## Title Page

# Title: Caught in the middle: early career researchers, public health and the emotional production of research

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# Caught in the middle: early career researchers, public health and the emotional production of research

## Abstract

In this short report, I discuss how public health research, its assessment and its dissemination outside the academy are produced, in part, through emotional circumstances. Using current debates on e-cigarettes as an example, I show that researchers find themselves uncomfortably positioned in complicated moral and affective landscapes, often making it difficult to represent the nuance of their research. I draw from the experiences and discussions of early career researchers to argue that this pressure can be intensified by the influence of senior colleagues, research communities and wider publics. While the social construction of knowledge has been acknowledged within much disciplinary introspection, the emotional and affective dimensions of knowledge production are perhaps under-appreciated and it is those dimensions that this report seeks to foreground.

**Keywords**

Tobacco research; electronic cigarettes; early career researcher, emotion

**Introduction**

Public health is laden with moral, ethical, personal and emotional feeling but what this means for knowledge production within the field and dissemination beyond remains underexplored. However, emotion *is* central to the field: evident in attempts to sway positions and convince on arguments (Cairney and Oliver, 2017; Etter, 2015). Additionally, publics, policymakers and commercial interests employ emotional language and appeals on public health issues (de Andrade et al, 2017; O’Donoughue Jenkins et al, 2016; Smith and Stewart, 2015). Public health is therefore subsumed in emotional and affective flows, but, I suggest this is rarely considered directly by the various actors that make up the field.

The work of Latour and Woolgar (1986) and many others has demonstrated that scientific knowledge is socially constructed. Latour and Woolgar describe how knowledge is created in research environments driven by personal beliefs, careerist strategizing and unpredictable opportunities. In particular, they mapped out the ‘cycle of credit’, a framework for achieving credibility in research, which identifies key career points including creating data, publishing articles and gaining funding. Arguably, it is this paradigm that reigns supreme in public health when considering knowledge production. However the ‘cycle of credit’ neglects the emotional dimensions of knowledge production and this is reflected in recent discussions on public health that call for objective approaches to divisive issues (Warner, 2018) and to consider the forces of policy formation with an attention to partisan politics (Greer et al., 2017), rather than personal drivers and emotive feeling. Although emotion runs through this cycle of credit, it is a neglected topic in considerations of how knowledge and research careers are shaped, even in fields such as public health which frequently evoke moral and ethical debates.

Indeed, many researchers tend to side-line emotional issues in their scholarship due to academic traditions in writing and presenting that value seemingly objective approaches (Askins, 2009). However, as one of the most recognised scholars on emotion, Sara Ahmed (2004, p. 4) argues: attempts to banish emotionality are a “hardness” which “is not the absence of emotion, but a different emotional orientation towards others”. Although writing about certain groups’ enrolling of emotions such as disgust towards immigrants, Ahmed’s statement can travel into a number of other contexts, including, I argue, public health. To borrow Arlie Hochschild’s (1983) term, working in public health can involve ‘emotional labour’ of myriad kinds, including culturing professional relationships, managing personal perspectives and navigating moral and ethical issues.

Academic research increasingly requires composed, professional and highly productive researchers and there is little consideration of how these requirements can create emotionally charged research processes and environments (Caretta, Drozdzewski, Jokinen, & Falconer, 2018; McKay & Monk, 2017). Early career researchers, especially those working in research areas typified by disagreement and strong debate, perhaps experience this most acutely as they have the least capital, but the most need, to enter into the cycle of credit. E-cigarette research is one such contemporary area characterised by conflicting opinions and strong emotional feeling. It is the experience of early career researchers studying these devices that I shall reflect upon in the remainder of this report.

**E-cigarette research and the emotional shaping of research careers**

It can be difficult to gain perspective in fields like Public Health that are so scrutinised by publics and involve such high population level stakes. Tobacco research is a case in point, as many scholars have noted the dominance of public health agendas through which smokers are viewed from narrow behavioural perspectives rather than as social, cultural, emotional, affective and relational beings (Bell & Dennis, 2013; Macnaughton, Carro-Ripalda, & Russell, 2012). These perspectives have become notoriously difficult to challenge among researchers from sociological and related disciplinary backgrounds (Bell, 2013; Mair & Kierans, 2007).

E-cigarettes are the subject of ongoing controversy. By some, the devices are hailed as potential life saving and tobacco ‘endgame’ devices (Fairchild, Bayer, & Colgrove, 2014), but others have cast doubt on their efficacy for smoking harm reduction (Chapman, 2014). We have seen these debates before of course; nicotine gum was initially subsumed in debates over whether nicotine addiction or the ‘contaminated’ nicotine delivery product (the cigarette) was the problem in need of addressing (Elam, 2015). Eventually, gum became configured as a medical product for reducing smoking rather than a pleasurable nicotine product. E-cigarettes do add a new dimension to previous innovations: the wide availability, variety and novelty of the devices and different modes of use has seen the emergence of a vaping ‘subculture’ (Keane, Weier, Fraser, & Gartner, 2017). Unlike gum and most other non-combustible nicotine, e-cigarettes invoke similarities with smoking through images of inhalation, exhalation, and the distribution of a ‘smoky’ substance and confound previous configurations of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ nicotine (Bell & Keane, 2012). The framing of ‘renormalisation’ of smoking has therefore now become a pivot for debate, and further reflects the deep-rooted moral beliefs of purity/sanctity and harm reduction that underlie public health knowledge formation (Alderman, Dollar, & Kozlowski, 2010).

The efficacy of e-cigarettes for effective harm reduction remains unclear (e.g. Malas et al. 2016) and the involvement of the tobacco industry in the manufacture of e-cigarettes (Gornall, 2015), along with possible conflict of interest and subsequent questions on the reliability of research (Kosmider & Anastasi, 2016; Pisinger, 2016) have all contributed to a seemingly divided field. One manifestation of these issues is that commentary pages of journals are littered with instances of strong feeling towards e-cigarettes, often framed through a narrative of researchers being either ‘proponents’ or ‘opponents’.

This division within public health has a range of implications for those at an early stage of their career. Early career researchers are, often reluctantly, embroiled in the ‘game’ of academia and have to answer to the imperatives of publishing, obtaining funding and teaching (McKay & Monk, 2017). Public health researchers are also expected to engage more directly with various publics (including policy, health services, third sector, communities) than other social science fields (Burawoy, 2005). As a result, researchers find themselves and their work ever open to interpretation by others who evaluate by their own morals, politics, emotions, institutional expectations and party lines. Engaging with publics therefore carries certain risks for academics: that our research will be misinterpreted; our motives misconstrued; our morals questioned and our skills doubted.

This feeling was evident in a one-day event organised in Edinburgh in 2016 for early career researchers in response to anecdotal accounts of negative experiences with colleagues, the media and publics around their research on e-cigarettes. Attendees came from across the UK nations and represented cognate disciplines to public health. There was a range of experience: from recently completed PhD to those emerging as recognized experts in their field. The experience of these researchers, who held diverse views about the role and potential of e-cigarettes in public health, will be shared in the remainder of this report. In the spirit of advancing professional practice rather than to criticise individuals or groups, common themes – which help our understanding of the emotional and affective dimensions of knowledge production in public health – will be the focus rather than specific examples. To enable this, semi-fictionalized vignettes, synthesized from experiences shared in the meeting but rendered less specific to individuals, are used to illustrate salient experiences. These vignettes are necessarily semi-fictionalized in order to protect anonymity, as far as possible, among the relatively small number of individuals involved directly in public health related research into e-cigarettes.

## Being assigned to e-cigarette ‘camps’

There was a general feeling that the polarization of the e-cigarette debate was beyond the control of researchers. The attendees spoke of having been placed by other forces (such as senior academics and the media) into a ‘camp’ representing either opponents or proponents. This was lamented and many expressed a desire to unpack the nuance of e-cigarettes and their impact on public health in less binary terms. The meeting itself evidenced this as several attendees reflected positively on the opportunity to discuss experiences of researching e-cigarettes, recognizing areas of common understanding with others who had been positioned as belonging to the ‘opposite’ viewpoint. From these discussions, two broad challenges to e-cigarette research were identified: the pressure felt by early career researchers to ‘declare’ for one ‘side’ or the other; and braving the public domain. I will examine each of these in turn and conclude with some thoughts on the current state of e-cigarette research and emotion within public health.

### *Declaring for one ‘side’ or the other*

Vignette 1: Senior advice

Following the presentation of research findings at a national conference, an early career researcher is taken aside by a senior colleague (beyond their immediate institutional/project team). The researcher is advised to situate their conclusions in a specific e-cigarette ‘camp’. The advice is presented as collegial and friendly, the benefit of experience from someone trying to help a junior colleague improve their research impact. The researcher does not entirely share their senior colleague’s perspective, having only recently completed the research and still developing their own opinions about e-cigarettes; but they feel somewhat coerced into changing their interpretation in order to create a positive relationship with an established colleague and fit in with this seemingly dominant perspective on e-cigarettes.

Pressure from senior academics was sometimes felt to direct the attendees to declare their allegiance for one camp or other. As the vignette describes, more nuanced positions were thought to be discouraged. Experiences like this highlight the subtle affective forces at play in e-cigarette research to create a sense of belonging and legitimation for researchers at the expense of encouraging contrary thought and debate. Given the level of nuance that participants lamented as being lost through this oppositional positioning, it is disappointing that we still see articles and commentaries reducing the debates to ‘opponents’ and ‘proponents’, implying that there are no shades of grey. Relatedly, as the attendees discussed the challenges of publishing e-cigarette research, some felt that the peer review process had become an opportunity for reviewers, and sometimes editors, to express political, moral and personal opinions on e-cigarettes, rather that assessing the academic rigour of studies. These experiences tell of a moral and emotional research landscape that is, perhaps, undercutting fair evaluations of research. Morality, and indeed emotion, should not be absent from our research but measures of reflexivity should be engaged to ensure that our own beliefs do not become axiomatic mantras that narrow what comes to be considered as legitimate research.

### *Braving the public domain*

Vignette 2: Misrepresentation

After presenting findings on e-cigarettes at a public engagement event, a researcher is approached by representatives from the media, third sector and policy, who want to report on the findings to their own audiences. The researcher is pleased at this interest but asks for caution about how the findings are interpreted and generalised, especially in an already divided tobacco research community. However, the nuance of the presentation and early discussion of findings is lost in these different media and contexts. Furthermore, some of the reporting firmly places the researcher in a particular e-cigarette ‘camp’. The researcher has limited experience of navigating the public domain outside of academia and feels overwhelmed at the pressure to correct misunderstandings. Ultimately, the researcher opts to keep a low profile moving forward, but is concerned about the personal and professional ramifications that may stem from these reports.

In contributing to discussion about academics sharing sociological research with various publics, Beck (2005) argues that we should not be surprised that those beyond academia re-interpret and re-frame our findings to suit their own audiences and mediums. However, by relinquishing control, the nuance and detail of findings - so important in this emerging topic - can be misconstrued. Moreover, coverage in social media was perceived by the attendees as exposing researchers to severe criticism, often taking a hyperbolic moralising tone, from groups with strongly held normative ideals and/or vested personal or financial interests. As the perceived divisions extend to the media and public domain, researchers are further pulled into a public health characterised by fundamental disagreements and ‘warring’ factions. Emotive forces, stemming from an ‘us’ and ‘them’ construction can lead to missed opportunities for researchers, who may find colleagues have inferred attitudes and standpoints for individuals based on sources that are out that individual’s control.

## Conclusion

Mair and Kierans (2007: 109) warned us some time ago that: “adopting any normative stance towards tobacco, whether pro- or anti-, would actually interfere with our capacity to document and interpret the significance of tobacco in the lives of those we study”. This statement transfers to the contemporary e-cigarette situation, and in this short report I have argued that binary framings are stymying early career researchers’ attempts to conduct research. In particular, I contend that we must acknowledge how research is emotionally and affectively constructed through our everyday interactions with colleagues and publics: through the ‘emotional labour’ in which researchers must partake to maintain relations in moments when their work is challenged. In the case of e-cigarettes these challenges are experienced through the fear of falling, inadvertently, on one side or another, of the fence. My suggestion to begin addressing these issues is to reflexively consider the way emotion directs our research, our actions, our comments and how these in turn create friendly, safe, hostile or intimidating environments for those just starting out in the field.

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## Competing Interests

## No competing interests to declare

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