



Tobacco Road Finland – How did an accepted pleasure turn into an avoidable risk behaviour?



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ABSTRACT

Smoking was once defined as an appropriate recreational substance or life comfort, but is now understood as a serious health risk and a public health problem important enough to be controlled by society. In this article the changed social position and development of tobacco regulations in Finland are studied from a perspective of social constructionism. The emergence of recent tobacco controls can be seen as a process whereby tobacco came to be defined as a social problem. I will argue that there were three primary definitions which played a decisive role in this process. Put in historical order, these three definitions contained (1) claims about harms to smokers, (2) claims about harms to others, and (3) claims about tobacco as a highly addictive drug. These conceptions together drove a complementary and mutually reinforcing re-conception of tobacco harms. Consequently, the emergence of these definitions led to the founding of new institutions, practices, and treatments. The leading value in the claim-making process was public health, which transferred the state's interest away from fiscal revenues towards lowering the costs caused by tobacco diseases. Correspondingly, medical science and medical doctors gained a position as the leading authority in the defining the tobacco issue. The latest conceptual innovation is the idea of a tobacco-free Finland by 2040, representing a strategy of 'de-normalising' tobacco use. The reversal in the social and cultural position of tobacco, which in Finland went from one extreme to another, was not based on pressure created by any wider social movements or organised tobacco-specific citizens groups, as in some other countries, but rather by a state health administration supported by a relatively small network of tobacco control advocates.

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Introduction

In 1957, a Finnish medical doctor, Alvar Wilska, placed advertisements in newspapers asking people who had quit smoking to write to him and answer questions concerning their reasons for quitting. Altogether 575 people answered his request, and this data has recently been reanalysed (Lenkkeri, Heloma, & Hakkarainen, 2013). What is interesting from today's perspective is that in addition to health issues, different kinds of moral reasoning and economic considerations were likewise expressed as reasons for quitting. Some people did not want to be enslaved by tobacco; some saw smoking as providing a bad role model for youth or polluting the air at home, while some saw it as simply an unnecessary waste of money. In other words, the general image of tobacco in the 1950s was still open to many different interpretations and there was not any fixed or dominating definition of the

problem. On the contrary, smoking was seen as a suitable comfort and a normal part of adult life in the official view of the Finnish state (KM 1950: 42).

While the awareness of the harms of smoking started to spread from the 1950s onwards, the success of tobacco continued without any serious obstacles until the mid-1970s. Smoking was widespread and the tobacco industry (Amer-Yhtymä Ltd, British American Tobacco Finland and Rettig Group Ltd) was flourishing in Finland. Tobacco products were regulated under food legislation (The Food Act, 526/1941; The Food Degree, 408/1952), where they had parallel status with food supplies and were explicitly placed in the category of harmless products (Aurejärvi, 2004). Consequently, advertisement of tobacco was free and extensive, and a vast range of positive images and meanings were attached to cigarettes and smoking (Salo, 1997). Those who were criticising public smoking were easily labelled as merely intolerant persons or straight-laced moralists (Hakkarainen, 2000).

In today's Finland, however, the position of smoking has changed beyond recognition. In the eyes of the public, tobacco has lost its fame and glory (Piispa, 1997, 564 pp.); it is seen as a risk

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behaviour and a public health problem of major significance. In terms of a social and cultural change, the shift in the position of tobacco has been rapid and radical. An equal shift has taken place in many other countries, but what characterises Finland is that the reversal in the social and cultural position of tobacco went from one extreme to another. In the 1920s, per capita consumption of cigarettes in Finland was the highest in the world (HE, 156/1975; Leppo, 1978), but at the beginning of 2000s, the level of smoking had dropped to one of the lowest in Europe (Heloma, Nurminen, Reijula, & Rantanen, 2004; Leppo & Puska, 2003). Correspondingly, there has been a complete change in tobacco policy. It has been said that when the 1976 Tobacco Act was passed in Finland, it was pioneering and one of the strictest in the world (Heloma, Helakorpi, Danielsson, Vartiainen, & Puska, 2012; Leppo & Vertio, 1986). In 2005, the Finnish tobacco policy was ranked in seventh place among the thirty EU countries, based on the Tobacco Control Scale (Joossens & Raw, 2006). Another feature which makes Finland an interesting case is that the state health administration and a relatively small network of tobacco control advocates were the key agents of the development, and not any wider social movement, as seen in many other countries. They also succeeded in transferring the state's interest away from fiscal revenues towards a lowering of the costs caused by tobacco diseases.

In this article, I will analyse the development of Finnish tobacco control policy from the perspective of social constructionism. Previously Heloma et al. (2012), Leppo (1978), Leppo and Puska (2003), and Leppo and Vertio (1986) have described this development or some phases of it. Those works are written by authors who have also personally participated in the formulation of tobacco policy both in national and international contexts. Hence, their works offer valuable insights into the developments. My position has been more distant from policy-making and in my analysis I will put more emphasis on different definitions of the problem than the different strategies of action. Internationally, social constructionism in the study of tobacco policy has previously been applied mainly to analyses of definite concepts or episodes of policy change (e.g. Troyer, 1989), rather than to analyses of longer historical processes of the formation of policy. I will argue that the development of Finnish tobacco policy can be seen as a gradually developed process where constructions of new conceptions in the definition of the problem played a decisive role.

Theoretical framework and data

Social constructionism is an umbrella concept for a wide array of different approaches rather than a uniform theory (Hacking, 1999). In this article, I will apply the tradition that has been developed in the study of social problems (Best, 1989; Blumer, 1971; Spector & Kitsuse, 1977). As seen from this standpoint social problems are social constructions in the sense that “a social problem exists primarily in terms of how it is defined and conceived in society” (Blumer, 1971, p. 300). When the perspective of a problem is defined, the horizon for possible solutions is also fixed (Gusfield, 1981). It is therefore important to analyse the definitions by which the tobacco problem is conceived when studying the development of the national policy on tobacco.

Other important components in the analysis of policy formation are social actors and the process of collective definition. An analysis should therefore be focused on three different components: (1) *claims* concerning the definition of a problem, (2) the *claim makers*, who are often making competing claims, and the (3) *claim-making process*, where competing claims are presented, evaluated and measured (Best, 1989).

There has been a lot of debate between scholars looking at social problems on how the social context of claim-making, the accuracy

of claims and the social and political consequences of redefinitions should be taken into account. Strict constructionists will concentrate solely on claims and the claim-making process while contextual constructionists are open to scrutinising the social and political context of claim-making as well (Best, 1989). My own position is closer to a contextual than a strict constructionist approach. However, as a sociologist, I am more interested in the social setting and political consequences than in judging the accuracy of single claims. This is not to deny the harms of smoking, but rather to put the emphasis of analysis on the social processes.

I will argue that there were three primary definitions built around specific claims, each playing a decisive role in the development of the tobacco issue in Finland. Put in historical order, these three definitions contained (1) claims about harms to smokers, (2) claims about harms to others, and (3) claims about tobacco as a highly addictive drug. It was essential that each of the separate claims did not contradict each other; indeed, there existed a reinforcing circle of re-conceptions which I will show in this paper. The latest reform which defined a revisited goal for national tobacco policy – a tobacco-free Finland by 2040 – can be seen as the conclusion of those three problem definitions having emerged together.

The two key claim makers in the process were *the health front*, composed of health activists and other tobacco control advocates, such as organizations for health professionals and NGOs concerned about smoking, and *the tobacco lobby*, led by the national and international tobacco industry. For industry, the rise of tobacco control policies contradicts strongly their economic interests.

In the definition of the tobacco problem, other important actors were journalists, the state administration (including different ministries and other offices), and politicians. Scientific research into tobacco played an important role in providing evidence for arguments, while the topic was also given visibility in mass media. As a last resort, public opinion acted as a pivotal point of reference.

In the United States, court cases against the tobacco industry have played an important role in the formation of tobacco policy. Finland was the first country in Europe to see the tobacco companies summonsed (Aurejärvi, 2004; Hakkarainen, 2000; Hiilamo, 2007). However, in Finland, a court case as an arena for policy formation has not been comparable in significance to Parliament or the state administration. Hence, in the following pages my focus will be on definitional processes in political arenas.

I base my analysis primarily on documents (1950–2012) such as government bills, parliamentary debates, passed acts and committee reports, which are publicly available. I also draw on previous Finnish research and other reports on smoking issues, tobacco policy and the strategies of the tobacco industry. In addition, I use interview material that was collected between 1995 and 1996 by a research assistant in my previous research project “The new direction of tobacco in Finland” (Hakkarainen, 2000). It includes interviews with tobacco control advocates (10), civil servants in the state administration (3), and representatives of the tobacco industry (3); the data amounted to 16 interviews (1 = interview; hereafter, interviews are numbered and the represented group are also named). Furthermore, there is a wide variety of other material, such as newspaper articles, that I have used as a background reading.

In analysing this material, I have concentrated on primary claims, central claim makers and the claim-making process in defining the tobacco problem in the course of the development of tobacco control policy, which is in keeping with my theoretical framework. Government bills have been especially valuable in this work, because they also include rather wide reviews of arguments, the evidence base, and justifications for a proposed reform. I use them as an axis around which other materials are organised.

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