

# ESRC Behaviour Change Seminar Series

## Seminar Three: Changing drug, alcohol and smoking behaviours (March 27<sup>th</sup> 2015, The Royal Society)

### Introduction

The third seminar in the 'behaviour change' series focused on changing drug, alcohol and smoking behaviours. Speakers were given free reign to talk on any subject they saw as pertaining to the 'future of behaviour change'; based on their own preoccupations, research and expertise. Where possible, speakers produced and shared (with delegates and each other) short position statements in advance of the seminar. (Nick Sheron was unable to do this due to the unpublished nature of the data he was presenting, although more can be read about his work here - <http://www.thelancet.com/commissions/crisis-of-liver-disease-in-the-UK>). The report below is an attempt to synthesise the discussion as a basis for future seminars and as a record of the afternoon's debate. This report does not suggest agreement was always reached between speakers or delegates or presume to be a full account of the afternoon's discussion. Rather, it focuses on three main themes which cut across much of the discussion. These are shown below:



## 1. Engaging with the alcohol and tobacco industries

A key theme of the seminar was the need to engage, in some way, with industry (e.g. the tobacco or alcohol industries). There were various views as to how this should be done.

- Tom Farrell presented netnographic research he has undertaken to explore the new 'vaping' culture growing in online and commented on the growing 'trilogue' between customers within a community of vapers and the companies involved in the industry. He concluded that engaging with companies is essential for understanding their influence and the level of engagement between them and consumers of their products.
- Jim McCambridge argued that although he agreed with Tom Farrell that it is essential to understand corporate behaviour, in terms of how partnerships across industries and public health are constructed, activities centred on engagement with business are the least likely to work (such as the New Responsibility Deals). Regulation is much more effective. It is the *least* effective approaches which are supported by industry. He cited the Portman Group's activities by way of example, arguing that the organisation was set up to further the interests of the alcohol industry, and therefore any 'counter marketing' activities it sponsors (such as via Drinkaware) are likely to be at best ineffective.
- James Nicholls noted that it is essential to understand the behaviour of generational cohorts and the impact of industry and policy on their behaviour. He presented evidence which showed that despite more liberal licensing policies and reductions in affordability, in fact the trend amongst young people across the UK is towards a reduction in their drinking. While there is no simple explanation for this, it is important for research to acknowledge and better understand such shifts. He noted how important it is to try and understand how policy might enhance or attenuate existing trends.
- Gerard Hastings argued that a pillar of behaviour change activity must be to 'contain' industry behaviour through regulation, although this must go in hand with counter-marketing activities and with building critical capacity in the population.
- Christine Griffin argued that despite James Nicholl's evidence, the culture of intoxication amongst young people was 'alive and well'. She presented data from a multi-disciplinary research project in New Zealand exploring the impact on this 'culture of intoxication' in relation to young people's social media practices and online alcohol marketing. She noted the increased exposure faced by young people to online and offline marketing activities which reinforces the culture of intoxication. The results of the New Zealand project indicate that social media marketing enables the alcohol industry to infiltrate young people drinking cultures, and that they do not always view this material as marketing. She commented on the corporatization of the relationship between Facebook and Diageo, for example, and concluded that more effective regulation is necessary to contain this set of new and high-budget marketing activities which focus on consumer engagement. For example, regulation needs to adapt and move away from individualized approaches. She also noted the argument in the USA that industry should be compelled to be fully transparent regarding their marketing strategies.
- The compulsion for industry to be transparent about their marketing activity was a view shared by Jim McCambridge, who added that industry should be taxed to help meet the cost of public health and also be compelled to make public their research and development documents. With an emphasis

on 'regulating everything necessary', this framework, he argued, could form the backbone of a new way of developing partnerships with industry that are genuinely in the public interest.

- Nick Sheron used the failed promise by David Cameron to introduce a minimum unit pricing for alcohol as the basis for his agreement on the importance – and difficulties – of regulating the alcohol industry. He presented data from his experiences treating patients with liver cirrhosis and noted that the worst effected drink as much as they can afford, so if they could afford less they would drink less. He also explored the potential effectiveness of downstream, brief interventions such as providing information to patients and argued that sometimes people's sensitivity to their own health can be highly motivational for behaviour change.

## 2. Harnessing citizen power

Various speakers and delegates also highlighted the importance of engaging with people to raise their critical consciousness as a way of affecting change. This was particularly with reference to the influence of corporations on modern culture; for example on the norms of excessive drinking.

- In addition to the need for increased 'containment' of industry through regulation, Gerard Hastings argued for the need for raising citizens' critical consciousness. He noted that people should be encouraged into a gentle revolution in the form of their non-compliance with marketers' persuasive imperative that consumption is the answer to all modern problems. Constant consumption and commercialization is not a sustainable. The solution is containment, but also counter-marketing (*i.e.* social marketing) and engaging with people to encourage their lack of cooperation. We should not be seeking behaviour change, he argued, but rather a lack of any kind of compliance with persuasive messaging. Gerard Hastings offered the Truth and BUGA UP campaigns as examples of when raising critical consciousness had had a significant behaviour change result.
- In response to Christine Griffin's presentation about online communities focused on a culture of intoxication, there was a comment from a delegate that some resistance to the force of commercial marketing activity encouraging intoxication is evident in online fora. There was no detail presented.
- Tom Farrell's research into vaping culture highlighted how consumers can take an active interest in the policy and regulatory backdrop to their chosen behaviour. He noted the considerable discussion and outrage in online 'vaping' communities about policies which might lead to vaping being viewed as dangerous to public health and even banned. While some in the audience felt online vaping communities promoted the corporate interests of manufacturers, others felt they represented the kind of citizen 'resistance' to state and corporate power (*e.g.* tobacco companies who seek to regulate e-cigarettes) that Gerard Hastings had called for. (No consensus was reached on this in the room). The engagement viewed in Tom Farrell's research implies a level of consumer involvement and consciousness with at least this behaviour.
- An important point was made by delegate Charles Abraham; that people are not merely cultural dupes. They are complicit in the behaviours they choose and in the case of alcohol, 'pleasure' has a strong part to play. It is important to recognise that upstream interventions alone (such as

regulating business) will miss an opportunity for using important levers for change. This relates back to Gerard Hastings' three-pronged model for the future of behaviour change; which includes containment, counter-messaging *and* critical capacity.

- Discussion continued and developed the idea that the pleasure of drinking is too often overlooked by those seeking behaviour-change. That is, discussion challenged Gerard Hastings's argument by pointing out that people may enjoy alcohol for intrinsic reasons, not because they lack critical capacity. The problem for behaviour-change researchers in that case would be: what if someone is exposed to (and perfectly well understands) counter-messaging, has high levels of critical capacity, and has their access to alcohol curtailed by the state, but still likes to have a drink? Who is 'in error' in that instance: the drinker or the advocate?

### 3. Social media

James Nicholls discussed the impact of social marketing campaigns led by both central government and the alcohol industry. He highlighted research which shows the unpredictability of audience interpretations of safe drinking messages – much of which suggests their effects on behaviour are limited, or in some cases counterproductive. As marketing and social marketing moves towards social media environments, researchers need to better understand how the relationship between exposure, interpretation and behaviour in that environment.

Discussion across several of the presentations highlighted that the new online digital landscape provides an important backdrop for discussions about the future of behaviour change. Firstly, social media has provided a new platform for the marketing activities of industries seeking to promote their products and engage more directly and fully with consumers than traditional offline media affords. This requires an adapted approach to industry regulation to take this into account. Christine Griffin's work exploring the presence of drinking culture in online fora is highly relevant here because it shows how engaged young people are with online corporate marketing activities using social media and how normalised this approach is within modern marketing strategies. Secondly, social media provides a potentially important platform for engaging with citizens for the purposes of empowering and engaging them in critical debate about the damaging influence of industry in their lives. Tom Farrell's evidence from the vaping online community is case in point; demonstrating the active voice that consumers of e-cigarettes have with regards to their behaviour.

### Conclusion

The three main themes cutting across the speakers and discussion were the absolute need to regulate corporate behaviour; the importance of raising the critical consciousness and empowering citizens to take action; and the need to understand the impact that social media has on corporate behaviours and potentially on participatory behaviour change activities. These are briefly summarised in the figure at the start of this document.

However another important point was raised about the nature of insight required to support behaviour change activities and how this is changing. Presentations by James Nicholls and Tom Farrell, particularly, argued that researchers must try and understand the trends that are happening around them rather than simply prescribing what might work. Tom Farrell showed that the grassroots vaping communities fail to fit with any of the models proposed by established behaviour change theorists, and therefore that researchers need to take a more grounded approach: *i.e.* to understand what is happening in real communities, before theorising as to what needs to be done. Similarly, the thrust of James Nicholls' paper was that researchers need to accept that culture is changing around them in ways they simply cannot predict, and they need to accept that and learn from it rather than proceeding as if their models were still correct, while the actual social trends were something to be explained away,

From seminar 3, key objectives for the future of behaviour change can be summarised as:

- To understand corporate behaviour better; in terms of its activities to engage with consumers (*e.g.* through social media platforms), its influence on policy and its research and development strategies for future profit making.
- To regulate industry as an essential pillar of behaviour change activity.
- To understand better the influence of policy and corporate behaviour on population-level behavioural trends.
- To continue to include brief, personalised and individualised interventions as part of a behaviour change approach where appropriate and effective.
- To better understand the relationship between people's capacity for agency amidst the powerful cultural forces shaped in part by industries whose 'bottom line' will always be more important than the public health agenda.
- To explore mechanisms for engagement which have the goal of raising the critical consciousness of populations.
- To embrace a multi-level behaviour change approach which includes critical capacity building, containment of industry and the countering of harmful corporate marketing with public health messaging.
- To better understand the actual subjects of the intended behaviour change; people with their own existing critical capacities, desires, pleasures and agencies; as people who might actually like vaping, or drinking, or for whom health and longevity are just one good among many others.
- To consider, as behaviour-change proponents, how we know our goals are 'right'? To consider the limitations of our own understanding of the social groups we are seeking to influence and to seek to understand change that happens in spite of our efforts?