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CULTURAL FACTORS RELATED TO SMOKING IN SAN FRANCISCO'S IRISH BARS

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Abstract

California's Smoke-Free Workplace Act was extended to include bars in 1998. While the majority of bars in the state have become smoke free, in many bars patrons and staff continue to smoke despite the law. The authors present findings from a study which assessed cultural factors related to continued smoking in bars in the city of San Francisco. In bars serving primarily Irish migrants, tight-knit relations within the local Irish bar community together with a reluctance to be the first Irish bar to ban smoking were found to contribute to continued indoor smoking. The findings illustrate challenges to implementing tobacco control policies within ethnic subpopulations and particularly highlight the importance of considering how cultural dynamics within subpopulations may help or hinder such policies.

Introduction

The California Smoke-Free Workplace Act—Assembly Bill 13—(AB 13) was enacted into law in July 1994 and applied to bars statewide in 1998 (Claiborne 1998; Leeds 1998; Magzamen & Glantz, 2001). Since 2001, anthropologists at the Prevention Research Center in Berkeley have been conducting ethnographic evaluations of this law in California bars, collecting data through naturalistic observations and in-depth interviews with bar patrons and staff (Lee, Moore, & Martin, 2003). While we found the majority of bars in these studies to be smokefree, we identified many bars where indoor smoking has continued despite the law, and many of these bars could be grouped by patron type. In the city of San Francisco, one such type has been bars serving predominantly Irish patrons, of which there are many in the city. In this paper we present some of the rationales for bar smoking as well as the changing perceptions related to bar smoking, which emerged from interviews with Irish bar patrons, bartenders and owners.

With legislation such as AB 13, California has been at the forefront of tobacco control policy across the nation (Pierce, Gilpin, Emery, White, Rosbrook, & Berry, 1998). Smoke-free workplace policies have been shown to effectively reduce exposure to secondhand smoke (Pickett, Schober, Brody, Curtin, & Giovino, 2006; Eisner, Smith, & Blanc, 1998) and contribute to a decrease in some of the adverse health effects tied to secondhand smoke (Eagan, Hetland, & Aaro, 2006) for workers. Workplace smoking bans also contribute to lower overall tobacco consumption (Fichtenberg & Glantz, 2002) and increasing cessation among smokers (Chaloupka & Wechsler, 1997; Chapman, Borland, Scollo, Brownson, Dominello, & Woodward, 1999; Jha & Chaloupka, 2000). Bar workers are among the most impacted by

tobacco exposure in workplaces with no tobacco ban (Jarvis, Foulds, & Feyerabend, 1992; Kawachi & Colditz, 1999; Jenkins & Counts, 1999; Maskarinec, Jenkins, Counts, & Dindal, 2000), and where bans have been implemented, the respiratory health of bar workers has improved (Eisner et al., 1998; Farrelly, Nonnemaker, Chou, Hyland, Peterson, & Bauer, 2005).

In the first of our studies of California bars, we found indoor smoking to be significantly related to patron ethnicity. Specifically, the research staff consistently observed smoking in bars serving primarily Irish and Asian patrons, while in bars serving primarily Latino patrons very little smoking was observed (Moore, Lee, Antin, & Martin, 2006). We conducted a subsequent study to examine factors which might have been contributing to these patterns, such as culturally specific social dynamics, smoking patterns in migrants' countries of origin and variation in local enforcement procedures. Analyses of our data from interviews with denizens of the San Francisco Irish bar community—bar owners, managers, bartenders, and patrons of bars serving primarily Irish patrons (hereafter referred to as “Irish bars”)—revealed that initial widespread dissatisfaction with the ban slowly changed into widespread approval by many of these same respondents as both time and enforcement progressed. These findings will be discussed in depth below.

Irish Immigration to San Francisco

The Irish famine of the mid-1800s initiated a prodigious emigration from Ireland to the New World and contributed to a population decline of 3.8 million people in Ireland between 1845 and 1911 (O'Rourke, 1995). At least a quarter of San Francisco's population in 1870 was Irish-born (Dezell, 2001). Despite a slowing of immigration to the United States during World War I and the Great Depression, ample Irish immigration continued until the U.S. Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. This Act eliminated favoritism for Northern European immigrants thereby leveling the playing field for people from countries underrepresented in the United States (Lobo & Salvo, 1998). Not until the 1980s did emigration from Ireland pick up again. Because of a slumping economy and high levels of unemployment, many skilled and unskilled workers left Ireland for the United States where the economy, at that time, was thriving (Lobo & Salvo, 1998).

During this new period of Irish immigration during the '80s and '90s, a major influx of people from Ireland entered US urban centers (O'Hanlon, 1998). While New York State remained a popular destination for immigrants, California housed many Irish immigrants as well, and San Francisco became one of the prime destinations (Lobo & Salvo, 1998). This wave of Irish immigration was characterized by relatively young, unmarried men and women who worked primarily in blue collar (men, in particular), administrative support, or service positions (Lobo & Salvo, 1998). Currently, estimates of the Irish in San Francisco place the number at 68,307, about 8.8% of San Francisco's population (United States Census, 2002), with most residing in the Richmond and Sunset districts of the city.

Irish Bars in San Francisco

San Francisco has dozens of ethnically Irish bars dispersed throughout the city. Much of this can be attributed to San Francisco's long history of Irish immigration, as well as its current migrant population in the city (Lobo & Salvo, 1998). However, like in many cities around the world, there is also a prevalence of Irish-themed and Irish-named bars that often make it difficult to determine what is an “Irish” bar.

Many Irish bars tapped into symbolic representations of Ireland, attempting to capture the “Irish” experience through drink, ambiance and Irish culture. Decor was one feature of these bars wherein Irish referents were displayed, such as photographs of famous Irish writers, Irish-

identified Guinness advertisements, traditional Irish instruments, depictions of Irish landscapes, soccer jerseys, and maps of the counties in Ireland. Most Irish bars prominently served Guinness and other Irish-identified beers; corned beef and cabbage or fish and chips might be served. Many Irish bars hosted live music events, most notably a regular session (often advertised as a “seisiun”) of Irish folk music, with or without folk dancing (or “ceili”). Bars also hosted Irish cultural events, most saliently St. Patrick’s Day celebrations, but also community holiday (Thanksgiving and Christmas) and familial gatherings (weddings, wakes, bon voyage, etc.). Many Irish bars were found to display ethnic referents in the name of the bar (such as “O’Kelly’s”¹, “The Limerick” or “James Joyce”) as well as referents less-obvious to outsiders, such as the “plough and stars,” which referred to the banner of the Irish Citizen Army of the early 20th century.

During the early phases of our research, however, after careful consideration of these cultural referents, the research staff decided to consider “Irish bars” to be only those where ethnically-Irish patrons predominated. Field observers were instructed to identify Irish patron ethnicity primarily based on persons speaking with Irish accents, but patron ethnicity might also be revealed to observers in the course of casual conversation with bar staff and patrons. Bars with Irish cultural referents but with a heterogeneous patron base were considered Irish-themed bars (Lee, 2006). This determination was based on preliminary findings of a pattern of smoking in bars serving ethnically-Irish patrons while no clear pattern emerged among Irish-themed bars. The ethnically-Irish bars in San Francisco had many distinguishing characteristics. They had a neighborhood component, reflecting the fact that the majority of the clientele came from the immediate vicinity. Some ethnically-Irish bars also had generic or non-obvious names (“Jimmy’s Place”). Finally, it was evident from both fieldwork observations, as well as interviews, that patrons felt “at home” in their neighborhood Irish bar.

Methods

The data presented in this paper were drawn from two studies of San Francisco bars. Data collection for Study 1 took place between 2001 and 2003 and for Study 2 between 2004 and 2006. In both studies, data were collected in two phases: a series of field observations within the bars followed by qualitative interviews with bar patrons, staff, and owners as well as county tobacco control enforcement personnel. In Study 1, pairs of observers conducted four rounds of hour-long, unobtrusive observations in 121 randomly sampled bars, which included seven Irish bars. In Study 2, pairs of observers conducted three rounds of the same type of observations, but rather than in a random sample, the study focused on bars serving Asian, Irish or Latino patrons. This second study included 17 Irish bars. Each observer produced two types of data: quantitative survey data uploaded to a handheld computer (PDA) and qualitative field notes written in the form of a structured narrative. All observers were trained in ethnographic methods, particularly participant observation, so they would be able to conduct their observations with minimal interruptions to the course of events in the bars as well as be prepared to produce good quality fieldnotes.

Next, field staff conducted semi-structured interviews with bar staff, owners, and patrons in order to contextualize observational findings and understand reactions to the smoke-free workplace ordinance. In Irish bars, a total of five bartenders, four bar owner/managers, and eight patrons were recruited at the bars by the field interviewers. Six of these interviews were conducted for Study 1 and eleven for Study 2. In order to be eligible for an interview, bar staff and owners needed to have worked in or owned the location for at least one year, and patrons needed to be frequent visitors to the bar for a period of at least one year. Most patrons were referred for interviews by bartenders who could vouch for their status as a regular or at least

¹All bar names are pseudonyms.

as a familiar and frequent visitor. Bar owners proved difficult to recruit, and Irish bar owners particularly so, partly perhaps due to their reticence to speak about illegal behaviors occurring within their establishments but also because many owners resided in Ireland.

Interviewers used a semi-structured protocol guided the interviews, and were trained in interviewing techniques such as probes to help uncover unexpected themes. Interview domains included the history of the bar and particularly of smoking in the bar; knowledge, perceptions, and attitudes about the smokefree ordinance and smoking in general; the implementation and enforcement history of this law in the bar; and suggestions for improving smokefree policy formulation and implementation. Staff also conducted interviews with officials in charge of enforcement of the smokefree law. All interviews were confidential and digitally recorded for later transcription. The Institutional Review Board at the Pacific Institute for Research and Evaluation approved all protocols and procedures for the protection of human subjects.

Observational fieldnotes and interview transcripts were uploaded to ATLAS.ti (Muhr, 2003), a qualitative data software package, for data management and thematic coding. Both *a priori* codes—informed by existing literature on bar smoking, the research questions, and our previous research—as well as inductive codes—developed from early identification of emergent themes—were used to ensure a grounded approach to analysis.

Findings

Smoking in Irish Bars

Initially after the smokefree workplace law extended to bars in January 1998 the majority of Irish bars in San Francisco continued to allow smoking in their establishments. In Study 1, field staff observed “endemic” smoking—that is, most patrons smoking most of the time²—in all of the Irish bars in the sample. Smoking was observed in 89% of all observations conducted in these bars. However, during Study 2 smoking was observed in only 57% of observations in the same bars. During interviews conducted immediately following this second round of observations, respondents attributed less smoking in bars with recent increases in enforcement. The city district attorney had pressed a series of lawsuits against bars considered to be most flagrantly in violation of the smokefree ordinance, and several of these bars were Irish bars.

Themes from interviews conducted with Irish patrons, staff, and bartenders supported findings from field observations that revealed the pervasiveness of smoking inside Irish bars. When asked about the smoking ban in Irish—bars more than four years after the ban took effect—one patron asserted, “Oh yeah, all the Irish bars allow smoking.” Another patron described the reaction of his neighborhood bar to the smokefree ordinance by explaining “when the law was first brought in, it was like blatantly disregarded here, I mean there was just flagrant disregard for the whole law.” A narrative from a bar observer—written more than five years after the ban took effect—offers a description of the typical scene in the Irish bars during this time:

This place is a small, primarily working-class, Irish-neighborhood pub, and is smoky when we enter. The room is decorated with vintage Irish homeland and sport memorabilia. A mix of rock and roll and traditional Irish music blares from the jukebox while a soccer game (muted) is playing on TVs situated throughout the bar. The place is overwhelmingly male and Irish (accents abound). The bartender, a white female with a thick Irish accent, kept busy throughout our observation pouring pints

²In our studies we have described smoking in bars as “endemic” if most patrons were observed smoking most of the time; “no smoking” described situations where no indoor smoking at all was observed; and “incidental smoking” described conditions in between endemic smoking and no smoking; see Lee et al. (2003) for details on this typology.

to the seemingly endless number of parched customers. There is little ventilation in this establishment, and with the front door closed, the smoke piles up and hangs in the air. From the likes of the filled ashtrays, the smoking didn't just start late at night. I spot five packs of cigarettes gracing the bar counter. At a rear booth where we sit, there are two informal ashtrays fashioned out of cocktail coasters. Both are filled to the brim with cigarette butts. There are butts all over the floor as well. At any given time, there are probably five to eight people smoking, and I'm convinced that more than half the bar patrons smoke at one time or another. Even though the bartender does not smoke, she lets the bar patrons smoke right in front of her.

In explaining why smoking persisted in Irish bars, Irish bar owners cited the cultural norm of smoking and drinking in pubs, espousing the view that smoking and drinking were so complementary that they were a "natural fit." Such a position was often supported by stories of the respondents' home country and what they described as characteristic of pub life in Ireland. Respondents frequently commented on this connection. In describing pubs in Ireland, one bar owner put it succinctly: "A pub's always been a place where you go to have a smoke and a drink." These descriptions hearkened back to an earlier time, because they failed to mention Ireland's 2004 Public Health Act banning tobacco smoking from pubs in their country of origin (Goodman, Agnew, McCaffrey, Paul, & Clancy, 2007; McCaffrey, Goodman, Kelleher, & Clancy, 2006).

Several rationales for continued indoor smoking in Irish bars were common to all bars in our studies, regardless of patron type. These rationales include a libertarian attitude which identified the law as an infringement on individual rights; a perception that enforcement of the law was weak or nonexistent; and a fear of loss of business profits. These last two issues were perhaps magnified for Irish bar owners and staff due to the nature of the Irish bar community in the city.

A Tight-knit Community: Implications for Enforcement

There was wide agreement among the respondents concerning the close relations of the Irish within the city. As we have noted in many bars in our studies, the community associated with one's neighborhood bar was often viewed as an extended family, exemplified in particular by "family" gatherings for special occasions such as birthdays, weddings, and funerals. This was even more so the case for Irish migrants in San Francisco. The neighborhood pub was often the first place a new arrival to the city would go to acclimate to his or her new surroundings, and more importantly, find a job and make contacts. One bartender described this phenomenon:

That's what we do. Everybody meets in the Irish bar. If you need a job, go to an Irish bar, talk to the other Irish people, and we all help each other out. It's just a community, so everybody looks out for each other. If you're Irish, everybody helps you out.

Both bar staff and patrons alike noted how relations between the Irish bars were close. As one patron stated, "Everybody knows everybody." Respondents spoke of attending celebratory events at other Irish bars in order to show their solidarity within the community. Bartenders and other bar staff spoke of getting together with those from other Irish pubs to socialize. Relations remained close partly because bartenders and staff frequented other bars around the city. A bartender suggested how this worked:

Yeah, 'cause you know they [bartenders] work in another Irish bar, and you talk to them, you ask them how things are at their bar, and usually bartenders are very generous towards other bartenders in leaving tips, so you become friends with them. And you sorta return the favor whenever you go there, so you get to know them fairly well.

These close relations had implications on enforcement of the smokefree workplace ban. The Irish bar community worked together to stave off many of the health and enforcement officials' "surprise" inspections and further lowered the odds of the Irish bars getting cited by health inspectors. Bar personnel noted that when targeted enforcement occurred, or if another bar got "popped," meaning cited, a phone tree was in place to warn other Irish bars of possible upcoming inspections. As one bartender commented,

Yeah, it's kinda linked through other bartenders working in the Irish bars as well, and they'd let us know what's goin' on, y'know? So it's kinda all internetted together like. If something happens, we all know what's happening.

When asked how long it took to get information from other Irish bars, one bartender replied, "Minutes." Other barstaff commented on this communication network, suggesting that the network created a system in which bars would "lay low" for a while, as one bartender stated, until enforcement subsided.

Level Playing Field and Irish Bars

The theme of the "level playing" field has emerged in all of our studies as a rationale for why management in some bars decided not to uphold the law. Likewise, the notion that bars would face negative economic repercussions due to the smokefree ordinance prevailed through the hospitality industry immediately after the passage of AB 13 (Glantz & Balbach, 2000). While many studies have rebuked this notion (Glantz & Smith, 1994; Glantz & Smith, 1997; Hyland et al., 1999; Scollo, Lal, Hyland, & Glantz, 2003), a fear of lost business profits was prevalent within the Irish bar community. According to most respondents, this fear was the major reason why bar owners allowed their patrons to smoke. Bar staff from bars we identified as smoky claimed that their owners wanted to enforce the ban, but "couldn't afford to." One bar owner explained that he had attempted to enforce the law soon after it took effect but quickly relented because he lost business and "people [were] pissed off." He added that some of his regulars simply got up and left, and he knew if he continued to enforce the ban he would lose even more customers. Similarly, other bar personnel stated that the owners were forced to let people smoke or else face drastic economic consequences because their patrons could choose to frequent another bar that continued to permit smoking inside. "[The owner] tried in the beginning, but nobody [other bars] was listening. I mean that's when not a lot of pubs were listening."

The interconnectedness within the Irish bar community was tied to the concern for loss of business. While patrons had loyalty to their favorite neighborhood pub, many expressed as great a devotion to their fellow patrons, their friends. As one patron stated:

Because the Irish community in San Francisco is so tightly knit, if you throw one person out, you could possibly lose 30 customers, 40 customers, maybe, 'cause you go where your friends are. So they're not gonna throw you out for smoking.

Bar personnel were cognizant of the potential to lose smoking and non-smokers alike based on the tight relations between many of the Irish patrons. For instance, when asked what would happen if his bar were to adhere to the ban, one bartender suggested "They'll [customers] just go down the road." A bartender described this fear of loss of business as a reason the bar's owner did not support bartenders upholding the law:

The reason he ignored the law at the beginning was because he was gonna lose a lot of custom [patronage], and so he'd be getting fines here and there but he'd just absorb them, just to keep the customers here... he didn't want to be the first of the Irish bars in the area to ban smoking.

According to bar personnel, the fines imposed by city officials were viewed as an operating expense for bar owners who preferred to let their customers smoke and pay the fines rather than enforce the ban and lose potential customers.

Changing Perceptions of the Smoke-free Law

Although many respondents believed that there was “no way that Irish bars are ever gonna stop smoking,” perceptions began to change as enforcement efforts intensified. Several bar respondents indicated that a handful of the Irish bar owners decided—almost simultaneously—to prohibit smoking. Much of this could be attributed to of the city attorney’s lawsuits as well as a public shaming campaign by the Tobacco Free Project³ aimed against a handful of the city’s Irish bars where indoor smoking had been reported. The lawsuits garnered wide media attention, and invariably sent a powerful message to bar owners that non-compliance was unacceptable and could mean future expensive lawsuits for other bars.

Word of the stepped-up enforcement efforts spread quickly throughout the Irish bar community. While the network of Irish bars had worked as a tool for resistance in the initial stages of the smoking ban, it became an effective mechanism by which the news of more firm and consistent enforcement spread. The litigation and pressing tactics of the tobacco coalitions compelled several bar owners to uphold the ban in their own establishments.

For those bars that decided to prohibit smoking, the decision and subsequent change within the businesses was swift, according to respondents. As one manager said, “Yeah [the owner] just told us all, ‘that’s it.’” Other respondents noted a similar change in compliance that occurred seemingly overnight. As one bartender described:

Gradually one by one [the Irish bars] were all starting it, ‘cause they were getting fined, and [afraid of being] shut down. So [the owner] didn’t want that, so he said ‘it’s serious now, we have to stop.’ So everyone stopped.

Several of the respondents from newly smoke-free bars spoke about the initial loss of their smoking customers. Yet, the loss of customers was much less dramatic than originally expected. Because self-policing of the ban among a handful of Irish bars occurred rather quickly, it ultimately leveled the playing field. Patrons had little choice but to endure the smoke-free bar policies since the majority of the Irish bars that previously allowed smoking became smoke-free. As one bartender described:

Like you’re gonna hear people [patrons] givin’ out, and they say, ‘okay, we’ll go somewhere else where we can smoke.’ But they don’t, because everyone else cut off the smokin’ too, so what do you do? So they all came back.

Due to adherence and self-policing among the majority of the Irish bars, many personnel perceived the ban to have a positive effect on business. In fact, several bar owners and bartenders we interviewed were surprised that they didn’t experience much of the anticipated negative economic effects they had expected from the ban. Bar staff indicated that their regular patrons remained, and many of those who initially exited to other bars that allowed smoking ultimately returned. Furthermore, bar staff and owners found that new non-smoking customers began patronizing their bars once they uphold the ban. As one manager explained: “We definitely get a crowd, more people coming in now because of the fact that we don’t allow smoking—a different crowd.”

The transformation of some Irish bars from smoking to non-smoking also transpired more smoothly than initially anticipated. One patron acknowledged that he was a bit skeptical that

³The Tobacco-Free Project is a branch of the San Francisco Department of Public Health.

the ban could ever be enforced, but found that “when it came down to it at the end, [the bar] said here, ‘okay there’s no more smoking.’ So the bartenders started to go outside to smoke, and people saw that, they really didn’t have a leg to stand on, y’know.” Similarly, a bartender explained:

Eventually, once they [the owners] kind of made a decision and they [patrons] saw that there wasn’t anywhere that they could go and smoke, basically a lot of the bars started to put benches outside, or they’d have particular smoking rooms that actually face onto the street. And I think when people realized that just, it wasn’t gonna happen, and that if somebody did start to light up, they were gonna be the pariah, rather than y’know, any great champions of freedom or whatever. So yeah, I think it was easy enough, when it did happen.

What was striking to respondents interviewed for this study was how the law—once enforced—brought about such a significant change in normative bar behavior and perceptions. Several bar staff indicated how their respective bars had been in a constant “haze of smoke” prior to enforcing the ban. In contrast the smoke-free environment was, as one patron put it, “a breath of fresh air.” This norm change, while not specific to the Irish bars (Lee et al, 2003; Moore et al., 2006) was nevertheless striking given the deep associations with smoking in bars which many Irish bar patrons and staff has earlier expressed.

Conclusion

Close-knit bar communities can either hinder or support the enforcement of policies such as AB 13. In the case of Irish bars, deeply-engrained cultural traditions of bar-going and bar smoking played a role in the community’s initial resistance to the law. However, targeted enforcement by the health department and the city attorney’s office contributed to a decrease in smoking within the Irish bar community as observed during our second study. Interviews revealed that the driving force keeping bar owners from enforcing the ban was their fear of losing business to competitors who would continue to allow patrons to smoke inside. Initially, respondents couldn’t imagine Irish bars enforcing the ban because of the pervasiveness of indoor smoking within the Irish bar community. The predicted negative economic impact did not materialize, however, and some bars reported a positive effect on business.

Moreover, the smokefree ordinance has contributed to changes in normative beliefs and behavior regarding smoking in bars. These changes indicate that a smoke-free policy is effective for not only reducing harmful exposure to secondhand smoke but also altering notions about smoking, smoking behavior, and smoking contexts which had been considered traditional aspects of Irish bar culture.

The case of the Irish bars in San Francisco draws attention to some of the issues involved in implementing a smoke-free workplace ban in bars and taverns. It also highlights the potential synergy between public health policies abroad and at home. In 2004 smoking was banned in all bars and pubs in Ireland. While, as in our San Francisco study, many observers were skeptical that smoking could ever be eradicated in Irish pubs, subsequent evaluations have indicated that the law has been highly successful (McCaffrey et al., 2006; Goodman et al., 2007). Since this law took effect at approximately the same time we were collecting data, it is difficult to assess its role in reduced smoking in Irish bars outside of the home country, including among San Francisco’s Irish bars. The efficacy of Ireland’s smokefree pub law serves, however, to underline the ability of cultural groups to adapt to changing social conditions entailed with public health policies such as those entailed by smokefree bar laws.

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