.

METHODS

Survey design

The development of the survey was determined from an extensive review of extant measurement instruments in the tobacco prevention research. Comments and reviews were then solicited from senior scientists at the SSRC, the MSDH, the CDC's Office of Smoking and Health, and a panel of consultants hired to support the overall evaluation component of the Mississippi Tobacco Pilot Program.

Data Collection

The data collection for the 2000 National Social Climate Survey was done via telephone interviews with a simple random sample of Mississippi adults living in households with telephones. The data were collected in 2000 (July and August) by the Social Science Research Center at Mississippi State University. Households were selected using random digit dialing procedures. Of the households contacted, 1,503 completed the interview and 504 (25.1) refused to participate. The sampling error (binomial questions with 50/50 split) for the total data set is no larger than ± 2.5 (95 confidence interval).

RESULTS

The purpose of this report was to illustrate variations in the social climate of smokers and non-smokers within several societal institutions toward tobacco use and tobacco control in the state of Mississippi. We developed the following heuristic approach to assist in interpreting the Social Climate Survey data.

Heuristic Classification Scheme for Assessing the Societal Dominance of Norms, Practices, and Beliefs:

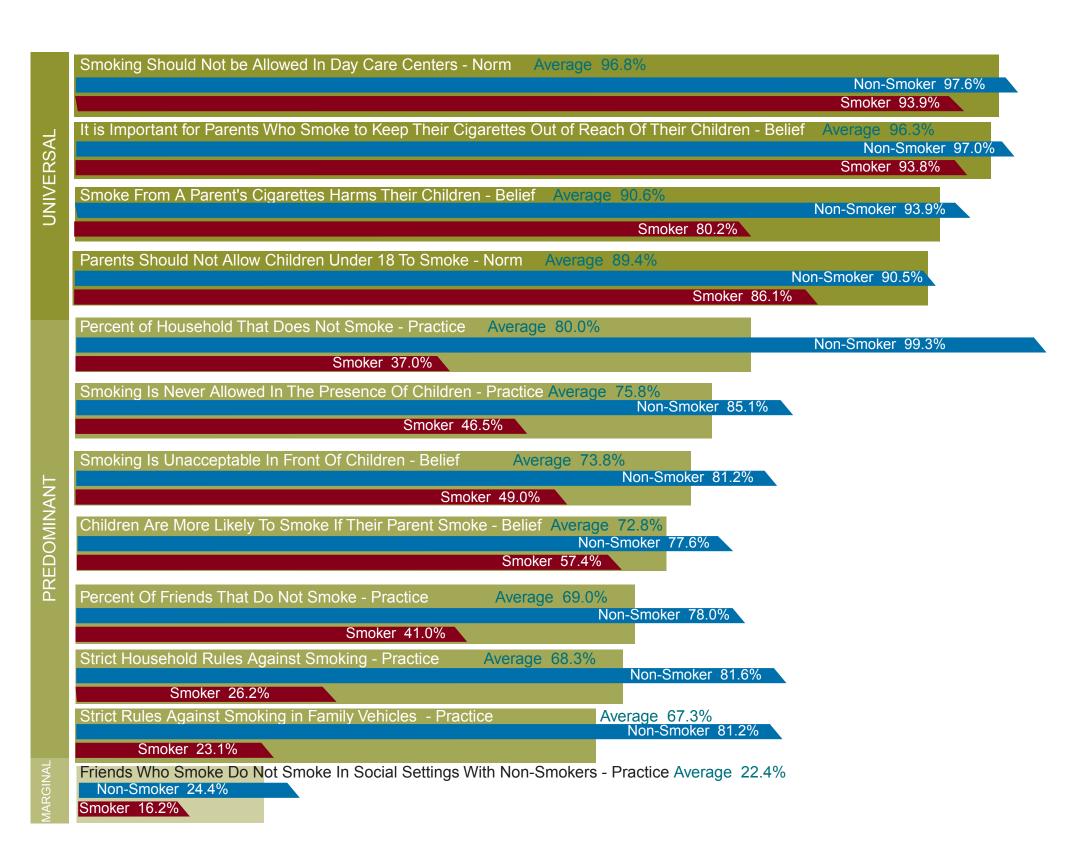|	
Universal	Universal norms, practices & beliefs Held by the overwhelming majority of society members: 85 of 100%
Predominant	Predominant norms, practices & beliefs Held by a pre-dominance of society members: 65-84%
Contested	Contested norms, practices & beliefs Held by ½ of societies members: 35-64%
Marginal	Marginal norms, practices & beliefs Held by 0-34% of society members

DISCUSSION

The results of the Social Climate Survey support our hypothesis that the objective social climates of smokers and non-smokers would differ. Smokers reported a higher percentage of family members, close friends, and co-workers who smoked than did non-smokers. Moreover, smokers lived in households with more relaxed rules concerning the use of tobacco in the home and in the automobile. The survey also revealed subjective differences in the social climates of smokers and non-smokers. Smokers and non-smokers were demonstrated to differ in their perceptions of the veracity of various claims by the tobacco industry, the health risks of tobacco, the prevalence anti-tobacco messages in the community and the media, and the degree to which public places in the community were smoke-free. Non-smokers also tended to be substantially more favorable towards tobacco control measures than smokers.
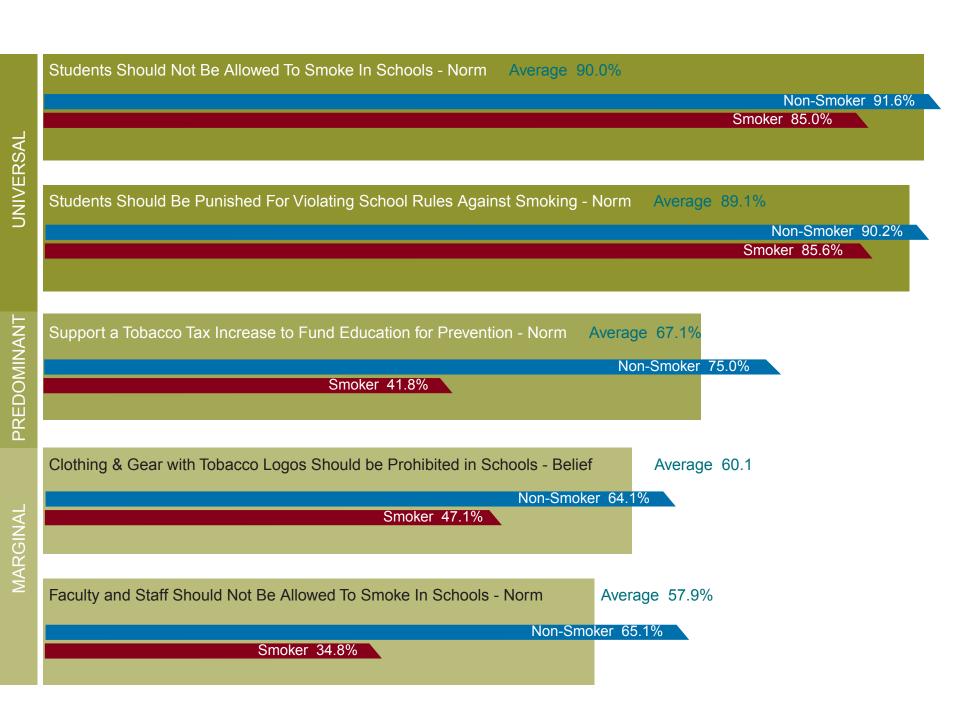
In conclusion, the 2000 National Social Climate survey identified several variations in the objective and subjective social climate of smokers and non-smokers. Because peer groups have a substantial influence on a person's perceptions of the appropriateness of certain behaviors and beliefs, the identification of these variations in the social climates among smokers is an important facet of tobacco prevention and control. People form beliefs about social norms by observing the behavior of other people and anticipating what other people think is appropriate behavior (Cialdini & Trost, 1998). That is, people observe others in order to determine what behaviors are normative in a given situation (e.g., Sherif, 1935). Because individuals use norms to guide their behavior, changing these norms, or perceptions of these norms, should change their behavior (Schultz & Oskamp, 2000).
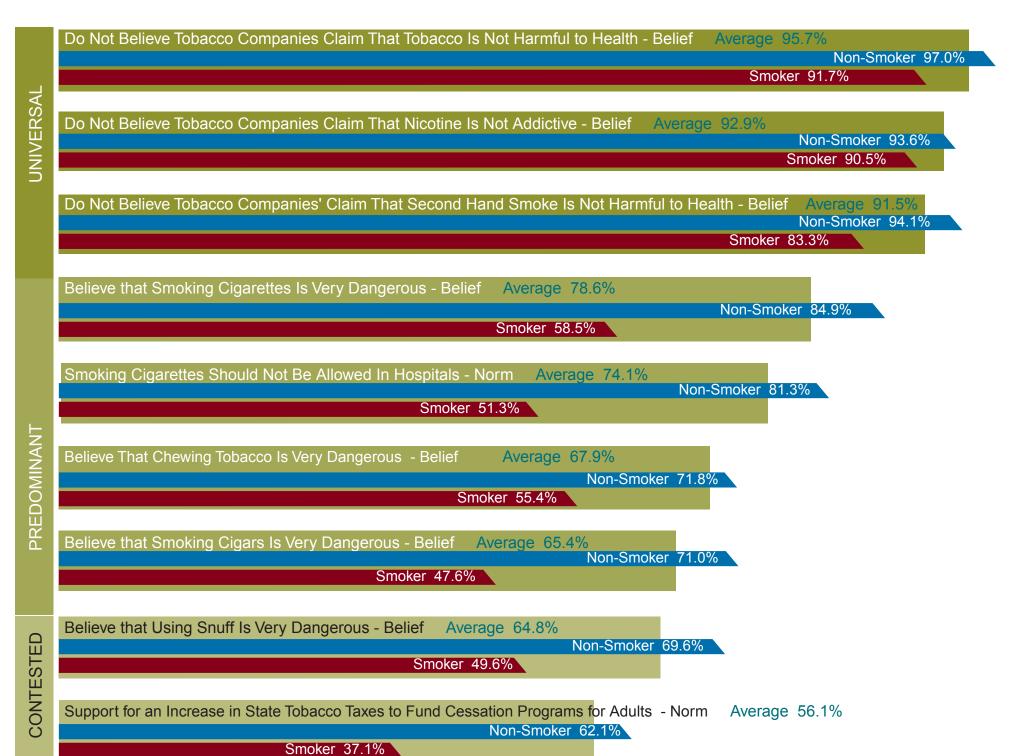
Family and Friendship Groups

There are strong norms controlling access to tobacco products for the youth population. However, there is substantial variation among smokers and non-smokers concerning smoking restrictions in the home and in the family vehicle, and smokers report a high percentage of friends and household members who smoke.
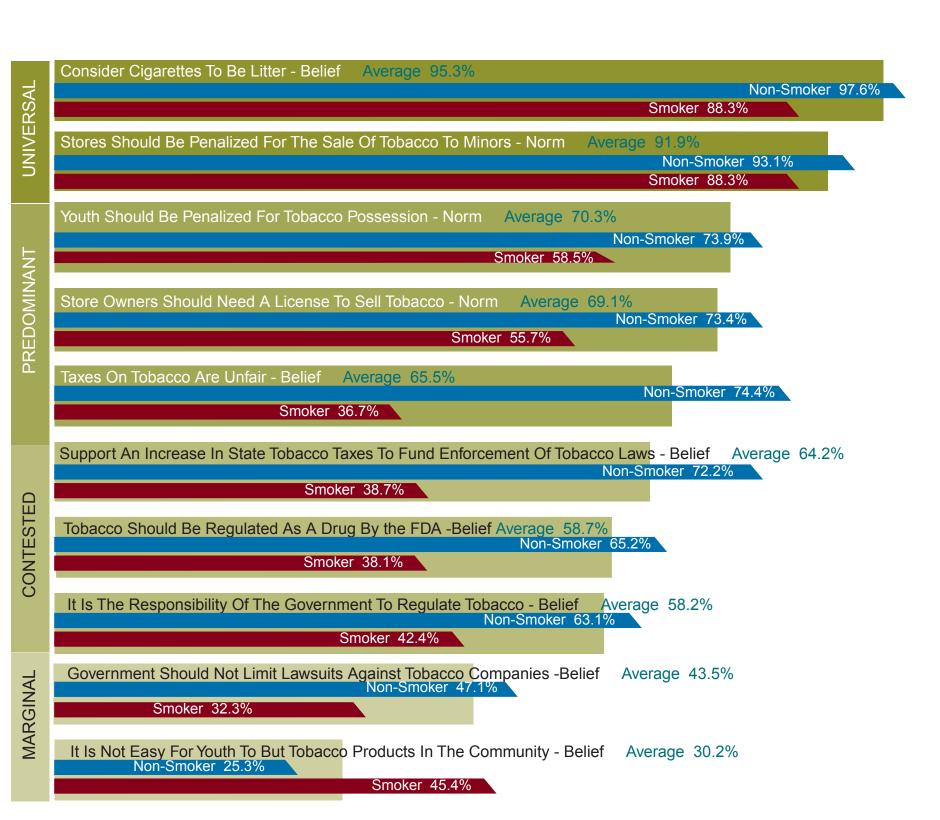
Education

Closely following in importance of determining appropriate norms, practices, and beliefs is the consistency of limiting tobacco access in schools. Support for some of these restrictions, however, was contested among smokers.

Health and Medical Care

Not surprisingly most people believe that smoking should not be allowed in hospitals - however, smokers are less likely to support this norm than non-smokers. Beliefs about the danger of tobacco use were widespread. Smokers, however, are substantially less likely to accept the health risks of tobacco use and environmental tobacco smoke than non-smokers.
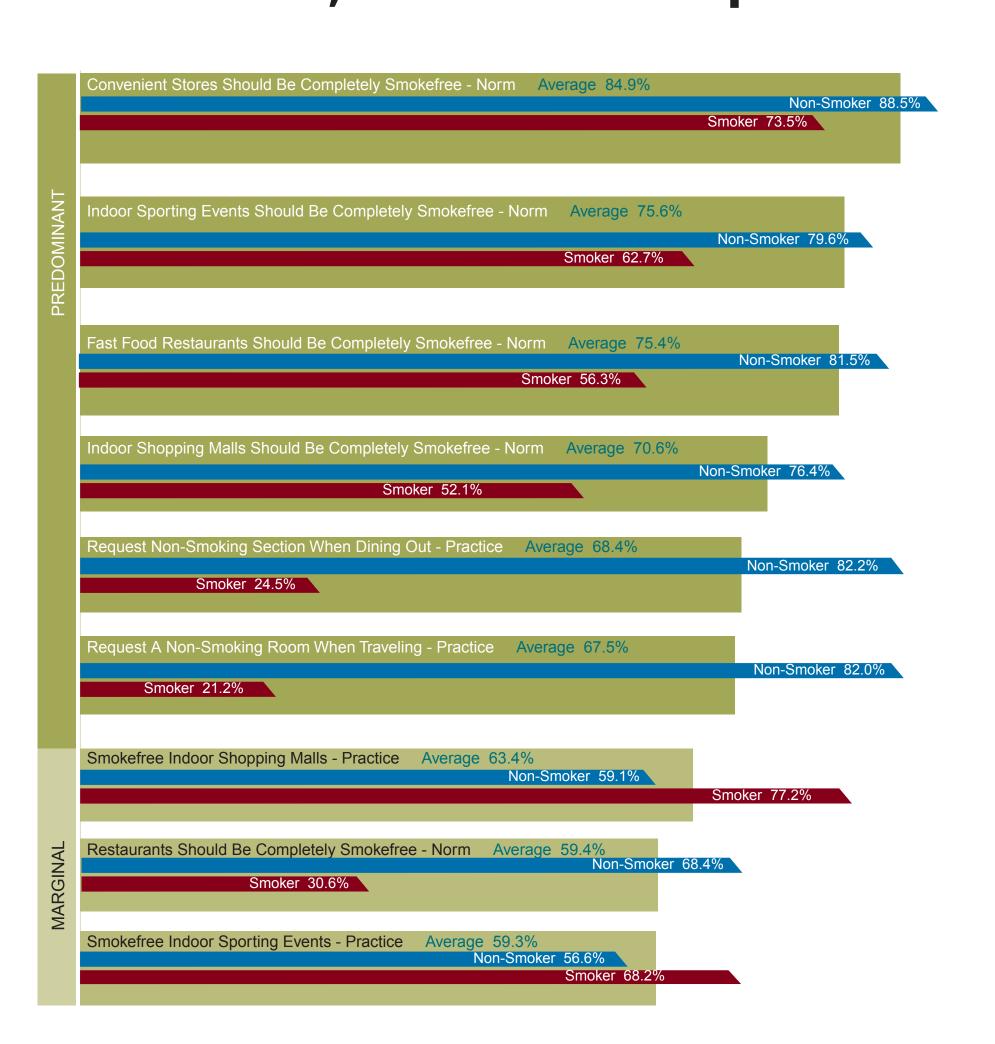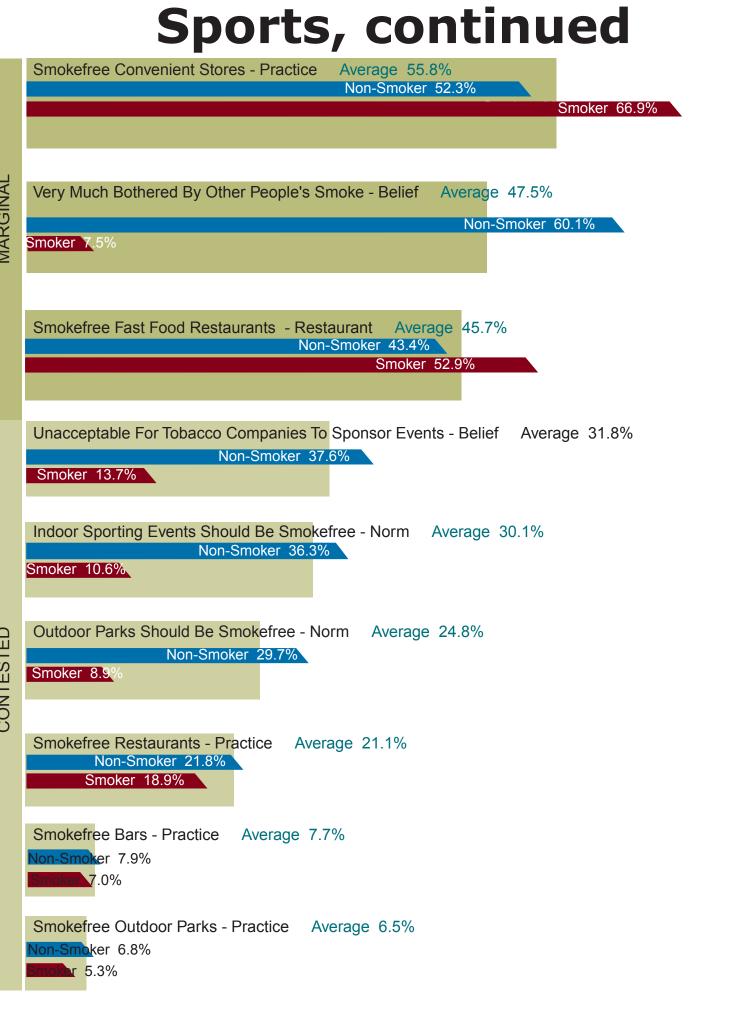
Government and Political Order

Support for enforcement of laws banning youth access tobacco and penalties for violating these laws emerged as strong norms. However, there was considerable variation between smokers and non-smokers over the issue of laws restricting access to tobacco and enforcement of these laws.

Work

Strict bans on smoking in work areas and the support for employer's smoking policies were heavily endorsed as universal norms. Although smokers also tended to support these policies, fewer smokers were employed at worksites with strict smoking policies.

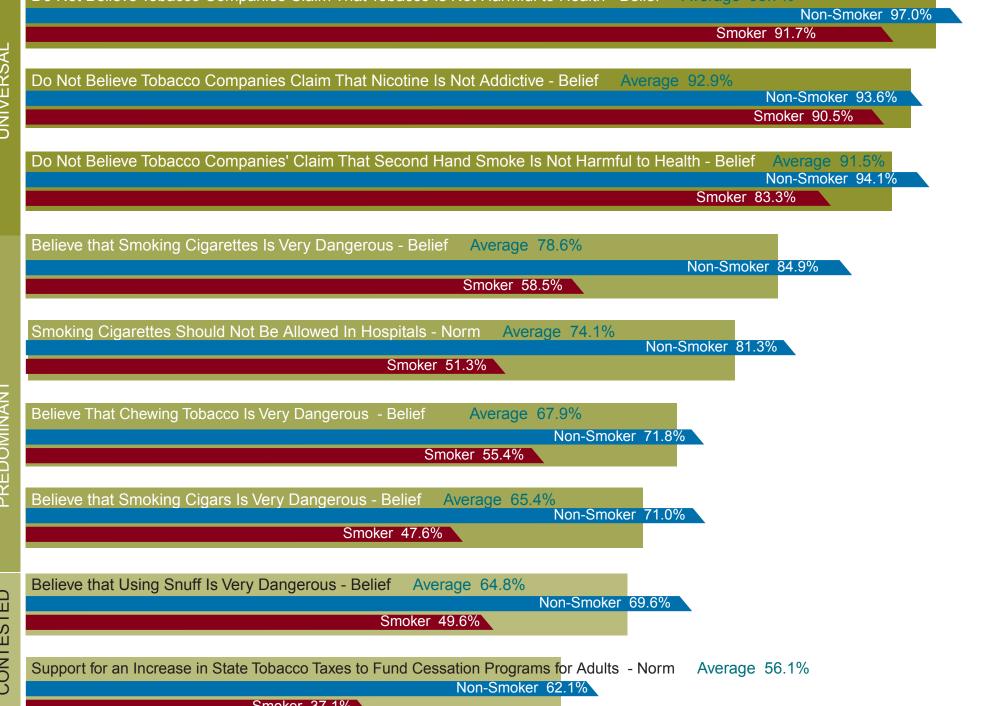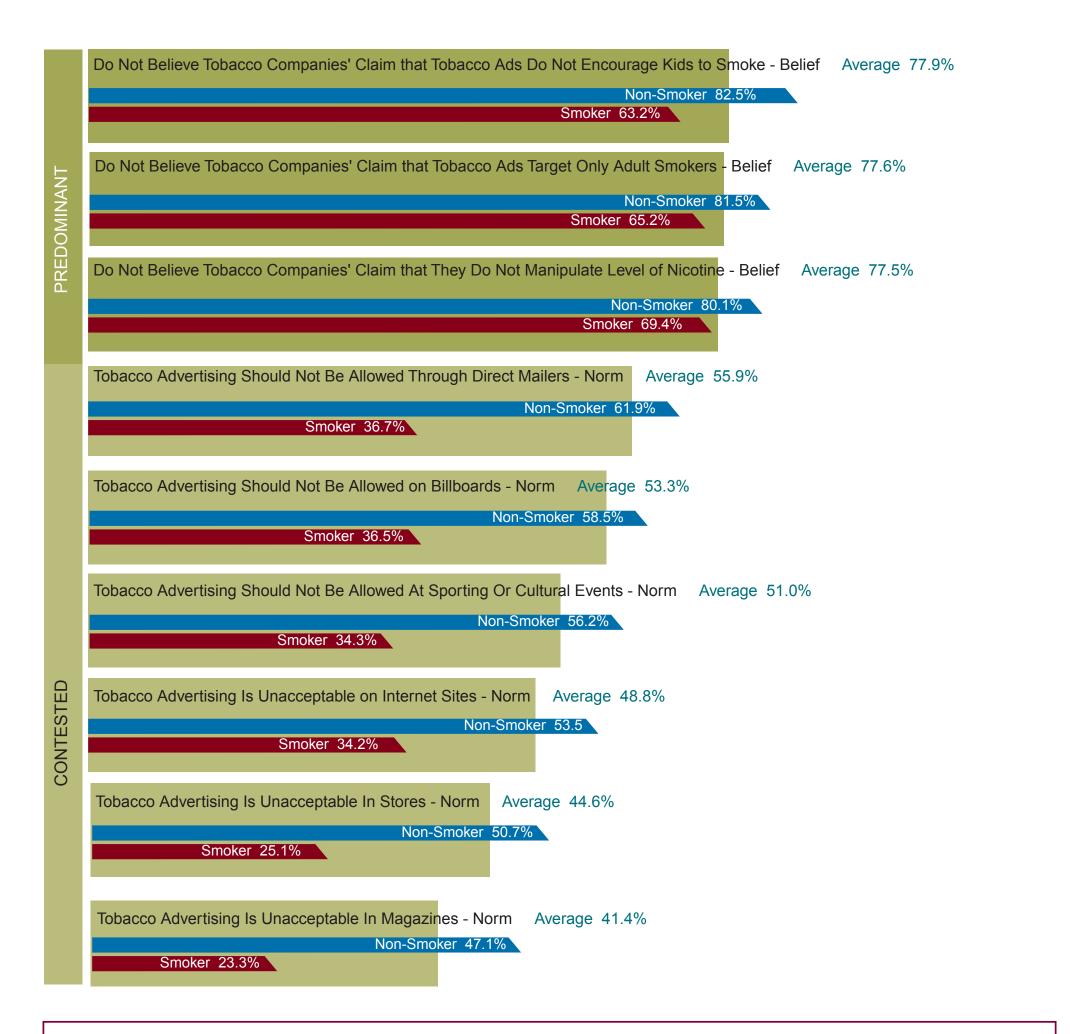### Recreation, Leisure and Sports

The institutional arenas of recreation, leisure, and sport appears to be lagging in the evolution of strong tobacco control norms, particularly among smokers. It should be noted that several norms banning tobacco use in this institution were judged to be predominant among non-smokers, but only marginal among smokers.
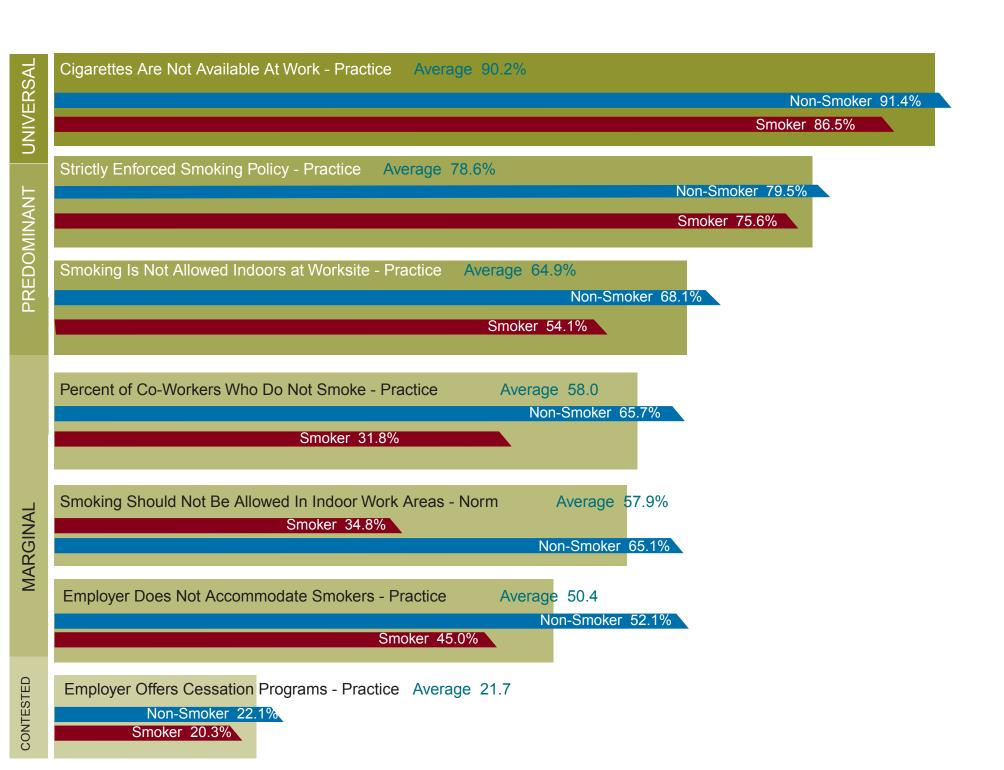
Recreation, Leisure and Sports, continued

Mass Culture and Communication

There is substantial skepticism towards the tobacco companies' marketing claims. However, smokers are more likely to accept these claims than non-smokers. Support for restrictions on advertising are more contested, with substantial variation between smokers and non-smokers.

The 11th World Conference on Tobacco OR Health, Chicago, IL

REFERENCES

Aronson, E. & O'Leary, M. (1982-1983). The relative effectiveness of models and prompts on energy conservation: A field experiment in a shower room. Journal of Experimental Systems, 12, 219-224.

Byrne, D. (1971). The attraction paradigm. New York: Academic Press.

Cialdini, R., Reno, R., & Kallgren, C. (1990). A focus theory of normative conduct: Recycling the concept of norms to reduce littering in public places. Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58, 1015-1026.

Cialdini, R. & Trost, M. (1998). Social influence: Social norms, conformity, and compliance. In D.T. Gilbert, S.T. Fiske, & G. Lindzey (Eds.), Handbook of Social psychology (4th ed., Vol. 2, pp. 151-192). New York: McGraw-Hill.

Duncan, S., Duncan, T., Biglan, A., & Ary, D. (1998). Contributions of the social context to the development of adolescent substance abuse: A multivariate latent growth modeling approach. Drug and Alcohol Dependence, 50, 57-71.

Evans, R., Rozelle, R., Mittelmark, M., Hansen, W., Bane, A., & Havis, J. (1978). Social modeling films to deter smoking in adolescents: Results of a three-year field investigation. Journal of Applied Psychology, 66, 399-414.

Flay, B., d'Avernas, J., Best, J., Kersell, M., & Ryan, K. (1983). Cigarette smoking: Why young people do it and ways of preventing it. In P. McGrath & P. Firestone (Eds.), Pediatric and adolescent behavioral medicine (pp. 97-127). New York: Springer-Verlag.

Glynn, T. (1989). Essential elements of school-based smoking prevention programs. Journal of School Health, 59, 181-188.

Moscowitz, J. (1983). Preventing adolescent substance abuse through drug education. In T Glynn, C. Luekefeld, & J. Ludford (Eds.), Preventing adolescent drug abuse: Intervention strategies. (NIDA Research Monograph 47; DHHS Publication No. ADM 86-1280). Washington, DC: US Government Printing Office.

Schultz, P. & Oskamp, S. (2000). Social psychology: An applied perspective. Upper Saddle River, New Jersey: Prentice Hall.