Differences in Rationalization and Regret Among Smokers in Western Countries and Asia Countries: Findings from the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project

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ABSTRACT

Rationalization and regret are two common psychological experiences among smokers. They have been found to be negatively related to each other, and both related to intentions to quit. The goal of this paper was to compare the prevalence of rationalization and regret among adult smokers in 7 countries of the International Tobacco Control Policy Evaluation Project (the ITC Project: in four high-income "Western" countries—Canada, US, UK, and Australia—and in three Asian countries—Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea). We analyzed data from the baseline wave of the ITC Four Country Survey in Canada, US, UK, and Australia, the ITC Southeast Asia Survey in Malaysia and Thailand, and the ITC Korea Survey. The respondents were adult smokers (≥ 18 years) in each country. Prevalence of rationalization and of regret varied across countries. Rationalization was extremely low in Thailand (9%), compared to Korea (31%), US (33%), and Canada (34%). which in turn was lower than rationalization in Australia (42%), UK (46%). Malaysia showed the highest level of rationalization (49%). For prevalence of regret, the ordering of the countries was opposite, with Thailand having the highest levels of regret (92%), Malaysia, the lowest (79%), and the other countries falling in the middle (Korea at 87%; the other countries at the 90% level). The differences in rationalization and regret prevalence among these countries may reflect differences in history and intensity of tobacco control measures, whose resulting norms may affect the level of dissonance experienced by smokers as they continue to smoke.

INTRODUCTION

Two important common psychological reactions among smokers are rationalization and regret. When smokers experience the inconsistent cognitions, smokers are motivated to reduce the dissonance by rationalizing their smoking. In recent years, the increase in societal norms against smoking that shaped by tobacco control policies has made rationalization more difficult. When smokers fail to rationalize their smoking, smokers may begin to regret their smoking. Rationalization and regret are negatively related to each other and both are related to future behaviors such as intentions to quit smoking.

Previous research has shown that regret is near universal experiences among smokers in high-income countries and factors predicting regret do not differ among those countries (Fong et al, 2004). However, prevalence of regret varies among smokers in low-income countries and predictors of regret also differ between the two countries (Lee et al., 2006). The current study was designed to examine how these two psychological reactions in four Western high-income "Western" countries—Canada, US, UK, and Australia—and in three Asian countries—Thailand, Malaysia, South Korea.

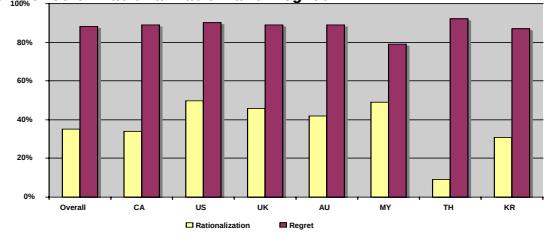
METHOD

Respondents to the International Tobacco Policy Evaluation (ITC) Four Country Survey, Southeast Asia Survey, and Korea Survey were smokers 18 years of age or older, who reported having smoked at least 100 cigarettes lifetime and who currently smoked at least monthly. A total of 4,007 adult smokers completed the telephone or face-to-face survey: Canada (N=2,193), US (N=2,115), UK (N=2,344), Australia (N=2,271), Malaysia (N=2,006), Thailand (N=2,000), and Korea (N= 1000).

Respondents answered measures on 5 point-scales of rationalization ("You've got to die of something, so why not enjoy yourself and smoke"), regret ("If you had to do it over again, you would not have started smoking").

RESULTS

Prevalence of Rationalization and Regret



1.Rationalization

Overall prevalence of rationalization was 35%. It varied across countries: Rationalization was extremely low in Thailand (9%), compared to Korea (31%), US (33%), and Canada (34%), which in turn was lower than rationalization in Australia (42%), UK (46%). Malaysia showed the highest level of rationalization (49%).

2. Regret

Overall prevalence of regret was 88%. Regret also varied across countries with the opposite ordering of the countries: Thailand had the highest levels of regret (92%), Malaysia, the lowest (79%), and the other countries fell in the middle (Korea at 87%; the other countries at the 90% level).

Logistic regression analysis of rationalization (unweighted)

Country	Rationalization	Odds ratio (95% *CI*)	*p*
Canada	34%	1	
United States	33%	.96(.84-1.08)	.478
United Kingdom	46%	1.65(1.47-1.87)	<.001
Australia	42%	1.36(1.20-1.53)	<.001
Malaysia	49%	1.57(1.38-1.78)	<.001
Thailand	9%	.20(.17- .24)	<.001
South Korea	31%	.87(.74-1.02)	.092

Logistic regression analysis of regret (unweighted)

Country	Regret	Odds ratio (95% *CI*)	*p*
Canada	89%	1	
United States	90%	1.03(.85-1.25)	.766
United Kingdom	89%	.97(.80-1.17)	.721
Australia	89%	.93(.77-1.12)	.450
Malaysia	79%	.45(.38- .54)	<.001
Thailand	92%	1.41(1.14-1.74)	.002
South Korea	87%	.80(.63-1.00)	.050

3. Country differences in Rationalization and Regret

Compared to smokers in Canada:

1) Smokers in UK, Australia and Malaysia were more likely to rationalize; whereas smokers in Thailand were less likely to rationalize smoking.

2) Smokers in Thailand were more likely to regret; whereas smokers in Malaysia and Korea were less likely to regret smoking.

DISCUSSION

The differences in rationalization and regret prevalence among these countries may reflect differences in history and intensity of tobacco control measures, whose resulting norms may affect the level of dissonance experienced by smokers as they continue to smoke.

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ITC Participating Institutions

ITC Project Research Support