

Autonomy, Compassion and Tobacco Endgames: Perspectives from Smokers Living in Marginal Circumstances



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Overview

- Brief review of tobacco endgames
 - Frictions between societal well-being and individual choice
- Control, liberty and agency
- In-depth interviews with people experiencing higher deprivation
- Findings
 - Autonomy and a search for compassion
- Implications
 - Opportunities to increase understanding of addiction and denormalise tobacco industry



You Cannot Trust
the Tobacco Industry to Tell
the Truth

Tobacco endgames

- Fundamental shift from “tobacco control” philosophy
 - Reframes tobacco – not a legitimate consumer product (McDaniel et al., 2016; Smith & Malone, 2020)
 - Recognises tobacco use compounds social inequalities (Atkinson et al., 2020; McDaniel et al., 2016)



Many countries (including NZ) have endgame goals

- Progress inadequate
 - Increasingly innovative measures proposed



Consumer autonomy

Tension between societal well-being and individual choice

- How do people manage societal disapproval and regulatory pressures?



Autonomy

- Liberty (independence from influences that control choice)
- Agency (the capacity to perform intentional actions) (Beauchamp, 2005)



Industry subversion of consumer autonomy

- Industry discourse portrays people who smoke as victims of unkind policy (Cardador, Hazan, & Glantz, 1995)
- Presents smoking as a habit following an informed choice (not an addiction) (Sharfstein, 1999; Thomson & Wilson, 2003 (Gray, Hoek, & Edwards, 2016))

We'd like to avoid the passing of laws. It would create a second-class citizen. People would be branded as smoker or nonsmoker.



Exploring the tension

- What impact could tobacco endgame policies have on liberty and agency?
- Explored tensions between liberation and coercion with people most likely to experience endgame policies



Methods

Recruitment

- Via social media, community advertising, and affinity groups
- On-boarding online eligibility survey
 - Inclusion criteria: (daily smoking, overall income less than 40% of the median income, and marginal income sufficiency or below)

Interview guide

- Explored smoking history, perceptions of Smokefree 2025 Goal and specific endgame measures.
- Interviews conducted late 2020; lasted 42-66 minutes
- Ceased when information redundancy identified

Methods

Ethics review

- Consultation with Māori colleagues and indigenous committee
- Approved as low risk project

Data analysis

- Social constructionist epistemology
- Iterative reading and re-reading transcripts and interview notes
- Identified recurring metaphors and used these to develop “organising constructs” from which we proposed overarching themes
- Shared over-arching themes with participants and invited feedback

Key themes

Two over-arching themes:

- The quest to maintain autonomy
 - Participants felt judged and tried to distance themselves from smoking's stigma
 - Most wanted to quit but on their own terms
- Yearning for understanding
 - Reflected on the loneliness of managing denormalisation
 - Wanted recognition of smoking as a powerful addiction



Autonomy

Many mis-interpretations of the goal as a ban on tobacco

- Seen as removing a fundamental freedom:
 - *"It's a choice that we make for ourselves. It's not a choice that the government should be making for us"* (Olivia)
- Saw tax increases as attempts to restrict choice:
 - *"It would probably make people angry, it takes people's choices away"* (Rebecca)
- Measures removing autonomy posed an existential challenge
 - *"people will always find a way"* (Tom)

But a counterpoint

Short-term discomfort was a pathway to greater freedoms

"Wouldn't bother me. In all honesty, if they [cigarettes] weren't on the shelves, or I didn't probably notice it around as much, I probably wouldn't feel as compelled"
(Tom)

Some supported stronger measures

"I think the aim should be 0% [smoking prevalence]. Straight up...If you don't have a choice, then you don't have a choice. Simple as that." (Ian)

Autonomy may mean relinquishing some freedoms

"I need to [be] locked up in a place for a fortnight, or whatever it is,...and have a real full on programme around addiction and everything" (Fran)

Seeking understanding

Smoking undermined choices and shaped priorities.

"A lot of people say it's a habit or, you know... Why are you doing that? You can't afford it? Or why are you buying that instead of food or whatever? Well, I mean, when you are addicted to, to, to something, then it becomes the priority".

Others' judgment hurtful

"People tend to look at you like in disgust if you are smoking. But a lot of them... they don't understand what it's actually like to be a smoker, and it's not as easy as just throwing them away and never smoking again"

Non-smokers could not comprehend psycho-social benefits of smoking

"I'm really scared of it [quitting]... I'm scared of losing it a, a best friend" (Katie)

Seeking understanding

- Trapped outside social norms but powerless to comply with these

It [people staring] makes me feel bloody small. Like I'm not worth anything to them"



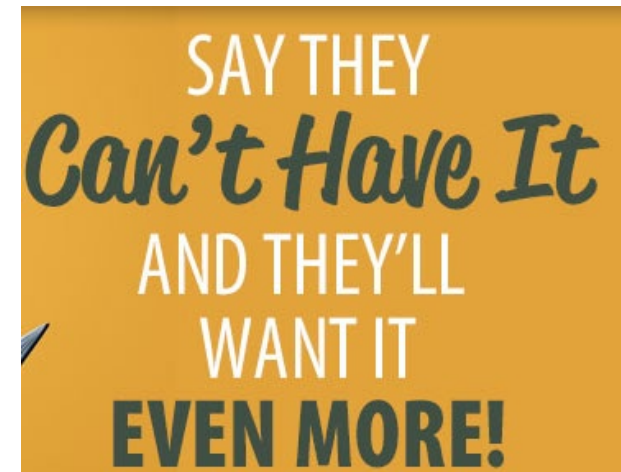
- Called for smoking to be seen and supported as an addiction and wanted compassion

"People respond better to positive affirmation and positive feedback...I just think it needs to be handled really carefully so that people who are smokers aren't made to feel bad or lesser than"



Discussion

- Reactions against perceived restrictions similar to earlier findings (Wigginton, Morphett, & Gartner, 2017b)
- Need to challenge “choice” rhetoric, originates from tobacco industry
 - Social marketing developed with communities could reframe quitting as empowering
 - Needs more cessation support to increase self-efficacy and agency



Limitations

- Diversity prioritised over representativeness
 - Provided rich insights but not generalisable findings
- Only two participants identified as Māori; no Pacific participants
 - Need more targeted research, conducted by Māori and Pacific, to explore perceptions held by these peoples



Conclusions

Tobacco industry rhetoric has shaped views of smoking as a choice and right, not an addiction

- Most privileged liberty even though it compromised agency
- Minority recognised constraint could be a pre-requisite for freedom

Endgames could reframe views of tobacco as a normal consumer product

- Change perceptions that blame people for a behaviour they are desperate to stop
- Foster greater compassion for people who smoke
 - Could be as crucial as policies that change the market structure

Questions (thanks to R1 and R2)

- Where is the line between consumer autonomy and agency, and individual and societal health?
- I wish I knew!
 - People draw their own lines, shaped by social environments
 - Tobacco companies shape social environments
 - Smoking is rarely, if ever, an informed choice
 - People do not understand the harms they will experience
- Creates ethical rationale for policies that foster societal well-being

Questions (thanks to R1 and R2)

How do the endgame goals improve the life of marginal community smokers?

- Smoking takes people's money, excludes them from social settings, and destroys their health
- Endgame measures reduce industry agency but promote individuals' agency

Papers now available

- Barbalich, I., Gartner, C., Edwards, R., & Hoek, J. (2021). New Zealand smokers' perceptions of tobacco endgame measures: A qualitative analysis. *Nicotine & Tobacco Research*.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/ntr/ntab161>
- Hoek, J., Barbalich, I., Edwards, R., & Gartner, C. (2021). A qualitative analysis of how people who smoke and manage lower incomes perceive the Smokefree 2025 goal. *NZMJ*, 21 May 2021, 134:1535, 83-87.



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