“It’s No Big Deal”

It’s not like I’m going to do these things forever. I mean, I’m in college and everyone says it’s the time to let go. If I don’t do all these things now, when will I? Now’s the time to party hard with friends, stay up late, smoke and drink, and just enjoy myself. But it’s not like something I do all the time so it’s really not like a big deal. I mean, I’m sure I won’t be smoking when I’m done with college.

—Blake, eighteen-year-old male

The quote above from this college freshman echoes prevalent ideas on college campuses about smoking. Tobacco, like alcohol, is a substance that “everyone” seemed to use, especially at parties. Few students on the campuses where I worked saw themselves as “real” smokers. They were party smokers, that is, people who mostly smoked socially. That’s why so many students referred to their occasional smoking almost as an afterthought, and talked about it as “no big deal.”

Social smoking is common among young adults, particularly those who are in college. Social smokers tend to be lighter smokers who do not smoke on a daily basis. Their smoking is more related to the context in which they find themselves. In fact, it’s an umbrella term that can refer to different patterns. On the college campus, the term “social smoker” most commonly refers to a person who smokes with friends at parties when consuming alcohol. I resist assigning a number of cigarettes to define social smoking at parties, as it really depends on how much drinking is going on and who the individual is hanging out with on a particular night. Other patterns of social smoking also exist. A person on a break from work may smoke because his or her coworkers do, or a person who rarely smokes may have a cigarette with a troubled friend who is smoking as a way of bonding. Social smoking can
also describe people who smoke a majority of their cigarettes in social contexts, but may also smoke alone when under stress. Indeed, some research has shown that more than half of college students who smoke fit this broad characterization of social smoker.

Recent years have seen a burgeoning epidemiological and psychological literature on social smoking, which is also referred to as light, low-level, and intermittent smoking. These terms are commonly defined in relation to the number of cigarettes smoked. Relatively few qualitative studies have been conducted to explore these patterns of consumption. At a time when just about everyone knows that smoking is bad for you, why are some college students starting to smoke once they arrive on campus? How, when, and where does social smoking occur? Despite an extant literature on smoking, there are lacunae in our understanding of the behavior. I argue that we must understand more about the meaning of social and low-level smoking to youth, the social contexts that facilitate uptake and those that limit use, and the social utilities of the behavior. Little is known about how smoking serves as a consumption event that facilitates social interaction, how smoking is used as a resource for negotiating identities, and how smoking serves as a signal for communicating emotive states. While much emphasis has been placed on the measurement of how much and how often young adults use cigarettes, less is known about what cigarettes say about who you are and who you are not. Thus, one of the aims of this book is to draw on interview data with social and low-level smokers in order to shed light on these increasingly common patterns of behavior.

Listening to the voices of young adults, I closely examine how smoking fits into their everyday lives and consider the extent to which college life actually fosters and sustains this behavior. In unpacking some of the complex reasons underlying smoking today, I challenge some simplistic but long-standing assessments of the behavior—for example, that most women smoke to control their weight.

Despite their smoking, most students I spoke with were confident that they were “not really smokers” and that their play time with cigarettes would be short-lived. As Blake points out in the opening quote, it was something one did in college, but certainly not after that. However, as students neared graduation, many of those who smoked expressed various degrees of ambivalence or reluctance to quit. Quit plans seemed
to move farther into a distant ambiguous future, something that might be reconsidered at the next life milestone, such as getting a real job or starting a family.

While this book is largely focused on the college campus, I also consider what happens after graduation. Many grads today are stepping into an uncertain future, where the prospect of finding a good job in a timely manner is unlikely. Their twenties may be characterized by multiple moves (in and out of their parents’ and friends’ homes) and compounded by multiple stressors, not the least of which is supporting oneself in a time of high unemployment and low wages. Moving into adulthood is now an elongated process, as markers of “settling down,” like marriage, edge upward toward one’s late twenties, if that. For those who have come to depend on the comfort of cigarettes during their college years, this array of life stressors may make cutting back or quitting more difficult, despite their intentions and understandings of the harms of tobacco.

Added to this picture is the powerful tobacco industry, which has focused much of its multibillion-dollar campaigns on young adults—the youngest legal targets of its products. Slim, light, and additive-free cigarettes are marketed to young people who may think they are engaging in harm reduction through the promise of a “healthier” cigarette. Emerging products in the marketplace, like e-cigarettes, carry with them the lure of vaping (distinct from smoking), ostensibly without the harmful effects. Taking these myriad factors into account, one begins to recognize how social smoking is a behavior that may continue well beyond the college years.

My analysis draws on a social ecology of health model, which postulates that in order to understand the meaning of health behavior in context, we need to critically examine multiple levels of influence, such as the individual, the social network, the community, and global systems. Applied to the study of smoking among young adults, the social ecological perspective prompts us to look beyond psychosocial models that privilege individual behavior to consider how social, cultural, and political-economic environments affect youth behavior and how youth behavior, in turn, may influence the environment. Moving from the micro (interpersonal) to the macro (community/societal) level with a focus on reciprocal and bidirectional interaction, the social ecological
model offers a productive frame for the discussion of behaviors and environments of risk that have an impact on young adults’ health.²

To date, although much research among college students has focused on singular behaviors (e.g., drinking, smoking, pharmaceutical use), qualitative studies point to the co-occurrence and interaction of these behaviors (e.g., smoking and drinking). The term “syndemic” has been used to refer to two or more epidemics (i.e., notable increases in the rate of specific diseases in a population) interacting synergistically and contributing, as a result of their interaction, to the excess burden of disease in a population. Coexisting behaviors like smoking and drinking need to be recognized as closely linked and potential independent threats to health, which need to be studied in context rather than in isolation. Recognition of the existence of syndemics suggests the need for a biosocial reconception of co-substance use and the adoption of holistic approaches that link micro-level behaviors to macro-level social and economic factors.

Shifts in Smoking in the United States

While the past forty years have seen significant declines in adult smoking (from 42 percent in 1965 to 20 percent in 2010), this is not the case among young adults, aged eighteen to twenty-five. Young adults have the highest prevalence of smoking of all other age groups, with approximately 35 percent reporting that they currently smoke.³ Analyses by race/ethnicity show that white youth have the highest prevalence overall (39 percent) followed by Hispanics (27 percent) and blacks (23 percent). Among women, white youth have the highest prevalence of smoking (37 percent) compared to other females (Hispanics 21 percent; blacks 21 percent).

I should clarify that the prevalence of smoking among young adults is highest among those who do not attend college. The focus in this book is on college-going youth, who actually represent a majority of young people in the United States today. In 2012, about two-thirds of high school graduates were enrolled in colleges or universities, and the majority of these students attended four-year institutions. Thus, it would seem that an in-depth understanding of smoking patterns on college campuses is warranted.
For many years, a widespread assumption in the public health field was that over 90 percent of those who became smokers would begin their habit before they reached age eighteen. The period of maximum vulnerability to initiation was considered to be during the middle or high school years. Recently the conventional wisdom about when youth start smoking has been challenged by findings that as many as 20 percent of smokers start smoking after age eighteen, a figure that represents a substantial increase from earlier years. Nationwide surveys reveal that it is increasingly common for college students to begin smoking after they arrive on campus, mostly in their freshman year. Over 30 percent of college students report that they smoked at least once in the past year, 25 percent report that they smoked at least one time in the previous month, and 12 percent smoke cigarettes daily.

Some research has concluded that smoking behaviors acquired in older adolescence and early adulthood are more likely to persist through later life. There is evidence to suggest that more than half of those who smoke at low levels in their freshman year will still be smoking when they are seniors. And for those who began smoking prior to college, more than one-quarter become regular smokers during the college years. For some of these students, what began as social or occasional smoking will convert to daily smoking. Clearly, an established pattern of smoking on a daily basis will make it more difficult to quit.

By all accounts, young adulthood is a pivotal time in the development of smoking behavior. Smoking patterns among college students are much more fluid than those of adults, whose smoking behaviors tend to be already established. In fact, studies suggest that “the number of individuals aged 18 and 19 years in the early stages of smoking initiation may be more than double that of established smokers aged 18 years.” Those who once detested smoking may take it up in college, those who smoke in social contexts may increase or decrease their use, and party smokers who once swore that they were somehow immune to addiction may become dependent smokers with little interest in quitting.

Scientific understanding of how one becomes a smoker has changed over time. For many years, researchers believed that after a person initiated smoking, the progression to regular or daily use took several years, with established smoking as an endpoint that occurred in the twenties.
During these early years, an individual’s smoking behavior was typically characterized as intermittent or light (i.e., the person smoked occasionally and at a low level, five cigarettes or fewer per day), a pattern that was seen as a temporary and transitional developmental stage while his or her smoking was becoming established. Eventually, the smokers would feel that they required steady and frequent dosing of nicotine, at which point they could be characterized as dependent on nicotine, or addicted smokers.

While this was the dominant characterization of a smoker for many years, by the late 1980s there was a growing recognition that not all smokers fit this pattern. Saul Shiffman, a professor of psychology and pharmaceutical science known for his research on addiction, identified a pattern among adult smokers whom he labeled “chippers.” These smokers inhaled and absorbed nicotine from cigarettes (typically about five or fewer per day) but did not smoke enough to maintain steady-state nicotine levels, nor did they experience many (if any) withdrawal symptoms when they did not smoke. Over time, these low-level smokers did not increase the number of cigarettes they smoked and they showed few signs of dependence.

Increasingly, tobacco researchers have recognized that divergent patterns of smoking uptake exist, with some individuals remaining low-level smokers rather than following neatly along a trajectory of increased cigarette consumption. In fact, in the United States today over a third of adult smokers do not smoke every day, and the proportion of non-daily or occasional smokers appears to be growing. This is a very sharp contrast from twenty-five years ago, when the average smoker consumed thirty-two cigarettes a day, over a pack and a half. Smokers today smoke an average of thirteen cigarettes per day. And among many college students who smoke, the amount smoked per day is much less.

What accounts for these downward shifts in cigarette consumption? Several reasons seem plausible in the general population. First and foremost, environmental restrictions—smoke-free legislation—have limited the spaces where people can smoke. Half of the U.S. population lives in areas where smoking is banned in workplaces, bars, and restaurants. More than 70 percent of Americans, including about half of current smokers, do not allow smoking in their homes. Rather than
being able to light up a cigarette wherever they wish, smokers need to find appropriate places, not only where it is legal for them to smoke but also where they will not offend others. Smoking has been increasingly stigmatized, and even when someone is smoking in a legal space—like outdoors—nonsmokers are often quick to show their annoyance. Restrictions on smoking are increasing on college campuses as well, and many colleges nationwide have enacted total smoking bans, meaning no smoking in campus buildings or outside.

A second reason for the downward shift in cigarette consumption is cost. Taxation on cigarettes, which varies across states, has resulted in increased cost, which can serve as a factor limiting the number of cigarettes one smokes as well as one's brand choice. Numerous studies have shown that young adults are particularly sensitive to cost.15

A third factor contributing to lower levels of smoking is a growing awareness of the harm of tobacco and secondhand smoke. To mitigate harm, many people are adopting harm-reduction practices, like cutting back on the number of cigarettes they smoke each day or trying to quit completely.

How Do College Students Describe Their Smoking?

The short answer to this question is that college students view their smoking very differently than public health and psychology researchers who frequently report on their behavior. Most researchers use the term current smoker to classify those who report smoking part or all of a cigarette in the past thirty days.16 Some years back, I realized that this label was a total mismatch for how students talked about smoking. In interviews with high school girls about their recent smoking experiences, my colleagues and I had asked, “Would you call yourself a smoker now?” Most girls seemed annoyed by this question, and quickly clarified their own behavior with comments like “I smoke, but I’m not a smoker” or “I just smoke when I’m partying.” These comments made it clear that from the girls’ perspective, there was a distinction between those who “really” smoked and their own occasional behavior. Their image of a smoker was someone “who bought cigarettes and really had to have one.”17

On a survey we developed for that project, we incorporated the teen-generated descriptors, and found that while 30 percent of the girls
reported that they currently smoked (out of 205 girls), over two-thirds of them described themselves as “someone who smokes but is not a smoker” or “someone who just smokes when I’m partying.” When my colleagues and I used similar response categories on a survey of over nine hundred college freshmen at a large midwestern university, over 40 percent of students who reported some level of smoking similarly characterized themselves in ways that reflected the idea that they were not “really smokers.”

Recently, Carla Berg and her colleagues examined the concept of “smoker identity” among college students at fourteen U.S. universities. Specifically, these researchers wanted to understand the extent to which college students who had smoked in the past month would identify themselves as smokers. Of the ten thousand students they surveyed, almost 25 percent reported smoking in the past thirty days. Of those who had smoked on three to five days in the past month, 92 percent did not consider themselves smokers. Of those who had smoked on six to nine days in the past month, 75 percent did not consider themselves smokers. And even among those who had smoked on ten to nineteen days in the past month, 45 percent did not consider themselves smokers. In total, more than half of college students in this large sample did not classify themselves as smokers, regardless of the frequency of their smoking cigarettes. These findings suggest that smoking may be even more common than our current statistics reveal and that it is a poorly understood label that has a different meaning to laypersons than to researchers. It also begs a reexamination of our classification of smoking.

Qualitative research among young adults in Scotland similarly found that those who smoke are reluctant to label themselves smokers. When asked whether they would call themselves smokers, some respondents compared themselves to friends who smoked more than they did and decided that their own level of smoking did not warrant calling themselves smokers. Others explained that even though they smoked almost every day, the number of cigarettes consumed was too low to call themselves smokers. Still others discounted their smoking status, noting that they smoked cigarettes only when they were drinking alcohol or when smoking marijuana, and therefore it did not “really count.” What is interesting to note in this study is that self-descriptors of smoking status
were dependent on a number of factors, with youth engaging in comparative reasoning and evaluating their smoking in relation to others in their social network. In doing so, they were not relying on a simple count of how many cigarettes they had smoked to define themselves.

Does Defining Yourself as a Nonsmoker Matter?

The answer to this is complex and multifaceted. Clearly, many of those who start smoking in their freshman year or who enter college having smoked a few times stop after a couple of months. Approximately 70 percent of all people try a cigarette at some point in their life, yet only a third continue smoking to the point of becoming dependent. At present, the differences between those who progress to high levels of smoking and those who experiment with smoking but do not transition to regular use are not well understood. Recent studies have shown, however, that intermittent smoking (i.e., non-daily smoking) among both adults and college students appears to be a stable category over time. In other words, those who smoke on a non-daily basis tend to do so for many years.

Recent studies have also shown that symptoms of nicotine dependence can develop rapidly after the onset of occasional or intermittent smoking. That is, there is no minimum nicotine dose or duration of use that has been established as necessary for dependence. What this means is that nicotine dependence can begin for some smokers as early as their first few cigarettes. While this may seem surprising, for some students I spoke with, the transition from trying their first cigarette socially to becoming daily low-level smokers (one to two cigarettes a day) took about two months.

It’s not just the possibility of becoming dependent on a substance that needs to be considered. From a biosocial perspective, we need to recognize that dependence may develop in a social context where one receives strong cues to engage in a particular behavior. College students who smoke occasionally and socially can become dependent or “addicted” to smoking at parties while drinking. In other words, the craving they describe—echoed repeatedly in the phrase “when I’m drinking I’ve got to be smoking”—may have as much of a social dimension as a purely biological one. In a similar way, a low-level smoker
who smokes only one or two cigarettes a day may feel very addicted to those cigarettes (often smoked at a special time of day, like after a meal). In fact, their addiction to the “after-food cigarette” may be so strong that they can’t imagine not smoking. It is not just the number of cigarettes that a person smokes but also the meaning of each cigarette and the pleasure that he or she derives from it. Importantly, some cessation experts think that smoking just a few cigarettes a day can be even harder to give up than a heavier habit, since each cigarette carries more of a reward.²⁴

Another important issue to consider with regard to college students who smoke—but do not consider themselves smokers—is that they may dismiss potential health consequences of tobacco and disregard messages to quit. Take Taylor, for example, whose grandmother had died after a long and painful struggle with emphysema. Despite the fact that she had observed firsthand the effects of long-term tobacco use and had received many warnings from her mom about her “risky genes,” Taylor distanced herself, adopting instead an air of invincibility. “After all,” she told me, “I really don’t smoke very much and I’m sure I’ll quit pretty soon, . . . and I smoke Marlboro Lights, which I think aren’t as bad for you.” Researchers have called this an “optimistic bias,” referring to people’s tendency to view the risks of various behaviors as lower for themselves than for others who engage in similar behaviors.²⁵

Some social smokers, like Taylor, opined that their smoking was not a big deal because of the type of cigarette they smoked. Although tobacco industry marketing has tried to lead the public to believe that one can be a “health-conscious smoker” by smoking “light,” “mild,” or “ultra-light” cigarettes—a belief that is held widely by college students—this is a misconception.²⁶ Light or mild cigarettes are not better for health than regular cigarettes. Studies on the topography of smoking have shown that smokers who choose light cigarettes believing they are a healthier alternative adapt their smoking behavior—inhaling more deeply and frequently—and as a result obtain similar levels of nicotine as with regular cigarettes. Similar misconceptions espoused by college students are that brands like American Spirit are “a healthier choice” because they do not contain additives. In fact, studies have shown that additive-free cigarettes deliver substantial amounts of nicotine and other toxic components of tobacco smoke.²⁷
As noted earlier, most social and low-level smokers believe that they will quit long before they experience any harmful effects of tobacco. There is a growing body of evidence, however, to suggest that even social and low-level smokers have difficulty in quitting, despite their desire to do so. And among regular smokers, national survey data have shown that of the more than 50 percent who tried to quit during the previous year, only 6 percent reported successfully doing so. Relapse rates are notoriously high.

It is well established that tobacco use has substantial health risks that begin almost immediately—even in adolescence and young adulthood. Although social or occasional smoking may be thought of by the lay population as less harmful than daily smoking, these patterns are also associated with poor health outcomes. Studies among college students find that even occasional smoking (at least five days in the previous thirty) increased the odds of experiencing shortness of breath and fatigue while doing regular activities.28

Compared to those who have never smoked, light and intermittent smokers are at increased risk for cardiovascular disease, lower respiratory tract infection, and compromised reproductive health, among other health conditions.29 With regard to cardiovascular disease, light and intermittent smoking carries nearly the same risk for heart attack and stroke as daily smoking.30 With regard to lung cancer, women aged thirty-five to forty-nine who smoke one to four cigarettes per day have five times the risk of developing lung cancer as nonsmokers; men have three times the risk.31 Over half of those who continue smoking will have a significant decrease in their life span—about thirteen years shorter than their nonsmoking peers.32 Another important point to consider is that light or intermittent smokers who think of themselves as nonsmokers are less likely than a regular smoker to be advised to quit or be offered cessation assistance from health professionals.33

Background to the Studies

My research on tobacco has been ongoing over the past twenty years. In this book, much of my discussion is drawn from research I conducted over the past decade with tobacco research colleagues at two large public universities, one in the Southwest and the other in the Midwest. These
studies were conducted under the auspices of the transdisciplinary network known as TERN (Tobacco Etiology Research Network), funded by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. As a Faculty Scholar in this network, I was fortunate to work collaboratively with a distinguished group of twenty-four tobacco researchers representing a wide range of academic disciplines for several years. Prior to implementing a large study at a midwestern university, the anthropologist Mark Nichter and I decided to conduct a pilot study at a southwestern university to enable a more nuanced understanding of smoking on campus. We reasoned that findings from this study could inform the design and development of the larger longitudinal qualitative and quantitative study, which was being planned for the following year.

Thus, we began our exploration of campus smoking to examine what we termed “the freshman experience.” Our main goal was to gain insight into the transition to college and to understand the extent to which smoking and drinking played a role in this transition. Over the course of a year, a team of medical anthropologists (myself, Mark Nichter, three advanced graduate students, and two undergraduates) conducted open-ended interviews with twenty-six freshmen (sixteen females and ten males) who smoked mostly at parties or at low levels. All participants were white, with ages ranging from eighteen to nineteen years. Each student was interviewed three to five times during the year. In addition, we conducted focus groups with low-level smokers to further explore their smoking behavior. Observations of smoking at parties were made by undergraduate research assistants who were provided training in participant observation. Students’ observations and insights were written up as field notes and discussed with the research group at weekly meetings. In total, we conducted about a hundred in-depth interviews with these freshmen and conducted four focus groups.

Over the course of the year, our research team identified a number of issues for exploration in the larger study, including the importance of drinking and smoking; perceived gender differences in appropriateness of smoking; on-campus stressors that affected smoking trajectories; and how romantic relationships could lead to shifts in smoking. On the basis of preliminary analyses and discussions among our research team, we developed a series of open-ended, semi-structured interview guides
appropriate for freshman college students, which we knew we would be able to use in the coming year.

Working with Students

The method of naturalistic observation by undergraduates proved very valuable for my research because there were certain venues where I as an older faculty member could not easily fit in. Although I did not attend college parties myself, I did spend one year on campus as a faculty fellow assigned to a residence hall. About 90 percent of the students in the hall were freshmen, so I had ample opportunity to interact with them as they settled in to campus life, as well as to observe their behaviors over time. These informal observations and conversations with students across the freshman year also informed this research.

As part of my university teaching, I regularly teach seminars at both the undergraduate and graduate level on the anthropology of youth. One of the foci of these seminars is drug use, including tobacco and alcohol, and I have assigned chapters of this book to my students as “member checks” to assess their continued relevance and to identify any changes occurring in consumption practices. Students have told me that my descriptions of student life and smoking and drinking on campus are quite accurate. Graduate students in adolescent health and medical anthropology seminars have also read and commented on versions of these chapters.

The University Project of the Tobacco Etiology Research Network

The year after the freshman experience study, a yearlong study (known as UpTERN, or the University Project of TERN) of incoming freshmen was initiated at a midwestern university. The social psychologist Steve Tiffany, a TERN member, was the principal investigator of the study. The goal of this study was to generate detailed assessments of smoking and other behaviors through weekly web-based quantitative data collection as well as through qualitative interviews and focus groups. As a research network, we were particularly interested in identifying trajectories of smoking and improving our understanding of the emergence of tobacco dependence. While this yearlong study generated both
quantitative and qualitative data, I primarily utilize findings from the qualitative component in this book.

Over nine hundred participants completed thirty-five consecutive weekly online surveys. Of these participants, 93 percent were white, reflecting the population of that college campus. Our ethnographic research team was multidisciplinary and was composed of the anthropologist Mark Nichter, myself, the clinical psychologist Elizabeth Lloyd-Richardson, and the family studies specialist Asli Carkoglu, as well as two graduate and three undergraduate students. Participants in the study used a web-based survey protocol, and were asked to enter the number of cigarettes they smoked on each of the previous seven days. Our research team received the names of students who reported on their web-based survey that they had smoked in the past week.

While the more intricate details of this complex study design are provided in the appendix, what is important to note is that this design allowed the ethnographic team to identify students for interviews just as they were transitioning to smoking on campus. From our “freshman experience” study the previous year, we recognized that the first few months on campus were prime time for smoking initiation and experimentation to occur—a time when students who were new to campus were partying “to the max.” Thus, rather than obtaining retrospective accounts of students’ earliest smoking experiences, as researchers typically do, we were able to capture this information extremely close in time, literally within a few weeks of occurrence.

In all, over the course of the freshman year, our research team interviewed thirty-five “party smokers”—eighteen men and seventeen women. We used this term to define those who smoked at least two-thirds of their cigarettes at parties and who reported smoking on four or more of the weeks that they completed the survey by the middle of the first semester. This categorization seemed to best capture a group of students who were actually developing a pattern of party smoking, as opposed to those students who may have only smoked a cigarette at a party very infrequently. It is important to note that we were able to identify this category (and that of low-level smoking) because we had fine-grained weekly quantitative data from this large college sample. We also interviewed twenty-four low-level smokers (fifteen men, nine women) who typically smoked three to four cigarettes on weekdays and
also smoked on weekends. Some of these students were interviewed multiple times over the course of the year.

Based on our pilot study findings and initial observations during the UpTERN study, we recognized the importance of fraternities and sororities in the social lives of freshmen. The Greek system was found to be a highly pervasive organization on both college campuses, with large memberships. During first semester of freshman year, both men and women commonly attend parties at fraternity houses. At both campuses, many (but not all) fraternity houses are important sites for tobacco and alcohol consumption. They are also “sites of socialization,” where incoming students observe the behavior of upperclassmen and learn what is normative on campus. Therefore, we decided to conduct focus groups in fraternity and sorority houses to learn about smoking and drinking behaviors in these contexts. Focus group participants were non-freshmen because we were interested in interviewing fraternity and sorority members (not incoming pledges). These groups were conducted to provide a forum for the emergence of natural speech and to allow participants to reflect on, and be reflexive about, smoking practices in social contexts, particularly with relation to gender.

Focus group questions centered on issues such as the prevalence of smoking among house members, spoken and unspoken rules within the house concerning smoking as well as alcohol use; smoking at parties; and the monitoring of excessive drinking and smoking among house members. In all, we conducted eleven focus groups (four sororities; four fraternities; three mixed groups), including eighty students in total.

We also conducted forty brief interviews during final exam time, which focused on “exam smoking,” a time hypothesized to be associated with stress. Thus, in all, over the course of the year we interviewed about 180 college students. Findings from the freshman experience study and the larger UpTERN study form the basis for several chapters of this book (chapters 3, 4, 6, and 7) and inform discussions about smoking and drinking, gendered dimensions of smoking, and transitions to higher levels of tobacco use.

For the discussion on smoking as a weight-control strategy, I draw on a longitudinal study conducted with my colleagues Cheryl Ritenbaugh and Mark Nichter that followed a cohort of girls from the eighth and
nineth grade for three years to explore their dieting and smoking behaviors. Initially, very few of these girls were smoking for weight-control purposes. Five years after the completion of the original study, we contacted these women again (at age twenty-one) to track their smoking status, discuss the role that smoking now played in their lives (if any), and explore the extent to which they smoked as a weight-control strategy.

A fourth study that informs my discussion about quitting is based on interviews with thirty students at a large southwestern university (twenty-five seniors, five graduate students). Twenty-one students were white, six were Mexican American, and three were Asian American. Each of these students had established patterns of smoking, with most smoking at daily or near-daily levels. Interviews focused on their smoking history, how it had changed in college, their interest in quitting, and if relevant, previous quit attempts.

Anthropological Approaches to Tobacco

To my knowledge, this is the first sustained discussion of social smoking. As a medical anthropologist, I feel there are several reasons a book on this topic is warranted. Much of what is currently known about smoking among young adults is from survey research that makes use of standardized question sets and scales designed for adults and adapted for youth without the benefit of a contextual understanding of how youth smoke. Survey researchers are using blunt instruments that have some level of utility for the tasks at hand, such as establishing prevalence rates. However, in order to understand how smoking trajectories change over time and identify points of transition when patterns of smoking shift, we need instruments that are more responsive to the lives of youth.\(^{34}\)

With its holistic mandate, an anthropological perspective has much to contribute to an understanding of the lure of cigarettes to youth. We need to consider the effects of growing up in a high-consumption environment in which people are exposed to a constant flow of marketing messages inviting them to consume in contexts where they feel a desire to connect, or any number of other emotions. Today’s young adults are growing up in a cultural environment in which freedom in the form of self-expression is valued, a sense of desire and lack are cultivated as
prerequisites to selling more and more goods, high-arousal products are easily available, and self-medication is condoned as a way of handling negative emotional states. Tobacco maintains its status as a recreational drug among college students because smoking has important utility functions in their social world and because cigarettes have been designed to become physiologically addictive long after their social utilities have diminished.

**Lens 1: Place: Studying Environments of Risk**

Throughout this book, I employ an anthropological set of lenses that have proven useful for my research. The first of these analytic lenses incorporates notions of “place,” defined as interactions associated with a particular space. Following notions of space and place discussed by humanistic geographers who study health, I adopt a relational perspective to place and health that considers place “on the ground” as dynamic and fluid, which “constitutes as well as contains social relations and physical resources.”

A college party, for example, is a social context that offers insight into how one’s experience and perceptions of place impact health behavior. Considerations of place represent a departure from existing quantitative research, which has largely focused on smoking as a risk behavior, and which seeks to identify “predictors of risk,” “groups at risk,” or the “co-occurrence of risky behaviors.”

As medical anthropologists, my colleagues and I have moved from a “groups at risk” approach to more closely examine environments of risk—namely, those places that may facilitate risk taking. Environments of risk, such as parties, bars, and nightclubs, can be viewed as “breeding sites” where smoking (in conjunction with consumption of other substances such as alcohol) may be initiated, fostered, and normalized. Rather than identifying individuals at risk for adopting unhealthy behaviors (e.g., smoking), I examine risk in context and examine how it is experienced and embodied. A college student enters a party scene, has a drink or two, and has an urge to smoke. What does smoking offer in that context? What social norms are associated with smoking there? Is smoking even perceived as risky by those who only smoke now and then? And are there some strategies—like working out or eating healthily—that are perceived to lessen or offset potential risk?
Environments of risk that enable smoking have a political economic dimension that begs careful consideration. The tobacco industry has invested heavily in creating and maintaining environments where smoking is normative. Tobacco marketing has been aimed at “tunnels of influence” through which young adults are perceived to travel, such as parties, fraternities, and bars. In particular, bars and nightclubs were identified by the industry as places where young adults would be open and receptive to new adventures—such as cigarettes—in part because alcohol consumption goes with smoking, and bars and clubs are places where the focus is on having a good time.\(^{36}\)

Researchers who study previously secret tobacco industry documents have found that promotions at bars, nightclubs, and college parties include aggressive advertising, tobacco brand-sponsored activities, and free giveaways of cigarettes. These have been developed to reach beginning smokers as well as to create smoke-friendly environments. Notably, such activities have continued even after implementation of smoke-free policies in bars. Findings of a study of college students attending bars revealed that those in a community with a smoke-free bar law were actually more likely to be offered (and to take) free gifts from a tobacco marketer than those who lived in an area without smoke-free bar laws.\(^{37}\)

The tobacco industry spends billions of dollars each year to market its products; in 2008, tobacco companies spent $10.5 billion marketing cigarettes and smokeless tobacco products in the United States alone. Broken down, this amounts to about $29 million each day.\(^{38}\) And while it is difficult to get exact figures on the percentage of marketing to young adults, it is sizable. Thus, it is critical to recognize that the environment promoting smoking extends well beyond the influence of friends’ smoking or the party atmosphere to include the active promotion of cigarettes by one of the country’s wealthiest and most powerful industries.\(^{39}\)

**Lens 2: Considerations of Time**

One of the important ways we structure time, define who we are, and express social relations is through acts of consumption. Consumption
events punctuate the flow of everyday life as we move from school or work to leisure time.

Smoking was often described as a marker of the beginning or end of an event, when moving in and out of spaces. References to time were replete in interviews, with parties described as “time out of time,” or “not real time.” This perspective of “not being in real time” allowed normative rules of appropriate behavior to be suspended. Some described smoking as “good for filling time” or to “pass time” when there was nothing else going on. In fact, the idea of college not being “real time” is a thread that runs throughout the book.

Young adults today live in an age of increasing time compression where there are greater opportunities for arousal (e.g., continuous connection to friends via Facebook, texting, and other social media) and diminishing tolerance for boredom. There is also a greater proliferation of products that promise instant gratification. Cigarettes have been engineered to be a fast and effective nicotine delivery device and socially engineered (i.e., advertised) to be an antidote for boredom. References to boredom and having nothing to do emerged frequently among some low-level smokers who reported that smoking “was a great way of killing time” or even among social smokers at parties for whom “smoking was a great way to kill time while sobering up a bit.”

**Lens 3: Identity Construction and Gender**

Cigarettes serve as symbols as well as props that allow people to temporarily assume a new role or a different identity on the stage of everyday life. Young adults create, appropriate, and assign meaning to smoking at the same time as they are being primed to interpret smoking in particular ways. Perhaps—and paradoxically—because of its stigmatization, the behavior has an increased allure for some college students. Smoking sends a signal that a person is willing to take risks with his or her health and that he or she is not too uptight. And there is a particular mystique to being seen smoking—doing something that “everyone” knows is really not good for you. While public health researchers have largely focused on the physical risks of smoking (i.e., the health-related risks), my research is attentive to the social risks of *not smoking*. What social
statement does it make when a person chooses not to smoke when at a party surrounded by people who are smoking?

While quantitative research has revealed few differences in smoking prevalence between women and men, the ethnographic research that my colleagues and I conducted revealed distinct notions of acceptability of smoking.\textsuperscript{12} I interrogate the gendered nature of smoking, describing gendered differences in the meanings of smoking as well as perceptions of the appropriateness of smoking at different levels of consumption. I also pay attention to gendered factors that may influence increases in smoking as well as factors that protect against escalation of smoking in particular contexts.

\textit{Lens 4: Social Utilities}

Identifying the social utilities of smoking—that is, what smoking does for you in particular contexts and how young adults utilize smoking to navigate various social worlds—is an important focus of this book. Moving beyond a “social influences to smoke” perspective, a social utilities lens helps us to consider young adults not as passive agents, but rather as active participants who choose to smoke for a myriad of reasons. For example, when the sophomore Kelly describes her increase in smoking when she’s stressed, she explains that it’s not always her exams that make her feel stressed but the stress of those around her. An analysis of the social utility of smoking during stressful times on campus leads us to explore the complex of motivations that may lead to increased smoking during examination time, beyond an individual’s own stress to a phenomenon we term “secondhand stress.”

\textit{Lens 5: Co-Substance Use}

Smoking as an issue on college campuses is somewhat eclipsed by the problem of drinking. College health services mount annual campaigns to promote “safe drinking,” and pay less attention to the reality of how drinking and smoking are inextricably linked on campus. To be clear, there are very real and immediate health implications of excessive alcohol consumption compared with the long-term risks of tobacco use. Nonetheless, given the commonality of co-consumption of substances
(drinking and smoking; smoking cigarettes and marijuana use, etc.), this is an important oversight that requires consideration not only because nicotine addiction can occur among social, intermittent, and low-level smokers, but because co-substance use can impact one's long-term smoking trajectory.

**Lens 6: Pleasure**

Even among novice smokers, I was often struck by the sheer sensuality of their experience with a cigarette, which included lighting it, holding it, and inhaling. What a person found pleasurable about smoking was dynamic and appeared to shift as he or she moved from occasional smoking while drinking to smoking with greater regularity. And having smoked throughout my own college career, I understood the lingering pleasure of smoking while drinking and the dissolving of daily stressors, if even for a few moments.

At present, we have few narrative accounts of the pleasure of the smoking experience that, in addition to addiction, makes it so difficult to quit. As noted by Robin Bunton, “the relative neglect of pleasure in drug and alcohol research is part of a broader difficulty public-health research has with pleasure.” With regard to club drug use, anthropologists have described how young adults engage in a process of active negotiation balancing the potential risks against the anticipated pleasures. This is equally true for cigarette smokers. A deeper understanding of the pleasures of smoking may help inform the development of more sensitive cessation interventions that can contribute to the overall health of this population.

**Lens 7: Life Trajectories**

This period of life—the college years and beyond—has been termed by the psychologist Jeffrey Arnett as “emerging adulthood” to refer to the extended transitional years between adolescence and adulthood. As noted earlier, this age period (eighteen to twenty-five—and longer) has the highest prevalence of drug use and is a key time for transitioning to smoking. This life stage, Arnett notes, is defined by several key features, including a continued exploration of one's identity; an intense focus on
one’s self; a feeling of being in-between—of not quite being an adult but not a teen anymore; and instability marked by multiple shifts in one’s life and social environment. Looping back to our earlier discussion of the uncertainty that frames the lives of twenty-somethings—in regard to employment, housing, and social relationships—we can see the importance of an analytic that looks at trajectories of use embedded in youths’ unstable everyday lives.

This in-depth examination provides a more nuanced and situated understanding of smoking trajectories over time, illuminating factors that can lead to upward and downward shifts as individuals move through the college years and beyond. One of the hallmarks of ethnographic analysis is close attention to language; specifically, listening for shifts in voice and intentionality. Smoking narratives provide insight into how young people make meaning of their experience and how they give shape and order to it over time. Using longitudinal data, I am able to contrast people’s imagined trajectories in relation to their real life experience.

The Plan of the Book

A basic anthropological concept is that any consideration of behavior or discourse has to pay attention to both context and the multiple voices of actors. To this end, I explore the how, when, and why of social and low-level smoking among young adults. One of my motivations for writing this book is that despite the volumes of survey data on youth smoking behavior, their voices have rarely been heard. Qualitative data on youth smoking are sometimes referred to as “anecdotal,” a phrase that suggests that such data lack the necessary rigor of science. In contrast, I contend that it is critical that we listen closely to youth experiences so as to more fully understand the lure of smoking in the twenty-first century.

In chapter 2, I present profiles of seven emerging adults who began smoking for a variety of reasons, and who represent a range of smoking behaviors. I do so as a way to represent some of the different (and common) narratives I encountered as a result of extensive ethnographic interviews. Each of the individuals profiled in this chapter was
interviewed more than once, so I am able to offer some sense of change over time.

Chapters 3 and 4 are companion chapters that bring the reader on to the college campus, and highlight the centrality of co-substance use. I explore and contrast the social utilities of smoking for women and men in relation to identity construction and social facilitation. Students who are presented in these chapters are largely from the group whom I refer to as party smokers, although some smoke daily at a very low level.

In chapter 5, drawing on longitudinal data that followed a group of girls from middle school to young adulthood, I critically examine and challenge the widespread belief that many women begin and continue to smoke as a way to control their weight. In doing so, I explore other reasons why women continue to smoke over time.

In chapter 6, I consider the process of becoming a smoker—the movement along a trajectory from party smoking to more regular smoking—and discuss the meanings of such terms as “habit” and “addiction.” I also discuss the moral implications of smoking, including self-judgment and explanations that people use to make sense of their behavior. In chapter 7, I turn to a discussion of how stress, boredom, and romance impact smoking.

Chapter 8 explores the extent to which students want to quit smoking as they near college graduation and are about to enter the “real” world. I discuss the challenges faced by those who are interested in quitting, and the strategies they adopt. Finally, in chapter 9, I consider cessation efforts on campus and the movement at some colleges to ban smoking. I also discuss the growing popularity of the latest nicotine delivery device, e-cigarettes. Looking forward, I explore how uncertain times facing college graduates may contribute to a continuation of smoking following graduation.

In conducting interviews with young adults largely on college campuses, I was often struck with how remarkably insightful they were in describing their experiences. This period of life is marked by an intense capacity for self-reflection, as evidenced by their thought-provoking commentaries on their own and their friends’ behavior. In the chapters that follow, we see how smoking weaves its way into the social life of young adults, and how this changes over time.