Whither tobacco studies?
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Abstract
In recent years, tobacco research has become an increasingly politicized field, with 'legitimate' research on this topic expected to further the goals of tobacco control. This paper presents an overview of the state of field of social science studies on tobacco and critiques the growing polarity evident in scholarship on this topic. Moving beyond mainstream public health perspectives, I outline a body of research that challenges dominant understandings of tobacco use and tobacco control. This research can be classified into three main categories: studies that interrogate conceptions of why people smoke, those that examine the impacts of tobacco control policy on smokers, and studies embracing intellectual and philosophical perspectives (especially phenomenology and social constructionism) that place them outside of a public health frame. I end with a broader discussion of the growing instrumentalization of social science research and the need to resist prescriptions that seek to dictate the appropriate form and content of scholarly work.

Introduction
Recently, a colleague and I co-convened a session on tobacco at a North American anthropology conference. As we made clear in our initial call for papers, our goal in the session was to 'step outside of the tobacco control and public health frame to examine tobacco's traces in social, cultural, political and economic life'. Although we disseminated the call for papers on a medical anthropology listserv, it soon became evident that someone had forwarded our call to GLOBALink, a tobacco control organization. Shortly afterwards, we received an email from an academic member of GLOBALink demanding that we explain 'more about what your objectives and expectations are for your meeting and beyond'. In questioning the agenda of our proposed panel, this person clearly saw our attempt to try to study tobacco outside of the public health frame as irresponsible. This view was also articulated in some of the feedback we received on our session, with several participants expressing their concern that the collection of papers implicitly played into the hands of 'Big Tobacco'.

I use this anecdote to highlight a phenomenon increasingly evident in the field of tobacco studies, which manifests a polarity regarding 'legitimate' and 'illegitimate' tobacco research and what each entails. My goal in this paper is to provide an overview of the state of the field of social science research on tobacco and to raise some timely questions about its present paths and future directions. As such, it should be seen as a broad discussion of the field, rather than a comprehensive review of available scholarship. I should also note at the outset that I'm primarily interested in critically engaged social

science perspectives on tobacco, rather than the larger body of tobacco control research produced by social scientists working in the fields of public health, health promotion, etc. I also focus primarily on research conducted in western contexts, rather than the body of historical and anthropological work conducted on tobacco in non-western settings. However, my agenda in this paper is also more ambitious. By drawing attention to the state of tobacco studies, I hope to raise some larger questions that are worthy of scholarly consideration and debate: namely, what *are* our roles and responsibilities (if any) as social scientists? And whose interests should research serve?

Situating social science scholarship on tobacco
In 2007, Mair and Kierans observed the growing alignment between tobacco research and tobacco control, noting that tobacco research is increasingly expected to further the goals of tobacco control, with tobacco research 'proper' defined by its commitment to ending the global tobacco 'epidemic'. As they point out, although this view of tobacco research stems from a desire to differentiate industry-funded and non-industry-funded research, in defining legitimate tobacco research by its commitment to tobacco control, research becomes purely instrumental in function. In this respect, tobacco control research has, rather ironically, begun to mirror tobacco industry research:[1]

> We have a situation where one group views research as a means to maximize tobacco use, the other to minimize it, with neither side seeking to improve their understanding beyond what they need to pursue their specific goals. As a consequence, instrumentalism, grounded in mutual antagonism, has become a hallmark of orthodox research on both sides (Mair & Kierans 2007, p. 104).

The polarity Mair and Kierans highlight is illustrated in a recent review of anthropological research on tobacco (Kohrman & Benson 2011) in which the authors castigate earlier generations of anthropologists for failing to pay enough attention to the harmful properties of tobacco and the financial and political alliances that got local populations hooked on the substance. Following a discussion of a small number of anthropologists 'on the take' (i.e. funded by the tobacco industry), the authors conclude:

> Such cases of embedded anthropology remind us, albeit disturbingly, that our discipline remains relevant to multiple audiences, capable of studying complex topics from various perspectives. It also reminds us that *simply agitating for more ethnographies of tobacco has its perils*. *Deliberate* instances of embedded anthropology are of course the exceptions when it comes to the topic of this review. Streams of anthropologists have carried out nuanced work on tobacco over the years, usually from perspectives *far less amenable to industry appropriation* (p. 338, emphasis added).

The political economy of tobacco production and consumption are important topics of study (see Nichter & Cartwright 1991; Benson 2007, 2012; Kohrman 2007). But the characterisation of ethnographic research that fails to take these forces into consideration as potentially 'embedded' and therefore 'perilous' is troubling. The implication is that anthropologists should vigilantly guard against the potential appropriation of their work by the tobacco industry, presumably by taking an explicit anti-tobacco/pro-tobacco control perspective. However, this framework seems designed to inhibit precisely the

sort of 'nuanced work' that Kohrman and Benson go on to praise.

When research shifts from the study of tobacco use amongst groups of individuals to an investigation of what *causes* or *makes* groups of individuals use tobacco, certain kinds of questions get asked and answered (Eakin et al. 1997; Mair & Kierans 2007). As Macnaughton et al. (in press) have recently noted, the principles that guide mainstream tobacco control research, as well as the epistemological assumptions and the choice of methods that generally underwrite it, articulate a particular vision of the smoking person. The 'rational agent' view assumes that smokers are rational agents who 'need only be presented with the facts to respond appropriately', and the non-agent view understands smokers as 'Pavlovian automatons' fuelled by their addiction and need for instant gratification. In the latter framework, the smoker is the victim of internal forces (i.e. physiological addiction, their psychological makeup) or external ones (the tobacco industry, their peers, etc.). In this framework, the *meaning* of smoking and its social context become largely irrelevant (Eakin et al. 1997; Poland et al. 2006; Mair & Kierans 2007; Macnaughton et al. in press). However, there is a body of social science scholarship that troubles dominant public health perspectives on tobacco and smoking. It is to this research I now turn.[2]

Beyond standard tobacco control perspectives

Based primarily (although not exclusively) on qualitative research with smokers, there is a body of research that challenges conceptions of smoking embedded in mainstream tobacco control research and/or tobacco control policy itself. In many cases, the critique levelled is soft, in so far as the authors generally start from the premise that smoking is a major public health issue and that interventions are required to encourage smokers to quit. Their concerns are framed as serving the interests of public health by improving the efficacy of tobacco control policies and tend to be faintly defensive regarding the critique levelled. For example, in their paper on eliciting smokers' agendas, McKie et al. (2003) state that, 'The authors assert that an acknowledgement of the attractive, pleasurable aspects of smoking *may be seen as unacceptable and irresponsible* but this could well provide an opportunity to relate to the everyday and multiple practices of smoking and smokers themselves…'[3] (p. 83, emphasis added). However, some of this research is more overtly critical in orientation and directly challenges present directions in tobacco control, in some cases sidestepping the public health frame altogether. Bearing in mind the caveat that some of the research I discuss below straddles several categories, I have nevertheless divided this scholarship into three broad themes.

Challenging conceptions of why people smoke

A sizeable body of qualitative research conducted with smokers of all shades and stripes (e.g. young smokers, mothers, women, working class smokers, etc.) shows that although they often describe smoking as an addiction, they also highlight a sense of agency, emphasizing what they perceive as the immediate benefits of smoking in their day-to-day lives in terms of pleasure, stress reduction, social connection and relationships (e.g., Graham 1993, 1994; Greaves 1996; Gillies and Willig 1997; McKie et al. 2003; Katainen 2006, 2012; Denscombe 2001, 2010; Haines et al. 2009; McCullough 2011). In these accounts, smokers challenge the prevailing public health discourse on smoking as uniquely risky, and the imperative of 'health' that drives it. Some studies have

particularly highlighted the relationship between smoking and identity, especially for young people, including the important role smoking plays in defining the self and the ways in which youth smoking challenges the categories of 'smoker' and 'non-smoker' (Wearing et al. 1994; Amos et al. 1997; Wearing and Wearing 2000; Denscombe 2001; Mair et al. 2006; Haines et al. 2009).

Either implicitly or explicitly, the majority of these articles suggest that in privileging lifestyle and addiction models, tobacco control researchers and policy makers have failed to take account of the reality of smoking in people's daily lives (e.g. Amos et al. 21997; McKie et al. 2003; Gilbert 2005; Katainen 2006; Haines et al. 2009; Denscombe 2010; see also Poland et al. 2006; Macnaughton et al. in press). In doing so, they challenge the rationalism of dominant behavioural approaches to smoking cessation and their underlying assumption that getting smokers to quit is primarily a matter of education.

Challenging the impacts of tobacco control policy
A second category of research focuses more explicitly on smokers' responses to tobacco control legislation and the iatrogenic consequences of prevailing policy approaches. For example, studies focusing specifically on smokefree and tobacco 'denormalization' policies have highlighted the class effects of such legislation, its potential to stigmatize smokers and the ways it may serve to reinforce smoking or push it into the home (e.g., Poland 1998, 2000; Kuhling 2004; Thompson et al. 2007; Bell et al. 2010a, 2010b; Ritchie et al. 2010). Other studies examining tobacco control messaging (e.g. anti-smoking advertisements) have pointed to its lack of relevance to the circumstances of smokers' lives (Gilbert 2005), as well as its potential to induce feelings of defensiveness, helplessness and disempowerment (Thompson et al. 2009) and enact symbolic violence by invoking gender normative appearance imperatives for girls/women and by linking smoking cessation to sexual virility for boys/men (Haines-Saah 2011).

A subset of this literature focuses specifically on mothers and the ways they have been targeted in tobacco control messaging around smoking during pregnancy (Oakley 1989; Oaks 2000, 2001) and around children (Bell et al. 2009), problematizing the widespread construction of mothers as 'fetal' and 'child abusers'. Qualitative research has also examined the ways in which mothers who smoke negotiate messages regarding the need for a smokefree home (e.g. Coxhead & Rhodes 2006; Robinson & Kirkaldy 2007a, 2007b; Holdsworth & Robinson 2008). Taken together, this research suggests that tobacco control messaging rarely works in the intended fashion. As Klein (1993, p. 1) observes, 'openly condemning smoking frequently fails to have the desired effect – often accomplishes the opposite of what it intends, sometimes inures the habit, and perhaps initiates it'.

Another body of social science scholarship focuses more generally on the uneven and inequitable effects of tobacco control legislation across populations, especially low-income women, although some research has considered the responses of working class smokers more broadly to tobacco control policies (e.g. Frohlich et al. 2010). Key here is the work of Greaves, who has consistently argued that by failing to consider their gendered effects, tobacco control policies inadvertently reinforce gender inequities, social

disadvantage, stigma and marginalization (e.g. Greaves 1996; Greaves et al. 2006; Greaves and Jategaonkar 2006; Greaves and Hemsing 2009; see also Burgess et al. 2009). Other work that has examined the differential effects of tobacco control legislation on women include studies by Moore et al. (2006, 2009) on the unintended consequences of workplace smoking bans in California for female bartenders and Robinson et al.'s (2010) research on the impacts of smokefree legislation in Scotland on families in the home.

Discourse, embodiment and the smoking subject
Another distinctive body of research shares many features of the prior two categories but is notable in its explicit commitment to intellectual and philosophical perspectives that clearly position it outside of the public health frame. The first strand of research focuses on the phenomenology of smoking. Klein's (1993) unapologetic ode to cigarettes, *Cigarettes are Sublime*, is an exemplar of this scholarship (although Klein's disciplinary background is cultural studies rather than the social sciences). Capturing the 'powerful charms' and 'negative pleasures' of cigarettes, Klein argues that efforts to repress smoking are likely to only increase its seductive allure. Social scientists who have followed Klein's lead in examining the embodied dimensions of smoking include Keane (2002), who has argued that much of the 'addictiveness' of smoking can be understood by reference its positive temporal qualities, and Dennis (2006, 2011), who has highlighted the ways in which smoking extends the reach of the body, the corporeal connections it engenders and the extricable intertwinement between the risks and pleasures of the habit. Also worthy of mention is a recent essay by Dwyer (2011), which examines the 'social lives of smokes' amongst heroin users.

The second strand of research is broadly social constructionist in orientation and highlights the social, moral and political forces that have led to the construction of smoking as a health 'risk'. Tellingly, little of this scholarship has been written by social scientists; instead journalists (Sullum 1998), legal scholars (Rabin & Sugarman 1993; Gostin 1997), and historians (Brandt 1997, 1998; Berridge 1998, 1999, 2007) predominate. However, there have been several social science examinations of smoking within the social constructionist and post-structuralist traditions, including studies on the social symbolism of smoking and health (Gusfield 1993), transformations in the meaning and uses of tobacco over time and space (Hughes 2003), public health discourses on secondhand smoke (Jackson 1994; Bell 2011), the productivity of tobacco control discourses in constituting the socially marginalized smoker (Frohlich et al. 2012) and the ways that public health discourses on smoking have transformed a complex social practice into a 'risk behaviour' (Mair 2011).

So, whither tobacco studies?
In 1993 Klein observed that 'It is no easy task to praise cigarettes at this time in America' (p. 3), although he incorrectly predicted that the pendulum would soon swing back. Instead, over the past two decades tobacco studies scholars have had to exercise increasing care in how they frame their research and those whose tone is critical of mainstream tobacco control open themselves up to accusations of alignment with 'pro-tobacco interests', along the lines of the response my panel engendered.

That said, I don't want to give the impression that contemporary debates about the appropriate form and content of tobacco research are particularly new or, for that matter, unique to this field. The tension between functional and problem-oriented approaches has long been a part of debates about social science research on drugs (Hunt & Barker 2001). Thus, although there is a history of anthropological research on drugs that has highlighted their everyday uses and cultural and functional benefits (Hunt and Barker 2001; Bunton & Coveney 2011) and sociologists have long crystallized the ideological biases caught up in supposedly neutral and objective descriptions of drugs (Goode 2007), these approaches have also been accused of 'problem deflation' (Room 1984). Despite such accusations, Hunt and Barker (2001) suggest that anthropological research on drugs has more often acquiesced to public health agendas than challenged them. As they note, 'Far from viewing problem drinkers or drug users as active agents, immersed in a complex social structure, relating to other actors in their social group, they are still generally viewed as isolated, passive and decontextualized individuals' (p. 169) – a statement that seems equally true of much social science research on tobacco.

However, as Hunt and Barker observe, these developments must also be located within larger social and political forces, including the growing number of social scientists employed outside of the academy (or inside the academy in departments of medicine and public health), where the needs and proclivities of the institutions that employ them may undermine and blunt the impact of disciplinary sensibilities. Following Mauss, they also point out that the stimulus for research questions is not driven by developments within the social sciences or even grass-roots understandings of social problems. Instead, agendas are determined by moral and government entrepreneurs and then channelled through the major funding agencies. Thus, 'social scientists have generally accepted the definitions of politicians as to what constitute the most serious "social problems" of the day, especially with the growing dependence upon federal research funding' (p. 188).

The rise of the 'managed university' has also seen institutional autonomy and academic freedom fundamentally reworked (Marginson 1997). In this environment, academics are increasingly being refashioned as entrepreneurial subjects, expected to focus on research that contributes to solving social, economic and cultural challenges and problems, with research that doesn't contribute directly to the improvement of society interpreted as unethical (Dehli and Taylor 2006). Thus, research ethics boards are mandated to assess the 'importance of the knowledge that may reasonably be expected to result' and to reject as unethical research that fails to meet this requirement (Shweder 2006, p. 515). Although academics as individuals theoretically are free to 'opt out' of such arrangements, in reality their abilities to do so are tightly constrained by tenure and promotion systems, institutional review requirements, etc., which make stepping outside of this paradigm potentially risky, especially for pre-tenure faculty.

However, I would suggest that there are good reasons to resist this growing instrumentalization of research – both in the field of tobacco studies and beyond it. This is certainly not to suggest that there is no place for research that takes an explicit public health and tobacco control stance – as detailed above, there are numerous examples of

valuable and nuanced work being conducted within this frame. However, if this framework becomes prescriptive of how we all *should* conduct research, it seems to me that much of what is valuable about the social sciences – especially their important role in cultural critique – will be lost. There has to be a place for research that prioritizes smokers' own perspectives on smoking, even if those perspectives happen to value the sensuous body over the healthy body. There must also be a place for research that challenges taken-for-granted perspectives embedded in tobacco control (and not just so that tobacco control can operate more effectively).

I recognize that the potential for industry appropriation of academic research remains a vexing issue. One needs only to dip into the Legacy archives[4] to observe the tobacco industry's long and chequered history of manipulating and misrepresenting scientific research.[5] However, while most of us shudder at the idea of our work being used to promote industry interests or initiatives, demanding that all researchers take an explicitly anti-tobacco stance because of the nefarious uses to which their work *may* otherwise be put by the tobacco industry amounts to a gag order. It also flies in the face of what post-structuralists have taught us about the irreducible plurality of textual readings (Barthes 1979). As Latour (1987) has shown, citations of prior research are hardly transparent; instead, academic texts are often made to support or interrogate truth claims in ways that are contrary to the intentions of the original authors. Beck (2005) has also made similar observations regarding the uses to which sociological research is put outside of the academy. As he observes, practitioners and decision-makers and interpret research 'within their own frame of reference and for their own practical purposes' (p. 337) and our work is just as likely to end up in the in-box of an 'ignorant' bureaucrat as to suffer some more ignoble fate. Indeed, plenty of social scientists have had their work used to support government-funded initiatives or interventions which they feel are misguided or actively harmful.

It's also the case that researchers, activists and industry representatives may come to similar conclusions for entirely different (and even diametrically opposed) reasons. Gard (2011) has observed the 'strange bedfellows' critical scholarship on obesity has produced, wherein left-leaning fat studies scholars and right-leaning libertarians have both attacked public health constructions of the 'obesity epidemic', albeit from very different philosophical and ideological perspectives (see also Cooper 2010). Strossen (1995) has made similar observations regarding the anti-pornography movement, which saw the emergence of unexpected alignments between conservative Christian groups and certain feminist factions. That 'strange bedfellows' also emerge in research on tobacco should hardly surprise us, suggesting that these odd alignments between individuals and groups of different political persuasions are a natural and even inevitable state of affairs.

In 1978 the anthropologist Sherwin Feinhandler observed that a 'moral fervor underlies anti-smoking efforts' (p. 3) and that 'the target of anti-smoking legislation often turns out to be the working class and the poor' (p. 4). I'm on the record as having made similar statements myself, as have some of the social scientists whose work I document above. Do I agree with the context in which Feinhandler's statements were made? (A US congressional committee hearing in defence of the tobacco industry.) No. Do I agree

with the fact that Feinhandler himself was funded by the tobacco industry? No. Should I therefore stop making such statements because they happen to mirror those made by someone funded by the tobacco industry? In my view, absolutely not!

So, what *are* our duties as social scientists? I close with a quote from Mair and Kierans (2007), who I think have it exactly right:

> As social scientists working in the field of tobacco research… we see the role of our research as being to examine the social, cultural and historical significance of tobacco use as an everyday practice. From our perspective, the known harms associated with tobacco use constitute part of that significance but they by no means exhaust it. (p. 109).

Notes

[1] See Eakin et al. (1996: 162) for similar observations regarding the convergence of anti-smoking and tobacco industry interests.

[2] For other overviews of the tobacco literature I direct readers to Poland et al. (2006) and Kohrman and Benson (2011).

[3] I single out McKie et al. (2003) here not in the interests of critique but illustration. I have engaged in the 'soft' critique myself on numerous occasions, which, as I go on to discuss below, is a position that is generally far more conducive to the acquisition of government research funding than the 'hard' critique – or stepping outside the public health frame altogether. As Hunt and Barker (2001, p. 170) note: 'the feasibility of obtaining funding on the possible cultural and social benefits of "unhealthy" substances, whether illicit drugs, alcohol, or tobacco, has become severely restricted'.

[4] The Legacy archives are a digital library of tobacco industry documents maintained by the University of California relating to their advertising, manufacturing, marketing, sales, and scientific research activities.

[5] Of course, the tobacco industry is hardly unique in this respect. It is noteworthy that the pharmaceutical industry (which has an equally chequered past) regularly funds smoking cessation research, with little critical commentary.

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