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This is [not] who I am : understanding identity in continued smoking and smoking cessation

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CHAPTER

5

IDENTITY PROCESSES IN SMOKERS WHO WANT TO QUIT SMOKING: A LONGITUDINAL INTERPRETATIVE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

The importance of identity in smoking cessation is increasingly becoming recognized by researchers. This study is the first in-depth longitudinal qualitative investigation of identity change processes among smokers who intend to quit. Ten smokers with a quit-intention were interviewed three times, approximately one month apart, and approached for follow-up two years later. Data from 30 in-depth interviews were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. Results showed two themes in relation to identity: 1) Identity change toward 'nonsmoker' makes it easier to quit, and 2) Identity conflict resolution via psychological and behavioral strategies when quitting is unsuccessful or not attempted. Identity change appeared to be facilitated by permeable identity boundaries, a continuous sense of self, and a sense of mastery of quitting. Transition toward a nonsmoker identity may be necessary for successful quitting. Future research investigating ways to help smokers to perceive themselves increasingly as nonsmokers appears indicated.

Keywords: smoking cessation, identity, identity change, psychological processes, interpretative phenomenological analysis.

Most smokers want to quit smoking, but many are unsuccessful in doing so. In the United States in 2010 69% of daily smokers were interested in quitting smoking. In 2012 43% of current smokers had unsuccessfully attempted to quit in the year before (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2014). Each year around 30% of Dutch smokers attempt to quit, but around 90% of them relapse within a year (Nationaal Expertisecentrum Tabaksontmoediging, 2015). Quitting smoking may be more difficult when this is not in line with how people perceive themselves. The role of identity has been identified as key for behaviour change in PRIME theory, which suggests that people are motivated to behave in correspondence with their identity (West, 2006). In line with this, quantitative research has shown that smokers who identify more strongly with quitting or nonsmoking are more likely to intend to quit, attempt to quit and stay abstinent, whereas smokers who identify more strongly with smoking are less likely to move away from smoking (Høie, Moan, & Rise, 2010; Meijer, Gebhardt, Dijkstra, Willemsen, & Van Laar, 2015; Meijer, Gebhardt, Van Laar, Kawous, & Beijl, 2016; Meijer, Van den Putte, et al., 2017; Moan & Rise, 2005, 2006; Tombor, Shahab, Brown, & West, 2013; Tombor, Shahab, Brown, Notley, & West, 2015). Furthermore, nonsmoker and quitter identities may be more important for smoking cessation than smoker identities (Meijer et al., 2015; Meijer, Gebhardt, Van Laar, Kawous, et al., 2016; Meijer, Van den Putte, et al., 2017). However, less work to date has investigated how identity may change during the process of quitting smoking.

Two longitudinal quantitative studies found that continuing smokers increasingly identified with smoking over time, whereas among ex-smokers identification with smoking decreased, and that motives for smoking, social norms and socio-economic status may play a role in shaping identity (Hertel & Mermelstein, 2016; Meijer, Van Laar, et al., 2017). Although these findings are valuable, quantitative studies provide only partial insight into the fine-grained psychological processes that enable identity to change. Qualitative methods allow for a more in-depth analysis of identity change processes and have been applied among ex-smokers to explore identity change in the processes of quitting smoking. Qualitative work with long-term ex-smokers shows that identity change may involve a continuous process of transition whereby nonsmoking increasingly becomes part of how they perceived themselves (Brown, 1996; Luck & Beagan, 2014; Vangeli & West, 2012). The findings of these studies suggest that change towards a nonsmoker identity may be enabled by continuous reaffirmation of the new identity of nonsmoker (Brown, 1996), a transitional quitting identity (Vangeli & West, 2012), and learning of new behaviors such as gardening that were not associated with smoking (Luck & Beagan, 2014). Vangeli and West (2012) highlight a fluidity of smoking-related identity following cessation. That is, while participants identified themselves using the self-label of 'nonsmoker', oscillation between a 'smoker' and 'nonsmoker' self was described in the accounts, with the 'nonsmoker' self gaining strength over time for most,

possibly with increasing mastery over the 'smoker' self. Importantly, another study found that some women who quit smoking during pregnancy returned to smoking because of a sense of 'nostalgia for the former self', suggesting that a lack of identity change may be a risk for relapse (Bottorff, Johnson, Irwin, & Ratner, 2000).

Notably, this cross-sectional qualitative work affords only retrospective exploration of identities and identity change processes that occur prior to the interview point several months or years after cessation. While this offers valuable insight into how ex-smokers make sense of their experiences and how this has changed over time, it does not allow direct exploration of the experience of identity during the processes of quitting. To our knowledge, the current study is the first longitudinal qualitative study to explore identity change processes among smokers who intend to quit. We investigated in-depth how smokers' sense of identity may change during the process of quitting, and what happens to their sense of identity if they are unable to quit successfully. Ten smokers who intended to quit within two months were interviewed in-depth using semi-structured interviews three times and approached for follow-up after two years. An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009) approach was taken to the data-collection and data-analysis. This analytic approach focuses on how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences, and is, therefore, very well suited to the exploration of identity change processes (Smith, 1999; Smith et al., 2009; Vangeli & West, 2012). The relatively small sample size is necessary to enable the idiographic focus of IPA and thus the development of insights that are contextually embedded (Smith et al., 2009).

METHOD

Participants

Ten daily smokers with an intention to quit smoking within two months were included (see Table 1 for participant characteristics). Five participants were recruited through an advertisement in a local newspaper, and five through the researchers' social networks. Two participants were superficially known to the first author before the study commenced, as they (had) worked at the same university. Participants were given pseudonyms.

Procedure

Participants were informed about the study and gave written consent. Participants were interviewed in-depth three times, approximately one month apart. The interviews took place in 2014 and 2015, at participants' home or at the University of the first author, according to participants' preferences. The first author conducted semi-structured

Table 1. Participant characteristics.

Name	Gender	Age (T1)	SES	Age daily smoking		Quit attempts		Smoking status (#cigarettes p/day)			Use of quit aids/ professional support during study
				Previous	During study	T1	T2	T3			
Iris	Female	25	Middle	2	1	Smoking (2)*	Abstinent (0)	Abstinent (0)	None		
Julia	Female	48	Higher	±5	1	Abstinent since 4 days; smoked 10	Abstinent (0)	Abstinent (0)	None		
Sophia	Female	69	Lower	2	1	Smoking (15)	Abstinent (0)	Abstinent (0), smoked 1 cig. since T2	Six-week group smoking cessation course		
Louis	Male	45	Lower	Many	1	Smoking (20)	Abstinent (0)	Abstinent (0)	Mobile phone quit app		
Karen	Female	54	Lower	Many	4 (1.5 – 4 days)	Smoking (8-10)	Smoking	Smoking (6)	E-health application (developed by professional addiction institute)		
Peter	Male	33	Higher	Many	2 periods of abstinence from regular cigarettes and e-cigarette (5-7 days when on holiday)	Smoking (10 + e-cigarette with nicotine)	Smoking (10 + e-cigarette with nicotine)	Smoking 10 (+ e-cigarette with nicotine)	None, does not perceive e-cigarette as quit aid		
Tom	Male	57	Lower	2	5 (<1 day)	Smoking (15-18 + e-cigarette with nicotine)	Smoking (10-15 + e-cigarette with nicotine)	Smoking (15 + e-cigarette with nicotine)	E-cigarette		
Chris	Male	24	Higher	3	0	Smoking (19)	Smoking (19)	Smoking	None		
Esther	Female	29	Higher	None	0	Smoking (23)	Smoking	Smoking (23)	Psychotherapy (general)		
Brigitte	Female	43	Higher	3	0	Smoking (16)	Smoking (16)	Smoking (18)	½-day group smoking cessation course		

Note. SES = Socio-economic status; previous quit attempts = serious quit attempts lasting >24 hours.

* Iris indicated that she smoked 4-10 cigarettes per day when she was included in the study, six days before T1.

interviews that were developed to be open to participants' experiences and areas that were relevant to them. Important topics that arose were probed by the interviewer. If smoking-related identity was not raised spontaneously by participants then the interviewer asked about this toward the end of the interview to enable its exploration without shaping the rest of the interview. The questions about identity were 'What are your thoughts about smoking/nonsmoking/quitting? Does it fit with who you are?' and 'What are your thoughts about people who smoke/do not smoke/quit smoking?'. The initial interview lasted approximately one hour, and subsequent interviews lasted between approximately 45 and 60 minutes. Life lines with separate boxes for smoking, important events and social processes were used to help participants organize their narratives chronologically during the interview, and to make participants feel at ease (Wilson, Cunningham-Burley, Bancroft, Backett-Milburn, & Masters, 2007). The interviews were recorded with a voice recorder and transcribed verbatim. Participants received €50 for their participation. The procedure was approved by the Ethical Committee of Psychology of the first author's University. To explore whether the identity processes observed during the interviews related to identity perceptions and smoking cessation over a year later, participants were approached for a brief online follow-up questionnaire in October 2016. This questionnaire contained questions about smoking status, quit attempts and identity (i.e., 'How do you see yourself in relation to smoking?'; see Appendix).

Analysis

Data were analyzed using an IPA approach. IPA is grounded in phenomenology and is committed to understanding the participant's lived experience and meaning-making. A 'double hermeneutics' is used wherein the researcher interprets the participant's interpretations, thus privileging the participants' understandings but also recognizing the central role of the researcher in the interpretive process. Furthermore, IPA has an idiographic focus and aims for a detailed analysis of each case (Smith et al., 2009). Data were therefore analyzed on a case-by-case basis. Moreover, the longitudinal analysis was in accordance with the few longitudinal IPA studies that have been published to date (Smith, Spiers, Simpson, & Nicholls, 2016; Snelgrove, Edwards, & Lioffi, 2013; Spiers, Smith, & Drage, 2015). The steps taken in the analysis were as follows: First, the transcript of the first interview of a participant was read carefully. Second, initial notes were taken on a descriptive, linguistic and conceptual level. Third, emergent themes were developed that captured these initial notes. Fourth, the emergent themes for the first interview were grouped into superordinate themes, according to similarity of content or connections between emergent themes. We continuously checked that our interpretations were grounded in the data by rereading the transcripts, and listening to the audiotapes when necessary. This process was repeated for the second and third interview with the same participants. After completing the separate analysis of each of the

three interviews for one participant, we examined transitional themes over time in order to identify changes in a participant's sense of identity, as well as potential mechanisms of identity change, and processes that may facilitate or hinder identity change. We then moved on to the next participant. As a final step, the themes were compared across participants within a homogeneous subgroup with respect to smoking cessation (i.e., those who quit successfully, and those who did not quit successfully). The analysis continued in the writing-up process. The analysis was performed primarily by the first author, who kept a reflexive log throughout data collection and analysis. For six interviews, the first three steps of the analysis (i.e., reading, initial noting, emergent themes) were also performed by a second analyst, and emergent themes were discussed. Interpretations were regularly discussed with the second and third author to ensure that they were grounded in the data.

RESULTS

All participants intended to quit smoking within two months (see Table 1 for participant characteristics and smoking/quitting behavior over the course of the study). During the study, four participants quit successfully (Iris, Julia, Sophia and Louis), three participants attempted to quit but were unsuccessful (Karen, Peter and Tom), and three participants did not attempt to quit (Chris, Esther and Brigitte). Table 2 provides an overview of participants' identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and presents example quotes for each participant at each interview. Most participants related smoking and quitting to their self-concept, such that they perceived the behavior of smoking (or quitting) as conflicting or matching with other identities (e.g., as a father) and self-perceptions (e.g., as recalcitrant) that they held that were not directly smoking-related (see Table 2). For example, Esther (T1, smoker) perceived smoking as conflicting with her professional role: 'Actually it [smoking] does not fit with me at all... And, and my job, and, and... Things that I find important'.

The analysis found two themes in relation to identity: 1) Identity change toward 'nonsmoker' makes it easier to quit, and 2) Identity conflict resolution with psychological and behavioral strategies when quitting is unsuccessful or not attempted. The identity dynamics observed are described in more detail below.

1. Identity change toward 'nonsmoker' makes it easier to quit

Four participants (Iris, Julia, Sophia and Louis) quit smoking successfully and did not relapse during the course of the study. While Sophia and Louis retained a stable smoker identity across their interviews and struggled to adjust to the absence of smoking, Iris and Julia accommodated nonsmoking into their lives with relative ease. Adjustment to

Table 2. Overview of identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and other identities held by participants.

Name	Example quotes regarding identity		Other identities or self-perceptions (matching or conflicting with smoking)
	T2	T3	
Iris	<p><i>Not a smoker:</i> "Actually I don't [see myself as a smoker] (...) It sounds so strange, some people say oh, do you smoke? I say yes... They say oh, I didn't expect that from you. So that is, that is stupid. (...) I'd say, you're right, that's what I think."</p>	<p><i>Ex-smoker in rehab:</i> "I see myself as] Ex-smoker, yeah. (...) Now I'm in the rehab phase."</p>	<p><i>Ex-smoker:</i> [Interviewer: Can you tell me how you see yourself now?] "Err... person that entered a new period (T1); person that entered a new period (T3)</p> <p><i>Interviewer:</i> And do you feel like a nonsmoker now or an ex-smoker? I think an ex-smoker. Because it's in the past. A nonsmoker is that you've never smoked. And maybe in a couple of years, that's possible. But now you've just entered that next phase, of course I've just, just left it behind me."</p>
Julia	<p><i>Smoking nonsmoker:</i> "Maybe I see myself] more as a nonsmoker who smokes [laughs]. Can you say such a thing?"</p>	<p><i>Detoxed smoker:</i> "If you've been smoking, you'll always sort of ... err stay a detoxed smoker. [Interviewer: Do you feel like a detoxed smoker?] Yes! I do (...) I'm very happy with it."</p> <p>"[I am] Eighty per cent nonsmoker, I think."</p>	<p>No other identities/self-perceptions mentioned</p>
Sophia	<p><i>Anti-smoker who smokes:</i> "I've got ten reasons [to quit] because I am such an anti-smoker, who is smoking. So that doesn't make sense."</p>	<p><i>Smoker who does not smoke:</i> "I'm still an err, I'm still a smoker who does not smoke. Yes. And I might stay that for the rest of my life."</p>	<p><i>Conflicts:</i> Mother (T1, T2); autonomous woman (T1); someone who is in-control (T1, T2, T3); assertive (T2, T3); independent (T3); decisive (T3); socially engaged (T2); environmentally aware (T2)</p>

Table 2. Overview of identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and other identities held by participants. (continued)

Example quotes regarding identity			Other identities or self-perceptions (matching or conflicting with smoking)	
Name	T1	T2	T3	
Louis	<i>Real smoker:</i> "I find myself a real, I find myself a real smoker yes. Yes. Yes. Can't, I don't really know why though, but err, yes. (...) I think it really fits with me, yeah. But I think that's also because I've been smoking for 30 years of course. So it's been quite a while."	<i>Smoker who does not smoke:</i> "I can't say, yeah, I can't err, I can't say, for myself, that I am a nonsmoker or something now, that I have quit smoking. That, that, I absolutely don't see it that way. I still think I am a smoker... who maybe doesn't smoke now."	<i>Smoker who does not smoke:</i> "I talked to someone and he said, I am an, I'm just a smoker who does not smoke for a while. Well, that's my idea too, that's how I feel. That, that fits with me, a little. So I am a smoker, or I feel like a smoker, but I'm just not smoking for a while."	No other identities/self-perceptions mentioned
Karen	<i>Not a smoker:</i> "Whether smoking fits with me, no. I don't see a monkey err... smoke. I don't see dogs walking around with a cigarette butt. So it doesn't fit at all. You sometimes try to compare it, like that. Do you see that cat smoking, you know [laughs]?" <i>Addict:</i> "[After quitting] You're no longer that addict who err runs to the petrol station to get a pack of cigarettes."	<i>Not a smoker:</i> "It [smoking] doesn't fit at all! No. Not at all, no. And it's not to save my face, it is... why... it's just to admit to err, a err, a nicotine addiction, actually. I'm so ashamed." "The feeling of exasperation a- about yourself, and disappointment, it becomes so strong that you think aaaaah, that makes you feel so [emphasized 'so'] cranky. Woman, why are you doing that?"	<i>Prospective quitter:</i> "I see, I see myself as an err a prospective quitter. Hmm, yes, yes. I don't want to belong with the smokers anymore, no, no."	<i>Conflicts:</i> Enterprising (T1); mother/example for daughter (T1)

Table 2. Overview of identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and other identities held by participants. (continued)

Name	Example quotes regarding identity			Other identities or self-perceptions (matching or conflicting with smoking)
	T1	T2	T3	
Peter	<p><i>Denial:</i> "I don't think that it fits with someone, yes or no, when you're talking about smoking. So, you either do it or you don't. Does it fit with you? No idea."</p>	<p><i>Denial:</i> "I am who I am, the moment I am smoking I am someone who is smoking, the moment I don't I'm not. At the moment that I, now, that I think about that I shouldn't do it I am someone who is quitting smoking. And then after that, when I'm smoking a cigarette again, I am someone who smokes. It's not something that interests me."</p>	<p><i>Not a smoker:</i> "Maybe things have fallen into place. Deep down I know that I'm not a smoker, really. I've always know that. I know that I have to quit smoking, that I want to again, I, that I just want, want to do sports normally and err, want to look and want to feel healthy and fit. I've always know that."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> Obstinate (T1); someone who goes for it 'full power' (T1); someone who wants to be different from others (T2); someone who goes his own way (T3)</p> <p><i>Conflicts:</i> Father (T3); risk avoider (T2)</p>
Tom	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "[Interviewer: Does smoking fit with you?] Yes. That's also what other people say. They also say, it [smoking] really belongs with you. They see me with a butt, they say Tom, it really fits with you. Yes. It fits with me, yes. Yes, yes, yes."</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> [Talks about smoking after a brief period of abstinence] "Yes, then you're back. You're just normal again".</p>	<p><i>Human being who smokes:</i> "I see myself as a human being who smokes."</p> <p>"And you think do you see yourself as a smoker, no, I just see myself as a human being."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> Recalcitrant (T1, T2); tough guy (T1, T2); risk taker (T1); all-or-nothing person (vulnerability to addiction) (T2); young (smoking shared activity with wife associated with being young) (T1, T3); not determined* (T1)</p> <p><i>Conflicts:</i> Health freak (T3)</p>

Table 2. Overview of identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and other identities held by participants. (continued)

Example quotes regarding identity		Other identities or self-perceptions (matching or conflicting with smoking)		
Name	T1	T2	T3	
Chris	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It [smoking] is such a palette of things that it's associated with in your life, that it becomes very interwoven or something like that, that's how I see it now. That's very strange, that, you really grow together with it or something."</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It [smoking] does not have to, it does not have to fit. So it's not, it's not really an image that I like. (...) Sometimes I see myself smoking, from the third person and I think well, ok, it fits, yeah, but it's also strange to see yourself, then. (...) You notice that it has really melted together with who you are, so it's all very logical that you do that [smoking], nothing strange about that, and it's very usual, and then I think oh! Pffff, it would be relaxed if that [being a smoker] wouldn't be the case anymore."</p>	<p><i>Smoker with SOS signal:</i> [Interviewer: How do you see yourself?] "[sighs] Well, still a complete smoker. Yes. But err, a smoker with a sort of err [laughs] SOS err signal. But that [SOS signal] is just for me."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> Someone who needs freedom and does not need rules* (T1, T2); thinker/philosopher* (T1, T2); impulsive* (T2); easy going* (T3); flexible* (T3); indifferent* (T3); inaccurate* (T3)</p> <p><i>Conflicts:</i> Partner (Chris feels that smoking complicates being an honest and sincere partner) (T1)</p>
	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It [smoking] is so intertwined, interwoven with all those aspects that you really, actually it is a sort of, if I may use a metaphor, err, a really tight large net that completely surrounds you"</p> <p><i>Not a smoker:</i> "I was smoking and I just looked at my cigarette, like, and I thought this really is not who I am [emphasized 'am'], this doesn't fit with me at all!"</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It's a confrontation with yourself, with a side of yourself [that smokes] (...) It is not nice to have to say, hey, I'm doing something [smoking], I don't want to do it, but if I quit I think I'll fail. It's not nice if you have to say that to yourself."</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "I can't, with, with, say well yeah, I am not a smoker, in essence, because I do smoke. And I think well, if I'm not [a smoker] in essence, I wouldn't be smoking now."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> All-or-nothing person* (T1); impulsive* (T1)</p> <p><i>Conflicts:</i> Professional identity (T1, T2); someone who does not walk away before finishing (T1)</p>
Esther	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It [smoking] is so intertwined, interwoven with all those aspects that you really, actually it is a sort of, if I may use a metaphor, err, a really tight large net that completely surrounds you"</p> <p><i>Not a smoker:</i> "I was smoking and I just looked at my cigarette, like, and I thought this really is not who I am [emphasized 'am'], this doesn't fit with me at all!"</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "It's a confrontation with yourself, with a side of yourself [that smokes] (...) It is not nice to have to say, hey, I'm doing something [smoking], I don't want to do it, but if I quit I think I'll fail. It's not nice if you have to say that to yourself."</p>	<p><i>Smoker:</i> "I can't, with, with, say well yeah, I am not a smoker, in essence, because I do smoke. And I think well, if I'm not [a smoker] in essence, I wouldn't be smoking now."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> All-or-nothing person* (T1); impulsive* (T1)</p> <p><i>Conflicts:</i> Professional identity (T1, T2); someone who does not walk away before finishing (T1)</p>

Table 2. Overview of identities in relation to smoking and quitting over time, and other identities held by participants. (continued)

Name	Example quotes regarding identity		Other identities or self-perceptions (matching or conflicting with smoking)
	T2	T3	
Brigitte	<p><i>Addict:</i> "I do, that I'm sensitive to addiction and there ... that's something of my identity. And that I thus err... make the choice to smoke all the time, but being a smoker is a behavior and so I don't see that as an identity."</p>	<p><i>Addict:</i> [Talks about own experience] "Well yeah, if you just say to a, whatever kind of addict... Err. It's over tomorrow, never again. Then you have, with whatever kind of addict, arousal levels will definitely increase (.) That's what you're an addict for."</p>	<p><i>Matches:</i> Demanding person* (T1); someone who needs relaxation (T1)</p>

*Participant indicated that this identity or self-perception complicated quitting.

Note. Identity labels (in italics) do not necessarily reflect smoking status, but reflect participants' self-perceptions (see Table 1 for smoking behavior at each time-point).

the absence of smoking appeared to be facilitated by a process of change in identity that integrated nonsmoking. This theme will first explore how the integration of nonsmoking into identity developed over time in the accounts of Julia and Iris, followed by three mechanisms that appeared to facilitate this change via the subthemes of 1) Permeable identity boundaries; 2) Identity continuity in the absence of smoking; and 3) Mastery of quitting. The contrasting experiences of Sophia and Louis will also be explored in relation to the theme and subthemes above.

Nonsmoking becomes a part of identity.

Iris and Julia quit successfully over the course of the study. They both showed a change in identity, such that over time nonsmoking became increasingly integrated in the way they perceived themselves (see Table 2). This change in identity made it easier for them to quit. At the first interview both described incongruence between their smoking and who they perceived themselves to be. For example, when Iris was asked how she perceived herself in relation to smoking in the first interview, she said that she did not perceive herself as a smoker, although she smoked. Aware of an irregularity in her declared ‘not a smoker’ identity Iris immediately noted that this “sounds very strange”, possibly revealing discomfort with the incongruence of her behavior with her identity. Similarly, Julia said that she saw herself as a “nonsmoker who smokes” and her discomfort with this became more explicit as she explained what this meant to her: “For me, it’s always been like, I do smoke, but I’m not okay with it”. These self-definitions showed a distancing away from identification with smoking and were confirmed by the surprise of others to learn of their smoking. For example, Julia explained:

I’ve heard that a lot, that people told me, like, because they never saw me smoke during the day, or the dentist, you know, they’d say well, that err [whispered] YOU? Are you serious? [continued in normal voice] That doesn’t fit at all, or, that can’t possibly be, you know. (Julia, T1)

However, although Iris and Julia did not identify with smoking, they also did not perceive themselves yet as nonsmokers. At the second interview Iris and Julia had been abstinent for the past 5 and 32 days, respectively, with Iris having had several other smoke-free periods since the first interview. Both described an identity that was associated with recovery from addiction: Iris identified as an ‘ex-smoker in the rehab phase’ and Julia as ‘a detoxed smoker’. These suggest a process of transition to restore oneself to a more positive condition (e.g., restoration to health or removal of a toxic substance). Julia already perceived herself as an ‘eighty percent nonsmoker’ (T2; see Table 2), such that the identities as detoxed smoker and nonsmoker co-existed.

The 'ex-smoker in rehab' identity was perceived as temporary by Iris, who believed that she could become a nonsmoker with time:

Interviewer: When would you say that you're a nonsmoker?

Iris: Well, I think, in at least five years.

Interviewer: What would you need for that?

Iris: Yes err, well, yeah, I could also feel like a nonsmoker in a year, but that's, we'll have to see. Now I'm still in the re-, re- err rehab phase. Could be a year, or in five years, but also in a couple of months, depends on how quickly it goes. (Iris, T2)

Although Iris was unsure about how much time she would need before she would become a nonsmoker, she perceived this to be transitional, in the 'ex-smoker in rehab' phase. Julia was a bit more doubtful whether she would move beyond her 'detoxed smoker' identity:

I think that once you've been smoking, you know, you always sort of... err stay a detoxed smoker. I guess, that you, yeah, maybe, I hope that it, or in a year, that you think well, I can't imagine that I ever smoked. That it's just out of your system (...) And it [abstinence] has just been a month, so it's not been that long [laughs]. (Julia, T2)

Whereas Julia believed that her (unchangeable) smoking history would 'always' define her as a detoxed smoker, at the same time she hoped that one day she would not even be able to picture herself smoking anymore. Her addition of 'it's not been that long' suggests that she might move beyond her 'detoxed smoker' identity in the future, a future that was relatively close ('in a year'). By the third interview, Iris and Julia (29 and 67 days abstinent, respectively) perceived themselves as ex-smokers. When Iris was asked how she saw herself now, she described herself as follows:

Iris: Err... [a] person that entered a new period, I think.

Interviewer: And do you feel like a nonsmoker now or an ex-smoker?

Iris: I think an ex-smoker. Because it's in the past. A nonsmoker is that you've never smoked. And maybe in a couple of years, that's possible. But now you've just entered that next phase, of course I've just, just left it behind me. (Iris, T3)

Thus, in the third interview, Iris identified herself as an 'ex-smoker' as she did in the second interview. However, instead of being in the 'rehab phase', she had now entered 'a new period' and 'next phase', and left 'it' behind her. Smoking was 'in the past': she successfully moved away from her past self as a smoker, and she marked this as a definitive change.

Similarly, Julia presented herself as an “ex-smoker nonsmoker” instead of a ‘detoxed smoker’ (Table 2), suggesting that she no longer perceived herself as a person in the process of recovery. To her, being an ex-smoker meant that she had smoked, and being a nonsmoker meant that she had moved away from smoking far enough, which she described as ‘smoking being out of your system’. Quitting was relatively easy for Iris and Julia, for example, in the third interview Julia said “It has been going very well, yes, very well. Little to no urge [to smoke]”.

The change observed in Iris’ and Julia’s identity involved a distancing away from a former smoker self, and increasing accommodation of nonsmoking in their self-perceptions. Unlike Iris and Julia, Sophia and Louis did not show a change in identity, and this lack of identity change appeared to make quitting more difficult for them. Even though they no longer smoked, they essentially remained smokers in the way they viewed themselves. They both continued to see themselves as a ‘smoker who does not smoke’ in the second and third interview (see Table 2).

Permeable identity boundaries enable identity change.

As shown above, Iris and Julia increasingly perceived themselves as nonsmokers over time, but Sophia and Louis did not. The identity change processes observed for Iris and Julia appeared to be enabled by a perception of fluid, permeable boundaries between smoking-related identities and behavior (e.g., smoking when ‘not a smoker’ and ‘smoking nonsmoker’).

As explored in the previous subtheme, Iris initially defined being a nonsmoker as having ‘never smoked’, such that becoming a nonsmoker was impossible for her. However, she immediately added that becoming a nonsmoker is possible with time, suggesting that for Iris the identity of nonsmoker did not have clear demarcated boundaries. In a similar way, Julia called herself an ‘ex-smoker/nonsmoker’ in the third interview, and suggested that “that can be the same, right?”. This indicates that Julia thought of the two identities as merged, which allowed her to identify with being a nonsmoker, despite her history as a smoker. As such, Iris and Julia did not think of being a smoker or nonsmoker as fixed identities with clear boundaries, but as dynamic identities with more fluid, or permeable, boundaries. This allowed them to navigate between the identities of smoker and nonsmoker, and to perceive themselves increasingly as people who no longer smoked and, eventually as nonsmokers.

In contrast, Sophia and Louis had stable perceptions of the identities as smoker and nonsmoker. They both highlighted their smoking history as a reason for seeing the self as a smoker:

Of course it [smoking] fits with me because it, just as long as I’ve been living consciously, you know [I smoked]. (Sophia, T3)

I think it [smoking] really fits with me, yeah. But I think that's also because I've been smoking for 30 years of course. So it's been quite a while. (Louis, T1)

The smoking history of Sophia and Louis was for them a stable factor in defining who they are, and the possibility of identity transition to nonsmoker unlikely or out-of-reach. This is observed for example when Sophia talked about what it would be like to be a nonsmoker in the second interview, she said:

Well, I hope there will be a time... I will only be a nonsmoker if it [smoking] no longer is a subject for me, so, that I for example just haven't thought about it for three days, and that I can just say no thanks, I don't smoke. Because I, I, I, I err, I don't have to tell anymore that I smoked in the past and that it was so difficult for me, that is... behind me. But now it's just, the most important issue for me, you know. (Sophia, T2)

Sophia appeared to expect that she could only become a nonsmoker in the far future ('a time') and whether this happened at all appeared to be driven by 'hope' rather than expectation. Her use of 'only' suggests that the requirements for becoming a nonsmoker are difficult to fulfill. These requirements are absolute (not thinking about smoking at all, being able to simply reject a cigarette) and very different from her current situation (thinking about smoking a lot, explaining that she just quit smoking when being offered a cigarette). This distinct and absolute nature of feelings and actions creates an impermeable boundary around the identity of nonsmoker, making transition from smoker impossible without renouncing smoking completely psychologically as well as behaviorally.

Identity change is facilitated by a sense of identity continuity.

In addition to fluidity between identity boundaries, a continued sense of self also appeared to facilitate identity change. Both Iris and Julia felt that quitting smoking allowed them to become the people that they essentially already perceived themselves to be when they were still smokers. In the second interview, Iris explained that "It [quitting] goes with it now. I still see the same person". As such, although her identity changed toward becoming a nonsmoker, she felt that at the core she had stayed the same person. The importance of a continued sense of self in the absence of smoking highlighted in the extract from Julia's account below:

I'm very happy with it [being a detoxed smoker]. So it's not as if I'm thinking ooooh my life is err... Like a friend of mine, life is not worth living, I've lost my best friend, and that that that, that's really what it's like for her... I err, what do I have, that, that she became depressed like, what's the point of my life. (...) Attributing it all to, err, well, if it has to be

like this, if my life has to be this way, well I'd rather continue smoking and then err, then, with all the risks attached. (Julia, T2)

Julia was 'very happy' with being a detoxed smoker, and contrasted her own experiences with those of a friend who clearly found it difficult to quit smoking. According to Julia, this friend felt like she had lost her 'best friend' (the cigarette), and lost her sense of meaning in life to the point of depression. Presenting the inconsolable loss experienced by a friend highlights Julia's perception that life without smoking carries an existential threat for some, an attribution that Julia perceived as unhealthy. The contrasting of her friend's existential crisis with her own positive experience of quitting suggests that Julia perceived identity continuity to be important.

Whereas Iris and Julia showed a continued sense of self, Sophia and Louis experienced a sense of disconnection, or loss of self, similar to that experienced by Julia's friend, when they quit smoking. In the second interview, when Sophia talks about the difficulty she had with quitting, she explains:

Sophia: I think well, Sophia, it's practically beneficial [to quit] and you just don't see it now err... [silence] but it doesn't feel that way, I, rationally, I'm convincing myself, but it doesn't feel that way.

Interviewer: Hmm. So how does it feel then?

Sophia: Well, the way I told you. Err, err... It's [smoking] a friend, you know, you are a p-, an err, in a way you're amp- amputated [silence].

Interviewer: Part of you is-

Sophia: Part of what my life was like, I mean, coffee, I didn't smoke much just like this, but, or an, and, but I err, never [had] a cup of coffee without a cigarette. And here I am with that... thing. (Sophia, T2)

In the extract above, Sophia had tried to convince herself that quitting was a good thing, but to no avail, and instead describes a sense of loss both in terms of the experience of pleasure (i.e. drinking coffee now reduced to an unremarkable 'thing') and to her sense of self that had become incomplete via amputation. While talking about this Sophia displayed signs of distress as she drummed her fingers frantically on the table. The comparison of smoking to a friend whose absence leads to a feeling of amputation invokes a sense of inconsolable bereavement, echoing the experience presented by Julia about her friend. At the end of the second interview when asked what smoking meant to her Sophia elaborates on this friendship: "Smoking is an err... a very dominant friend, err... that I find it very difficult to say goodbye to, but what's actually a err, a err bothering thing, or person". The extract above shows that Sophia perceives the absence of smoking to be more complex than simply missing a friend who provides safety and

familiarity, but rather paints a problematic relationship with smoking as the 'dominant friend' and Sophia as the submissive friend with limited agency to end it.

Sophia smoked one cigarette between the second and third interview. When she was asked what this was like, she explained:

Well, in the first place it makes you completely dizzy. Pffffff, yeah. [silence] Look, you've been doing something for fifty years, and you're not doing that anymore. And that is, so it's err, err, a sort err, s- safe and familiar or, or err, yeah, you're a little bit, who you were, let me put it like that. The amputation is gone. (Sophia, T3)

In Sophia's account above, she describes the feeling of smoking a cigarette as returning her to the person she was before, a person who is free from amputation, complete. Louis also struggled with his abstinence and felt different since he quit. This was most pronounced in the third interview, when he explains his psychological difficulties:

You only stay stuck in some sort of... irrational anger. That really is, that's scary. I'm anxious about that. (...) If someone would say well, this, cope with it for this one week and then err, it's over, promise, and then you'll be err yourself, because I really don't feel like myself right now. You know, like that. And, but in a week then, then it's again, all err, then err, your eyes will open and you'll see, you'll see the light and then you'll be, be the same person again. I would like that a lot. But no-one is going to say that, and no-one is able to say that. (Louis, T3)

In Louis' account above, a sense of self compromised by feelings of irrational anger is observed. He did not feel like himself, and found himself in a dark and frightening place. In stark contrast to the initial transitional phase perceived by Julia and Iris, Louis saw himself as 'only staying stuck' with this compromised self. He longed to 'be the same person again' that he was before quitting, but did not know when, and even if, he would regain his sense of self. This sense of loss of identity in the absence of smoking appeared to obstruct identity change in Sophia and Louis, whereas a continued sense of self observed in Iris' and Julia's accounts appeared to facilitate this.

Identity change is facilitated by a sense of mastery of quitting.

The integration of nonsmoking in the way Iris and Julia perceived themselves also appeared to be facilitated by a sense of mastery in learning to live as nonsmokers. For example, in the third interview, Iris recalled how at work "You used to go outside to get some fresh air, to smoke. But you obviously don't do that anymore. So now I bring a book, or I surf the internet". Her use of the personal pronoun 'you' in the plural and second person when recollecting her smoking behavior, and moving quickly to the singular and

first person 'I' to describe her behavior at work now, may reflect a distancing from the smoker identity. A process of learning to be a nonsmoker was also seen in Julia's account as she explained that the "habit [to smoke] begins to wear off" (T3). Both Iris and Julia felt proud of the progress that they had made with quitting, and gained self-confidence from this achievement. In the third interview for example after achieving two months abstinence, Julia explained: "I'm very proud of myself. It [smoking] is something that I don't need anymore, it's not necessary anymore. So it's some sort of achievement". This sense of pride appeared to be related to her new identity as a nonsmoker. For example, when Julia went to a restaurant with three smokers as 'the only nonsmoker in the group', she felt proud that she did not have to 'stand outside like that [to smoke]'. For Iris, self-confidence gained from quitting appeared to increase her belief in her ability to cope with other challenges as indicated in the account below:

Iris: You have more self-confidence now I think. You just know that you have a strong body. That you can handle more than you'd think.

Interviewer: Is that also the case more generally?

Iris: Yeah, you take it with you in other things.

Interviewer: Could you tell me what sort of things?

Iris: Just the daily things. Just at work, or err... That you take it with you.

Interviewer: So in general you feel stronger than before?

Iris: Yes. (Iris, T3)

In the account above, quit success appeared to make Iris feel strong, both physically ('strong body') and psychologically ('self-confidence'). The taking of self-confidence with her into daily life was probably facilitated by increased self-efficacy, following her self-discovery of an ability to cope with quitting that exceeded expectations. Later in the same interview, when Iris was asked what smoking now meant to her, she used a metaphor to describe how quitting smoking made her feel free:

It [smoking] is a closed period in my life. And that, you carry it with you, further. It [smoking] wears off more and more. And then, that, you spread your wings and you are completely loose, free again. (Iris, T3)

Iris explained that she struggled with low self-confidence in difficult periods in the past, and she felt that smoking was tied to low self-confidence. In her account above, she describes this period of her life as closed, and her sense of mastery of quitting appeared to allow her to become a more confident (nonsmoking) person. For both Iris and Julia therefore, transition towards a nonsmoker identity appeared to be facilitated by mastery over quitting.

Sophia and Louis however, continued to struggle to refrain from smoking. They did not gain confidence in quitting, but both described quitting as a 'battle' in the third interview, indicating that quitting was a sustained fight and required a high level of effort to maintain. In addition, they both remained strongly attracted to smoking. For example, in the third interview Louis said that "everything within me screams [sighs] smoking". The difficulty that they experienced with not smoking possibly made it more difficult to imagine themselves as nonsmokers or transition towards this.

2. Identity conflict resolution via psychological and behavioral strategies when quitting is unsuccessful or not attempted

The previous theme demonstrates that identity played an important role for the four participants who quit successfully over the course of the interviews. Identity issues were also observed in the six participants who did not quit successfully (see Table 1); all six participants found it difficult to picture themselves as nonsmokers (like Sophia and Louis). That is, although most of these participants experienced identity conflicts, they also lacked a positive future self as a nonsmoker that could serve as a goal in their quitting process. Various psychological barriers were observed that complicated identification with a future nonsmoking self. Furthermore, participants used psychological and behavioral strategies to protect a positive sense of self in the face of their difficulty to quit. These are discussed in turn below.

Barriers to identification with a positive future nonsmoking self.

Several barriers were observed that appeared to prevent the participants who did not quit successfully, or did not attempt to quit, from identifying with nonsmoking. These barriers are explored below.

Expectations of feeling incomplete without smoking.

Esther, Chris and Tom expected to feel incomplete without smoking and described a sense of loss of self, or of pleasure and purpose in life that they associated with quitting smoking (similar to Sophia and Louis). For example, Chris described his previous quit attempts as follows in the first interview:

Also err... previous quit attempts, yeah, it f-, it feels just like there's sort of err, you know, like, you're the bathroom floor and it, and it, and the err, bath mat with suckers is being pulled away from you, that's what is sort of feels like, that's very strange. Because it, yeah, it's very much err, linked to everything you do. (Chris, T1)

Using the metaphor of a bathroom floor and a bath mat, Chris presents an image of two objects that had become conglutinated together via bathmat suckers. His experi-

ence of quitting smoking as the separation of two objects which require an aggressive force to overcome the sucker mechanisms suggests an immediate and strong sense of loss. Moreover, the positioning of smoking as the bath mat indicates that smoking does not easily let go of Chris, and, as smoking is linked to everything he does, it may have agency over his actions more broadly than the decision to smoke or not. This parallels Sophia's bothersome and dominant friend who is not easy to say goodbye to.

Perceptions of quitting as not fitting with certain identity aspects.

Chris, Esther and Brigitte had a sense that aspects of who or how they perceived themselves to be made it more difficult to quit. For example, Chris said: 'I am such a person who is so, I like to philosophize, you know. And sometimes I wonder whether that could very, very much, obstruct my quitting' (T2, smoker).

Perceptions of quitting as an insurmountable endpoint.

Furthermore, Esther and Brigitte in particular perceived quitting as very difficult and frightening. For example, in Brigitte's account in the second interview below she describes her expectations of quitting smoking:

If you don't have it [smoking] anymore, your [inaudible] drops, you become more tired, more stressed, etcetera. Then of course you're more vulnerable to those kind of things. So not having that anymore, you know, then it will completely go wrong. (...) It's a way to deal with stress. And taking that away, that results in stress. (Brigitte, T2)

Brigitte expected that, without having the cigarette to help her cope with life's stresses, she would become more vulnerable to these. This would lead to the complete collapse of the situation in that 'it will completely go wrong'. Her stress levels would become uncontrollable, and thinking about this period resulted in distress in the present. She could not imagine that she would find other ways to deal with her stress and have a normal life as a nonsmoker, such that quitting was an insurmountable endpoint in her life. Similarly, in the second interview Esther said that she could not 'jump over' the period of quitting, suggesting that becoming a nonsmoker was inaccessible to her. In line with this, she talked about life as a nonsmoker as something that 'remains a little closed off'.

Experiences of difficulty quitting.

Whereas Esther and Brigitte were unable to picture themselves as nonsmokers at any time point, Karen had very positive expectations of herself as a nonsmoker in the first interview. She expected to feel "nice, fresh and healthy and err, and awake and err refreshed and happy, yeah, and more energetic" and this would be "fantastic, I will feel like I was again". This shows that she felt that quitting would allow her to be the person

that she felt that she essentially was; a nonsmoker. However, quitting was more difficult than she expected, and she did not talk as positively about becoming a nonsmoker anymore in the second and third interview. For example, when she was asked whether nonsmoking fitted with her in the second interview, she said: “Yes, if that could be, yes, yes. That’s a big wish, yes, I go for it”. Although she appeared determined to quit, she no longer articulated the positive expectations that she had before, and she was more hesitant about whether she could become a nonsmoker with this becoming a wish and thus something that she had no expectation to achieve, or control over. The diminishing expectations over time indicate the weakening of perceptions of herself as nonsmoker. Instead, she was afraid of becoming like the heavy smokers that she perceived to be ‘hollow-eyed’ and ‘unhealthy’ (Karen, T2):

My goodness, they [some heavy smokers] look so bad, you know, a very grey skin and very hollow-eyed... those dark grey teeth, I really don’t want that! To me that is, it, an, it’s an, an image of that’s what I don’t want! (Karen, T2)

Picturing positive futures with smoking.

Chris and Tom pictured positive futures that involved smoking. Both were less inclined to think about life without smoking. For example, in the second interview Tom shows a desire to be an occasional smoker:

I know people, and they really smoke three cigarettes a day. They take the first cigarette at lunch, then one in the evening and one at the end of the evening, you know. That is their moment of happiness, they really sit down for it, and I have friends who smoke cigars, they have a cigar and it takes an hour (...) I find that fantastic [laughs]. I wish I could do that! (Tom, T2)

Tom talked about occasional smoking as something that his friends ‘can do’ and that he wished that he ‘could do’, showing that he perceived it as an ability which he valued very much. He described occasional smoking as ‘fantastic’, showing that he wanted to become an occasional smoker himself. In addition to picturing a positive future, Chris also pictured a negative future when he would have become similar to ‘dirty’, ‘sluggish’ and ‘ugly’ long-term smokers: “I don’t want to become like that! Please no! But I, I’m well on my way to become such a person” (Chris, T1). None of the six participants who did not quit successfully, or did not attempt to quit, appeared to hold positive expectations of who they may become if they would continue to smoke, nor if they would quit smoking.

Denial of relevance of smoking to self-perceptions.

Peter (at the first and second interview) and Brigitte (at all interviews) denied that smoking was relevant for their self-perception altogether. This will be further explored in the following theme.

Strategies to protect a positive sense of self when being unable to quit.

All six smokers who were unable to quit successfully or did not attempt to quit used strategies to protect a positive sense of self, and participants typically used more than one strategy. Psychological strategies observed were downward comparisons, self-affirmation, avoidance and denial. In addition, two behavioral strategies, hiding smoking to resolve social conflict and independence strategies, were used. These are each discussed below.

Psychological strategies.

Esther, Peter and Tom made downward comparisons with other smokers, by pointing out that they themselves were more decent or socially considerate (Esther) or less 'fat' (Peter) than other smokers. Similarly, Tom had lost a friend who died from lung cancer and was puzzled by what happened at his funeral:

Everyone was smoking. And the guy was lying on his stretcher two meters away from us [talks in disapproving voice]. Isn't that bizarre? (...) And we're joking and talking about his life, and no one talks about smoking! No one talks about the disease, how it happened, no one blames it [smoking]. (...) It keeps me occupied, yes, yes, yes. And smoking too, it keeps me occupied, keeps, and err, I am not a thoughtless smoker, I have, a friend of mine, and I can sit and talk with her, and she... smokes, and walks to the dish washer and smokes indoors, and smokes again and very much too, maybe even 2 packs a day... She always has a cigarette in her face. (Tom, T3)

Following Tom's surprise and disapproval at the continued smoking of the funeral guests, of which he was one, he immediately presents a new smoker identity that made him look better in comparison to other smokers. That is, in contrast to a friend who smoked almost continuously, Tom was 'not a thoughtless smoker'. Comparing himself to his friend, whom he ridiculed by saying that she 'always has a cigarette in her face', probably made him feel better about himself.

Chris and Peter appeared to use self-affirmation strategies (i.e., focusing on one's positive characteristics) to protect a positive sense of self. For example, in the first interview Peter talked about continuing smokers, and his own continued smoking, as follows:

Peter: I can't imagine that there is anyone who does not want to quit smoking, who does smoke. I just don't believe that. So that means that [if you are smoking] you can't quit smoking, in my opinion. So you don't have stamina, or endurance.

Interviewer: Right. Does that apply to yourself as well?

Peter: Yes, definitely. Otherwise I would have quit smoking. Right? [laughs] (...)

Interviewer: What's that like, to think about that?

Peter: Tomorrow is another day? Yes. Nothing more, nothing less. I don't care so much, personally. I do so many other things, which I do do well, and with which I have endurance and which I finish and whatever. And one thing's not. Yes. Okay, so I'm not a hundred per cent, but I got far, with having my life on track. (Peter, T1)

Peter perceived his continued smoking as an indication that he lacked stamina, but he did not want to elaborate on this. He downplayed the importance of lacking stamina ('tomorrow is another day') and instead focused on everything that he succeeded in. These 'many other things' that went well allowed him to balance the negative impact of his continued smoking on his self-perception, and allowed him to perceive himself in a positive light. However, although Peter presented quitting smoking as trivial here, later on he said: "If I would quit and stick with it, it [life] will be more complete. (...) I might desire to have everything in my life on track" (T1), indicating that quitting smoking was important to him, and a key component of getting his life on track.

A number of participants showed avoidance or denial of a smoker identity. For example, in the second interview Esther said that "It's a confrontation with yourself. With a side of yourself [that smokes]. (...) So preferably, you always try to... push it to the background". As such, she acknowledged that 'a side' of her was a smoker, but she avoided thinking about this negative identity. Brigitte and Peter went a step further, and denied that smoking and nonsmoking were relevant for the way they perceived themselves in any way. This allowed removal (or reduction) of the identity threat associated with their continued smoking. For example, in the first interview Brigitte said:

I don't feel like it [smoking] is a part of me, who I am... No. It's part of what I do, but that doesn't necessarily mean that it's a fixed part of who I am. (Brigitte, T1)

For Brigitte, having an identity as a smoker meant that smoking was a stable part of who she was. She perceived smoking as a mere behavior, suggesting that she did not want smoking to define her as a person. Similarly, in the first interview Peter compared smoking to eating certain types of food, and asked "Does it fit with you to eat pasta? That's the same question, basically". However, between the second and third interview, Peter had reflected on his life and realized that he was unhappy with his smoking and his lifestyle more broadly:

Maybe things have fallen into place. Deep down I know that I'm not a smoker, really, I have always known that. I know that I have to quit smoking, that I want to again, I, that I just want, want to do sports normally and err, want to look and want to feel healthy and fit. I've always known that. (Peter, T3)

Whereas Peter denied that smoking was relevant to his identity in the first and second interview, he now admitted that his current smoking behavior had 'always' conflicted with his true sense of self. He experienced this realization positively, as 'things falling into place'. His realization was accompanied by a strong increase in his motivation to quit smoking. He now referred to quitting smoking as something that he 'wanted' to do, whereas quitting had been something that he 'had to' do up until this point. For Peter, continued smoking was incompatible with his new awareness of his negative identity as a smoker.

Behavioral strategies.

Finally, two different behavioral strategies were described by Esther, Karen and Brigitte. Esther and Karen both attempted to resolve social conflict by hiding their smoking, and Brigitte employed strategies to feel more independent.

Esther felt that smoking conflicted with her professional identity, and believed that her colleagues would think less of her if they would see her smoking. Esther would therefore 'sneak around' and 'crawl away like an ashamed dog' (T3) if she was on her way outside to smoke, in order to prevent negative judgments from coworkers. Using the dehumanized metaphor of an 'ashamed dog crawling away' possibly reflects a fear of being judged as being without human agency and succumbing to primal urges of an intelligent animal (i.e. an animal with an awareness of expected behavior, capable of feeling shame). Similarly, Karen took care to buy her cigarettes from different shops as she explains: "you don't want to be recognized [by the shop owner], that you're such a stupid cow that you're smoking" (T3). Karen also took steps to avoid association with the group of smokers (by anyone), and she said that "at a barbecue, there's the group of smokers, I am standing there [far away from the smokers]. So, I'm not going to join them" (T3).

Brigitte attempted to increase her sense of control over smoking, by deliberately buying her cigarettes separately for each day rather than at once. She described this as 'my way to control it [smoking]', although at the same time she recognized this to be an 'excuse' and a way of 'fooling herself' (T3).

Results of the follow-up

With the exception of Peter, all participants completed the online follow-up survey approximately 20 months after their final interview (T3). Current smoking status, duration of and time since most recent quit attempt since T3 and self-label are presented in Table 3. While four participants had successfully quit at T3 (i.e., Iris, Julia, Sophia and Louis)

Table 3. Follow-up smoking status, quit attempts and identity.

Name	Months to follow-up	Smoking status (#cigarettes p/day)	Duration and recency most recent quit attempt since T3	Self-label
Iris	19	Abstinent	Abstinent since T3	"Ex-smoker"
Julia	18	Abstinent	Abstinent since T3	"Nonsmoker who used to smoke"
Sophia	19	Smoking (10)	No quit attempt	"Someone for whom relapse looms time and time again"
Louis	18	Smoking (20)	3 weeks (17 months ago)	"Fine"
Karen	18	Smoking (6)	3 days (16 days ago)	"A nonsmoker"
Tom	19	Smoking (15-20)	No quit attempt lasting >24 hours	"Someone who enjoys it but does not have the strength to quit"
Chris	18	Smoking (20)	1.5 day (237 days ago)	"Someone who is addicted and is captured in the addiction"
Esther	28	Smoking (20)	No quit attempt	"An addict"
Brigitte	28	Smoking (20)	No quit attempt	"Someone who seems to need a cigarette to be able to concentrate"

No follow-up data were available for Peter.

only two reported continuous abstinence at the follow-up survey. These were Julia and Iris, the two participants who in their interview accounts demonstrated identity change toward a nonsmoker identity. Sophia and Louis however, who presented a resistant smoker identity in their interviews, had relapsed back to smoking, and smoked 20 and 10 cigarettes per day, respectively. At follow-up, Iris labeled herself as an 'ex-smoker', and Julia labeled herself as a 'nonsmoker who used to smoke'. Instead, Sophia labeled herself in terms of inevitable relapse, "someone for whom relapse looms time and time again", and Louis refrained from defining himself in terms of smoking and nonsmoking altogether.

In addition, none of the participants who were smokers at T3 (i.e., Karen, Tom, Chris, Esther and Brigitte) were abstinent at follow-up (follow-up data was unavailable for Peter). Most of them still perceived themselves in terms of smoking and addiction. Karen, however, perceived herself as a nonsmoker, although she had not (yet) been successful in quitting. As such, her identity conflicted with her smoking behavior. She had attempted to quit very recently, suggesting that she tried to behave in line with her self-perception as a nonsmoker.

DISCUSSION

This study is the first in-depth longitudinal qualitative study that explores identity change processes in quitting smoking. Each of ten smokers with an intention to quit were interviewed three times, approximately one month apart, and data were analyzed using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) approach (Smith et al., 2009). The approach taken in this study allowed for the in-depth exploration of how participants made sense of their experiences with smoking or quitting, and how this related to their sense of self. Moreover, the longitudinal nature allowed direct exploration of the experience of identity during the processes of quitting. The results showed two themes in relation to identity: 1) Identity change toward 'nonsmoker' makes it easier to quit, and 2) Identity conflict resolution via psychological and behavioral strategies when quitting is unsuccessful or not attempted.

This study provided new insight regarding identity change dynamics over time, and the processes that appeared to facilitate or obstruct identity change. Of the four smokers who quit smoking successfully over the course of the interviews, identity change toward becoming a nonsmoker was indicated in two people, whereas the other two continued to perceive themselves as a 'smoker who does not smoke', showing that their identity remained unchanged by their quitting. Importantly, it appears that quitting was much easier for those who increasingly came to perceive themselves as nonsmokers. Similarly, the study by Vangeli and West (2012) suggested that a lack of identity change toward nonsmoker in some participants made it more difficult for them to stay abstinent. The identity as a 'smoker who does not smoke' was also observed in an ethnographic study among smoking cessation group participants (Nachtigal & Kidron, 2015), but was in that study considered as a means to resist the temptation to smoke and thereby empower the identity as a nonsmoker, something our results do not seem to support. Importantly, extending previous work, follow-up results from the current study were in line with the identity processes observed in the interviews, as only those for whom identity change was observed had gained long-term abstinence, whereas those whose quitting did not seem to be accompanied by identity change had relapsed. The findings of the current study thus suggest that nonsmoking needs to become incorporated in ex-smokers' self-perceptions in order to reach stable abstinence.

Results further suggest that the perception of permeable identity boundaries, a sense of identity continuity and a sense of mastery of quitting enabled identity change in the two participants who increasingly perceived themselves as nonsmokers over time. The perception of smoker and nonsmoker identities as not clearly distinct but flexible (e.g., the smoking nonsmoker) appeared to allow navigation between the identities more easily. Permeability across identity boundaries was possibly supported by a transitional recovery identity (e.g. rehab phase or detoxed smoker). This permeability relates to the

conceptualization of smoking-related identity as fluid, as was proposed by Vangeli and West (2012) who found that ex-smokers oscillated between the identities of nonsmoker and smoker.

Furthermore, identity change in these participants seemed to be facilitated by a sense of identity continuity, such that, in the process of change, they essentially stayed the same person. In contrast, the two participants who did not show identity change and relapsed by follow-up experienced a sense of loss of self without smoking, and said that they were 'not myself' or 'amputated' without smoking. Similar experiences were reported by participants in other studies, who reported a 'voided self' without smoking (Nachtigal & Kidron, 2015) or a sense of loss that resembled 'bereavement' (Vangeli & West, 2012). Importantly, a lower sense of identity continuity is associated with worse psychological well-being (Sokol & Serper, 2016), and follow-up results of the current study suggest that it may be a risk for relapse (Bottorff et al., 2000). In addition, identity change appeared to be facilitated by a sense of mastery of quitting in the two participants who increasingly perceived themselves as nonsmokers. This resonates with observations by Vangeli and West (2002) and Luck and Beagan (2015). For example, Luck and Beagan (2015) found that 'favorable experiences and perceptions of not smoking (...) nurtured a positive identity that reinforced successful transition' (p. 191). Correspondingly, identity shift theory (Kearney & O'Sullivan, 2003) suggests that successful behavior change (which may be reflected in a sense of mastery) may facilitate identity change.

Identity also played a role in the six participants who attempted to quit, but relapsed, or did not attempt to quit. For various reasons, all of these participants had difficulty picturing themselves as nonsmokers. Although they all had an intention to quit, and most did not hold a positive identity as a smoker, the lack of a future nonsmoker identity seemed to impair smoking cessation. In line with this, none of them had quit successfully at follow-up, and most of them still perceived themselves in terms of smoking and addiction. This finding corresponds with previous work, which showed that smokers need a strong nonsmoker identity, rather than a weak smoker identity, in order to quit smoking (Meijer et al., 2015; Meijer, Gebhardt, Van Laar, Kawous et al., 2016; Meijer, Van den Putte et al., 2017).

The difficulty with quitting experienced by these continuing smokers appeared to constitute a threat to a positive sense of self. Several psychological and behavioral strategies were observed that may protect a positive identity in the face of (perceived) inability to quit. On a psychological level, participants used downward comparisons with smokers who were worse off than themselves, used self-affirmation (i.e., focusing on accomplishments or positive experiences instead of their difficulty quitting), avoided thinking about their negative identity, and denied the impact of smoking on their self-perception. With regard to behavioral strategies, some participants hid their smoking from others to resolve social conflict (Luck & Beagan, 2014), or engaged in strategies to

gain a sense of independence of smoking. Some of these strategies, such as downward comparisons (Vohs & Heatherton, 2004) and self-affirmation (Derks, Scheepers, Van Laar, & Ellemers, 2011; Sherman, 2013) have also been reported in the psychological literature more generally as ways to cope with identity threat. Both strategies are considered to allow for a more positive perception of the self by diverting attention away from the threat, which then has less impact on identity. However, such strategies may be disadvantageous in the long term as they decrease the need for (healthy) behavioral change (Hoek, Maubach, Stevenson, Gendall, & Edwards, 2013).

This study has limitations. While the importance of identity change processes was confirmed through follow-up, it is possible that at follow-up participants provided socially desirable answers as it did not include face-to-face contact. However, given that the majority of participants indicated that they smoked (vs. not), answers do not appear to be biased in a socially desirable direction. Relatedly, biochemical verification of smoking status was not used. Although this would provide a reliable assessment of smoking status, it might have complicated rapport between participants and the interviewer. Furthermore, as is inherent to qualitative research, the findings are not intended to be generalizable to the complete population of smokers who intend to quit. It would be beneficial to conduct similar qualitative studies among different smokers. However, the experiential approach taken in this study led to valuable insights regarding identity change processes that cannot be obtained with quantitative methods. For example, permeable identity boundaries are more difficult to capture with quantitative methods such as questionnaires. Finally, in accordance with the 'double hermeneutic' employed in IPA (Smith et al., 2009), participants' interpretations of their experiences were interpreted by the authors who had their own assumptions and were interested in how sense of identity may change among smokers who are in the process of quitting. While this necessarily shaped the findings - other themes that are not related to identity can possibly be found in the data as well - the continuous focus on grounding interpretations in the data, and discussions between the authors during the analytic process ensured the findings closely reflected the participant accounts.

Notwithstanding these limitations, this longitudinal study provided an in-depth understanding of identity change during the process of quitting smoking. The findings indicated that change toward a nonsmoker identity may be necessary for successful quitting in the long-term. In addition, results suggested that permeable identity boundaries, a continuous sense of self, and a sense of mastery of quitting may facilitate identity change. Given these results, future research investigating ways to help smokers to perceive themselves increasingly as nonsmokers appears highly indicated, for example through writing exercises about the future self (Meijer, Gebhardt, Van Laar, Van den Putte, & Evers, 2017). Given that most smokers are motivated to quit smoking in the future, but relatively few of them succeed in quitting (Nationaal Expertisecentrum

Tabaksontmoediging, 2015), interventions focused on identity change are likely to help more smokers to quit successfully.

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APPENDIX. FOLLOW-UP QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Do you smoke nowadays?
 - Yes
 - No, I do not smoke anymore

If question 1 = Yes

2. How many cigarettes do you smoke on average per day?
3. Did you attempt to quit since the last interview? This refers to serious quit attempts when you did not smoke for at least 24 hours.
 - Yes
 - No

If question 3 = Yes

4. When was your most recent quit attempt of at least 24 hours? Try to indicate this as specifically as possible.
5. How long did you quit smoking during your most recent quit attempt? Try to indicate this as specifically as possible.

If question 1 = No

6. For how long have you quit smoking? Try to indicate this as specifically as possible.
7. Did you ever smoke since the last interview? If yes, when?

All

8. Do you ever use an e-cigarette?
 - Yes, I use an e-cigarette with nicotine
 - Yes, I use an e-cigarette without nicotine
 - No
9. The next question is about how you see yourself. How do you see yourself in relation to smoking? Try to provide a brief description.

I see myself as.. (textbox)

