

Narrative theory V: Narratives about penalties resulting from illegal tobacco purchases increase psychological distress

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Abstract

Previous research with individuals with substance use disorder indicated that different narratives have different effects on one's behaviors and decision-making. One question that remains unanswered is whether simulating real-world consequences of illegal purchases using narratives would induce psychological distress levels as expected in real-world situations. The present experiment used a between-group design to study how different narratives regarding penalties impact smokers' affective state and more specifically, psychological distress. Participants ($N = 93$) were randomized into one of the three groups: (a) legal tobacco purchases (LTP), (b) illegal tobacco purchases with fines (ITP_F), and (c) illegal tobacco purchases with fines, criminal record, and negative public exposure (ITP_F + CR + NPE) to complete an online survey. The survey contained one narrative randomly assigned to each participant, demographic questions, the heaviness of smoking index, the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS), and a single-item psychological distress question. The results showed that (a) narratives about making illegal tobacco purchases significantly increased psychological distress when compared to narratives about making LTP, (b) no differences were observed on psychological distress and negative affective state between a narrative describing a fine and a narrative describing a fine, a criminal record, and negative public exposure, and (c) a narrative about a criminal record had the greatest effect on psychological distress among the different narratives about penalty types. Narratives involving illegal purchases increase psychological distress, which varies according to the hypothetical penalties described. More research regarding the use of narratives on decision-making and purchasing of hypothetical substances is warranted.

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