

Nicotine addiction as a moral problem: barriers to e-cigarette use for smoking cessation in two working-class areas in Northern England

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SSA Conference 2019,
Newcastle



About me

- University of York Research Fellow in the Sociology Department, funded by Cancer Research UK 2017/21
- researching smoking cessation and health inequalities (PhD 2015)
- long-term relationship with high smoking prevalence deprived areas of North East (County Durham) and North West (North Manchester)
- no industry funding (tobacco, e-cigarette, other)

The study

- 2017/2019 study with smokers, quitters and vapers of the take-up of e-cigarettes in two deprived areas; some findings on barriers to take-up reported in:

Thirlway, F. (2019) Nicotine addiction as a moral problem: barriers to e-cigarette use for smoking cessation in two working-class areas. *Social Science & Medicine* vol. 238, p. 112498

- Study also included the tobacco and e-cigarette industry context, including research with vape shops in the same areas supplemented by document and policy analysis
- currently writing this up

Also reported here



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Tackling smoking: never mind health, we need to talk about price



Frances Thirlway explains why smokers' concerns about addiction provide an unlikely but compelling rationale for making a minimum price strategy a central part of tobacco control.

People stop smoking for health reasons, right? We all know the link between **smoking and cancer**, not to mention heart disease, stroke and many other conditions. But that doesn't necessarily mean we stop smoking or switch to a less risky alternative such as e-cigarettes. Smoking rates continue to be high in the most deprived areas of **England, Scotland** and **Wales**, and health advocates are

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How can we address health inequalities related to smoking?

- Smoking rates continue to be high in the most deprived areas
- health advocates are constantly looking for new ways to highlight the health effects
- but many working-class smokers are more concerned about being addicted than about the damage to their health

Why?

Why do people feel bad about nicotine addiction?

- UK approach both in the drug field and more recently in tobacco control has been to medicalise substance use i.e. to define it as a medical problem rather than a moral one
- but ordinary smokers saw their own addiction as a moral issue in 2 ways (Flanagan 2013)
 - sense of personal failure resulting from failed attempts to quit
 - guilt about the financial cost involved e.g. diverting financial resources from the family

Flanagan, O. (2013). "The shame of addiction." [Frontiers in Psychiatry 4: 120.](#)

Reconciling smoking with guilt about addiction

- they tried to stop, but they often failed
- they kept trying – but some despaired of ever managing to quit
- they reduced the guilt by spending as little as possible
= massive switch to cheaper tobacco AND/OR switch to vaping

The move to rolling tobacco and ultra-cheap brands
is about moral identity – not just affordability

.. but they were reluctant e-cigarette users

- 'still addicted' because they vaped as often as they previously smoked
= felt discouraged and relapsed to smoking
- tried to lower their nicotine ➡ used their e-cig more often ➡ felt more addicted
- spent as little as possible on e-liquids = cheapest brands
- worried that nice flavours would make them 'more addicted'

Price differential is key

- price differential with smoking key to the appeal of e-cigarettes to working-class smokers
- saving money meant feeling less guilty about addiction
- policy makers must ensure that entry-level vaping continues to be significantly cheaper than smoking, and ideally **increase the differential**

Policy measures

- ensure that e-cigarettes continue to be exempt from excise duty
- provide free starter kits to vulnerable smokers
- beware of regulation which favours closed over open systems

= tobacco industry strategy of tying consumers into more expensive products

Price is the most effective way to address health inequalities linked to smoking

- making smoking more expensive ➡ more people quitting, smoking less or switching
- real price of cheapest UK tobacco barely changed over the past fifteen years
- taxes on rolling tobacco are lower than on cigarettes
- tobacco industry has been gaming the system: absorbs tax increases on cheapest products to keep poorer smokers smoking + overshifts tax on expensive products to maximise its profits.

Raising the minimum tobacco price

- targeted interventions are needed to increase cheap tobacco/e-cigarettes price differential
- 2017 Minimum Excise Tax needs to increase further
- increase tax on rolling tobacco to close the gap
- Consider minimum unit price for tobacco
- or price cap regulation = to limit price differentials

On pricing options, see recent research by Professor Anna Gilmore and the Tobacco Control Research Group at the University of Bath ([@BathTR](#)).