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**Using Emancipatory Transformative Learning to Address Smoking Behavior  
in the LGBT Community: A Quantitative Study  
[Empirical Research Paper]**

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**Keywords: LGBT, tobacco, sexual orientation, Transformative, Emancipatory**

**Abstract**

This study sought to understand the disproportionately higher smoking rates among LGBT individuals. Additionally, this study sought to aid participants to make meaning of the social and environmental factors that motivate them to smoke. We employ emancipatory and transformative learning theory as a tool to raise awareness among participants and to understand survey findings among this population in one metro area. The findings indicate that the LGBT participants in this study did not rank tobacco use as one of the top three health issues facing the LGBT community. However, half (50.1%) agreed that there is too little emphasis on smoking as a health issue.

**Introduction**

Data on the prevalence of cigarette smoking among lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) populations in the United States is limited, but suggest that smoking rates among LGBT populations are much higher than those of the general population. It is estimated that nationally smoking rates among LGBT youth ranged from 38% to 59%, compared to a prevalence rate among the total youth population ranging from 28% to 35%. Some studies even show the smoking rates for LGBT youth to be much higher (Rosario & Schrimshaw, 2010). Adult LGBT smoking rates ranged as high as 50% according to some studies, compared to 28% among the general population of adults (Ryan, Wortley, Easton, Pederson, & Greenwood, 2001). The research literature reveals that the tobacco industry targets the LGBT community while holding lesbians and gays in contempt (Washington, 2002). These high smoking rates directly impact the health of LGBT individuals by contributing to the development of chronic diseases such as lung cancer, oral cancer, and chronic obstructive lung disease.

The city of Atlanta has the third highest proportion of LGBT residents in the United States, and is comprised of many diverse sub-communities (The National Association of LGBT Community Centers Tobacco Control Program, 2011). However, there are no data on smoking rates and tobacco use among LGBT metro Atlantans. The quantitative data presented here resulted from a larger study whose purpose was to assess the needs of the LGBT community related to reducing smoking initiation, assessing daily smoking habits, reducing exposure to secondhand smoke, and promoting long-term smoking and tobacco cessation among LGBT metro Atlantans. Thus, the objective of this study was to promote transformative and

emancipatory learning among the participants about the prevalence of smoking in the LGBT community and its negative health consequences.

The literature in adult education has rarely addressed how and why LGBT individuals learn to smoke in such large numbers. The high rates of tobacco use should make LGBT populations a priority for smoking cessation programs and funding opportunities, but this has not happened historically. This research project has worked to counter industry efforts by showing the LGBT community how tobacco companies strategically market to them while giving little consideration to their health and wellbeing.

An in depth understanding of higher smoking rates will require the same levels of extensive research and attention to LGBT populations as have been devoted to other populations. Given the alarmingly high rates of smoking in the LGBT community, we propose starting by examining how emancipatory transformative learning can help LGBT individuals become liberated and take action to change smoking behavior and attitudes.

### **Defining Emancipatory Transformative Learning**

Transformative learning (TL) as it applies to the field of Adult Education has to do with how individuals make meaning of their lives, life events and life changes (Taylor, 2008; Johnson-Bailey, 2006; Dirkx, 1997). Although an exhaustive exploration of Transformative Learning (TL) is beyond the scope of this research, there are a couple of interesting concepts in this learning model that are relevant to this study. One such concept is critical reflection. According to Mezirow (2000), one goal of adult education should be to help learners critically reflect on and effectively act on their beliefs, interpretations, values, feelings, and ways of thinking. TL has within its framework a potential for the adult learner to become liberated from self-limiting patterns that inhibit growth and development. In other words, it provides a potential for the learner to become emancipated and liberated. The question then becomes: what does this mean to the adult learner or academician? Mezirow (2000) further describes an emancipated person as:

*Free from unwarranted control of undesirable beliefs, unsupportable attitudes, and paucity of abilities, which can prevent one from taking charge of one's life? He further explains that, fostering these liberating conditions from making more autonomous and informed choices and developing a sense of self-empowerment is the cardinal goal of adult education. (p. 26).*

This then puts adult educators in a direct path to help facilitate empowering LGBT individuals to become active in protecting their health.

Freire (1970) presupposed that learning should empower the oppressed and the marginalized by challenging the forces of oppression, thereby taking the sole responsibility for emancipation off the backs of the oppressed individual. This puts the LGBT community in a position to challenge and advocate against tobacco companies and bar owners who put profit ahead of the health of the LGBT community. Other scholars expand on this thesis and note that learning is recognized as more than the accumulation of cognitive structures, but defined as a function of the transformative roles, responsibilities, and identities that happen as people participate in and become experienced members of a community of learners (Rogoff, 1990). In

other words, issues such as oppression and homophobia should become a central part of the discourse; thus, learning is seen as both social and psychological

According to Hart (1990), Emancipatory education's primary goal is to question and critique social norms. He further posits that norms have the power to govern socially accepted behavior. This applies to this study in that participants considered smoking a social norm in many gay social circles, especially bars and restaurants. This is primarily due to the fact that bars are one of the only sanctioned social gathering places for LGBT individuals in the United States. Participants in this research are beginning to question these social norms in light of the many diseases caused by second hand smoke. Additionally, other scholars such as Tisdell (1993) note that people can become empowered to liberate themselves by challenging the power structure, by finding different ways of achieving their needs. Tobacco companies present a formidable influence in the gay community during events such as local pride celebrations and other social gatherings. With the goal of consciousness raising as espoused by Freire (1970) and Mezirow and others (1991), the authors designed a study with the intent to foster a perspective transformation among participants in an effort to address smoking behavior and encourage participants to adopt healthier lifestyles

### **Methods**

In this study, we utilize emancipatory transformative learning as a tool to foster change in smoking behavior. Several contemporary adult education scholars have examined the topic of emancipatory learning. Specifically, we employed the work proposed by Freire (1970) and Mezirow (1991). Several themes resonate across their work that is consistent with the design of this study. Their work posits that learning can be an emancipatory process that encourages one to become free of self-defeating attitudes and behaviors, and replace them with more positive and reaffirming behaviors.

In March 2010, The Atlanta Lesbian Health Initiative (ALHI) was contracted by the DeKalb County (Georgia) Board of Health to conduct a community needs assessment to better understand tobacco use by LGBT metro Atlantans. The primary objective of this research project was to assess the needs of the LGBT community related to reducing smoking initiation, assessing daily smoking habits, reducing exposure to secondhand smoke, and promoting long-term smoking and tobacco cessation among LGBT metro Atlantans. Additionally, this needs assessment was conducted to help inform the development and implementation of future LGBT-focused tobacco control efforts in the state of Georgia. Research questions that guided this study include:

1. What are the primary factors that lead to high smoking rates in LGBT Atlantans?
2. What are the specific cessation needs of the LGBT community in Atlanta?
3. What are the specific needs of the LGBT community related to environmental smoke?
4. What are the learned behaviors of LGBT metro-Atlantans related to smoking initiation and cessation?

Surveys were administered to 685 individuals at six local events and organizations to determine respondent's knowledge of the importance of smoking as a health issue in the LGBT community and health behaviors such as smoking, exercise habits and body mass index.

Surveys were administered at several venues in an effort to gather information from a large number of LGBT individuals in the metro Atlanta area. The survey instrument was

developed and triangulated by members of a Research Advisory Board. Surveys were administered at six events in the metro Atlanta area: 1) Atlanta Gay Pride; 2) East Point Possums (drag show/fundraising event); 3) Southern Comfort Conference (transgender event); 4) a Ryan White meeting (Ryan White services assist people with HIV/AIDS); 5) a recovery group; and 6) Atlanta Black Gay Pride. Surveys were self-administered among persons ages 18 and older.

## Findings

### *Responses to Health and Wellness Survey Questions*

Current tobacco use was reported by over one quarter (27.3%) of the participants. Two thirds (67.0%) reported exercising an average of at least 3 times per week (Table 3); however, body mass index, calculated from self-reported height and weight, was categorized as overweight for 44.8% and obese for 9.0%. When asked to select the top 3 health issues for the LGBT community, of the 12 issues listed, tobacco was ranked 8th. HIV/AIDS, alcohol abuse/addiction, and sexually transmitted diseases were the top 3 choices. Half (50.1%) agreed that there is too little emphasis on smoking as a health issue in the LGBT community.

**Table 3 – Exercise Habits**

*How many times per week on average do you exercise?*

	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
0	46	6.7
1-2	141	20.6
3-4	244	35.6
5 or more	215	31.4

### *Opinions and knowledge*

A series of questions assessed participants' opinions and knowledge related to smoking and tobacco use. Over two thirds (70.9%) indicated that smoking is not allowed inside their home (Table 6). Almost half of those surveyed said that smoking indoors at the workplace and in restaurants and bars should not be allowed at all (49.0% each), and over one third (35.2%) agreed that pride celebrations should be smoke free events. Only 13.2% were aware of any tobacco prevention or cessation services tailored to the LGBT community and only about one third (32.1%) knew that LGBT people smoke more than the general population.

**Table 6 – Smoking at Home**

*What are the rules about smoking inside your home?*

	<b>Number</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Smoking is allowed anywhere	55	8.0
Allowed at some times or in some places	100	14.6
No one is allowed to smoke anywhere	486	70.9

### ***Summary of Survey Findings***

Survey respondents had high levels of education. Over one quarter were current smokers, and despite the majority reporting regular weekly exercise, over half were overweight or obese. Tobacco ranked 8th out of 12 top priority health issues for the LGBT community among those surveyed. The vast majority did not allow smoking inside their homes, almost half indicated that smoking should not be allowed at all in workplaces or bars and restaurants, and over one third did not think smoking should be permitted at pride events.

Respondents did not think the tobacco industry has been a friend to the LGBT community, but few disagreed that there is nothing wrong with LGBT organizations, bars or nightclubs accepting tobacco money.

Survey respondents subsequently participated in focus groups conducted by two researchers. During these focus groups participants were asked several questions all designed to raise their awareness regarding the prevalence of smoking in the LGBT community as well as to gain a greater insight into the behaviors, attitudes and opinions of the participants. These sessions were robust, interactive and designed to foster critical reflection on smoking behavior in the LGBT community. Critical reflection involves a critique of the presuppositions on which beliefs have been built. According to Mezirow (2000) such critical reflection enables learners to correct distortions in their beliefs. Additionally, participants from the focus groups as well as other LGBT community members galvanized to discuss ways the LGBT community can organize to integrate findings from this study into policies and practices and implement a plan to move forward. Participants included 30 representatives from organizations around the metro Atlanta area.

### **Implications for Adult Education**

These findings have significant implications for adult educators who are concerned about social justice. The LGBT community has historically been marginalized and relegated to the fringes of society. In the wake of a national campaign to educate all Americans about the dangers of tobacco use and smoking in particular, it is not a coincident that the LGBT community has been overlooked. Indeed, the data indicates that the Tobacco companies have targeted LGBT communities across the country.

This study was designed to engage the LGBT community in thought and reflection on the reality of smoking in their community. Such consciousness raising about smoking can bring about change. Raising awareness about the dangers of smoking and the disdain that cigarette manufacturers hold for LGBT people is critical to reducing the smoking rates in the LGBT community. While historically transformative and emancipatory learning have been thought of as techniques to foster learning and change in the adult education classroom, this study has utilized the technique to raise awareness and foster social change in the LGBT community. Hill (2007) affirms the oversight of LGBT issues in adult education literature. He notes that this is an ongoing problem for adult educators in keeping with our profession's purpose of promoting social justice. Transformative and emancipatory learning can be a powerful tool in advancing social justice. While there has been some positive action in the field in recent years through the inclusion of scholarship that has served to reveal the lived realities of lesbian and gay men and women in our society, this scholarship has not typically addressed the unique realities of LGBT individuals and the role of tobacco and second hand smoke in their lives.

This research study provides an example of how transformative and emancipatory

learning can be used in research design. It provides adult educators with some insight into the issues related to LGBT tobacco use, and as such provides adult educators with useful knowledge of how this population creates meaning for themselves in a world that oftentimes uses tools such as strategic-targeted marketing and pretense to promote unhealthy lifestyles in the LGBT community.

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