Regret, Rationalization, and Intentions to Quit among Smokers in Thailand and Malaysia: Findings from the ITC Southeast Asia Survey

Wonkyong Beth Lee1, Mark P. Zanna1, Geoffrey T. Fong1, Ron Borland2, Buppha Sirirassamee3, Maizurah Omar4 and Foong Kin4

1University of Waterloo, Canada, 2Centre for Tobacco Control, Australia, 3Mahidol University, Thailand, 4University Sains Malaysia, Malaysia

ABSTRACT

We analyzed data from the ITC Southeast Asia Survey, a large national survey of 2,000 adult smokers in each of two countries—Thailand and Malaysia—to measure the prevalence of regret and rationalization among smokers and to examine the importance of these two constructs in understanding intentions to quit. The prevalence of regret in Thailand (92.2%) was comparable to four high-income countries (US, Canada, UK, Australia) whereas regret prevalence in Malaysia was considerably lower (79.1%). Rationalization prevalence was much higher in Malaysia (45.1%) than in Thailand (9.5%). These differences in rationalization and regret are consistent with the fact that Thailand has a longer history of tobacco control policies. Rationalization was negatively correlated with regret. Thai smokers were more likely to intend to quit, and mediational analyses demonstrated that the difference in quit intentions was mediated by both rationalization and by regret. These results point to the importance of psychological and cultural variables in understanding tobacco use throughout the world.

INTRODUCTION

Two important common psychological reactions among smokers are rationalization and regret. When smokers experience the inconsistent cognitions—“Smoking is harmful” versus “I am smoking everyday”—dissonance is created. Then smokers are motivated to reduce the dissonance by changing their behavior or rationalizing their smoking. In recent years, the increase in societal norms against smoking has made rationalization more difficult. When smokers fail to rationalize their smoking, smokers may begin to regret their smoking (Fong et al., 2004). The current study was designed to examine how these two psychological reactions are related to intentions to quit in two middle-income, developing countries in Southeast Asia: Thailand and Malaysia. We were also interested in understanding how smokers in Thailand and Malaysia may differ in rationalization and regret. Although the two countries are similar on some ways (e.g., geographical proximity, collectivistic cultures), they differ in their history of tobacco control policies (Thailand has a longer history of strong policies) and in the degree of traditionalism (Thailand is more traditional). These differences may influence smokers’ experiences of rationalization and regret and their importance in understanding smoking and cessation.

METHOD

Respondents to the International Tobacco Policy Evaluation (ITC) Southeast Asia 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 face-to-face survey: Thailand (N=2000) and Malaysia (N=2007). Wave 1 of the ITC SE Asia Survey was conducted January-March 2005.

RESULTS

Prevalence of Rationalization and Regret

The bar graphs above show that Thai smokers were much less likely to rationalize their smoking and more likely to regret smoking than were Malaysian smokers. Indeed, there was, both across countries and within countries, a negative correlation between rationalization and regret, consistent with the notion that regret is experienced when rationalization is no longer psychologically tenable. The mediational analysis presented on top of the next column shows that both rationalization and regret help explain why Thai smokers are more likely to intend to quit. The bottom two models show that the psychological variables of vertical collectivism and people norm help explain the differences between Thai and Malaysian smokers in whether they rationalize their smoking or experience regret.

CONCLUSIONS

These findings demonstrate the importance of psychological variables both in understanding differences between countries in intentions to quit (rationalization and regret were both significant mediators) and in understanding differences between countries in rationalization and in regret (vertical collectivism mediated country differences in both rationalization and regret; people norm mediated country differences in regret but not rationalization; and society norm did not moderate either regret or rationalization). The experience of smoking and consequences for quitting are influenced by a combination of psychological and societal forces. Future waves of the ITC SE Asia Survey will allow more detailed examination of these factors in actual quitting.