

Room, R. (2016, early view) Sources of funding as an influence on alcohol studies. *International Journal of Alcohol & Drug Research*, doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.7895/ijadr.vXiY.231>.
<http://www.ijadr.org/index.php/ijadr/article/view/231>

Sources of funding as an influence on alcohol studies

Robin Room

Centre for Alcohol Policy Research, Turning Point, Fitzroy, Victoria, Australia
Melbourne School of Population and Global Health, University of Melbourne
Centre for Social Research on Alcohol and Drugs, Stockholm University

It was when I first read Thomas Kuhn's (1962) seminal work shortly after its first publication that I was awakened to the historical evidence that even the "hardest" science is a human construction deeply influenced by the social order and the conceptual traditions in which the scientist works. On the other hand, as constructivism took hold in sociology, I realised I was a "soft" constructivist, willing to acknowledge that our conceptual and other constructions face some limits from the physical world and its operating rules (Room, 1984). But in fields like ours, the constraints are quite broad, so that what constitutes alcohol social science – what its research questions are, and how it approaches them – have varied a great deal over the last century or so, and vary considerably among the societies which have been willing to fund such research. I remember discovering that temperance-oriented survey studies, when they turned attention at all beyond the boundary between drinker and abstainer, focused only on frequency of drinking, ignoring amount per occasion (Lindgren, 1973) -- a pattern found also in drug war-era drug surveys. For another example, psychiatrically-oriented survey analyses tend to gravitate immediately to the diagnosis level – skipping over the levels of the items, "symptoms" and "criteria" which tend to be of the greatest interest to sociologists (Caetano, 1991). What we collect as material for study and what we focus on in analysing it are deeply influenced by our intellectual and cultural-political heritage and environment.

They are also influenced more directly by the research's sources of funding. Most of those of us who choose research as a job must rely on some entity to fund us. Particularly in a field like ours, which is not of central interest to any traditional academic discipline or profession, the funding is usually given within a frame of institutional interests of the funder. This is most often a government department or research fund. Less commonly, it may be a charitable organisation. Or it may be a commercial organisation with interests in the field. Over the years, interested commercial organisations funding research in the alcohol field have included insurance companies supporting studies which might suggest how to reduce liability; pharmaceutical firms funding research on medications for alcohol-related conditions; and, of course, firms involved in producing, distributing or marketing alcoholic beverages.

As Mäkelä and Viikari (1977) analysed, governments have various interests at stake in the production, marketing and consumption of alcoholic beverages – including at least some interests in

an expanding market as well as those in controlling the market. Charitable organisations funding research in our field are usually interested directly in reducing social and health problems related to drinking. Commercial organisations are responsible to their stockholders to maximise their profitability, and their support for research has this as its short- or long-term aim. For pharmaceutical and insurance firms, this will usually be oriented to finding ways to respond to or reduce problems from drinking, whether or not this would affect the overall amount of alcohol consumed. For alcohol producers and marketers and related industries, the stockholders' interest tends to be unambiguously to increase or at least stabilise the level of alcohol consumption. Thus they may sponsor research with the intention of serving this interest. Research may also be sponsored because of a second-order interest. Given the long history of social and cultural conflict in many societies over the availability of alcohol, alcohol producers are often quite aware that it is in their political and longer-term interest to improve their industry's social image, and one method by which this has been pursued in many countries is through supporting foundations to fund research in the field.

Some research projects supported by the industry quite directly serve the interests of the industry. For instance, a British anthropologist was recently funded by Lion Breweries to produce and publicise for Australian and New Zealand audiences a research report reviewing the literature on alcohol's role in violence, essentially with the argument that, because there are cultural differences in how people act when intoxicated, alcohol cannot be seen as a causal factor in the occurrence of violence (Fox, 2015; Miller, 2015). In these countries, where there have been successful efforts to reduce rates of late-night street violence by closing bars and clubs earlier (Kypri et al., 2014; Menéndez et al., 2015), the report obviously had direct relevance to the alcohol industry's economic interests.

Research funding by the alcohol industry is often not so obviously tied to immediate economic interests. To be seen funding studies by prestigious researchers – especially biological and clinical researchers – can also serve an industry's interest in improving its reputation and being seen as a “good corporate citizen”. An improved reputation will help in the industry's lobbying efforts on behalf of its economic interests. Often the longer-term and shorter-term interests are tied together, as in industry-linked funding of medical research on alcohol and heart disease. However, the industry's approach seems to have been more to fund research in areas where the results may be helpful than to try to influence the results of studies it funds. Thus a recent analysis comparing findings on alcohol and cardiovascular disease found only equivocal evidence for any difference in results between industry-funded and other studies (McCambridge & Hartwell, 2015).

In recent decades there has been substantially more recognition in the scientific community of the potential influence of funding sources on research. As a result, it is now routine for research journals to require that sources of funding be disclosed in the published article. This is a sensible requirement, in terms of giving the reader at least a clue about potential influences on the research. But a thoughtful reader will recognise that funders are not the only sources of influence on research, and indeed that there are substantial variations between funders in the extent to which they exert any influence on the research after it is funded.

The question which alcohol researchers sooner or later face is whether to seek or accept funding from particular sources. It seems to me there are several main considerations for the researcher in deciding on this question.

- The degree of autonomy which the researcher or research group has in carrying out and reporting the research.
- The extent to which the researcher has the right to publish the results of the research within a reasonable timeframe, and to work further with and publish from the research data beyond what may have been contractually specified.
- The threat to the researcher's reputation from accepting research money from the particular source.

In my experience, sentiment has shifted on this last question in the decades I have been working in the field. In the 1960s, at least in English-speaking countries, there was not much reputational damage to a researcher from accepting funding from alcohol industry-related foundations. Things have gradually been changing, so that the alcohol field is becoming more like the tobacco field, in which there tends to be a bright line splitting the field between researchers who have accepted tobacco industry money and the rest of the field, who will not. On this matter, my advice to young scientists has been to take into account their future reputation in deciding whether to accept industry funding, particularly given the direction in which the field has been changing concerning reputational damage.

Complicating the situation is the fact that the balance on these decisions on reputational risk clearly differs from country to country. For one thing, in many countries there is no substantial alternative to industry-connected funding for social alcohol research. In my view, researchers from other countries should take the funding situation in such a country into account in their view of decisions made by researchers there. In the end, anyway, research should be judged by its inherent quality and contribution to knowledge. Only where the probity of the research team and results is in doubt does the issue of source of funding come to the fore in assessing the study.

It is worth keeping in mind, also, that all sources of funding are potential sources of influence on our research. What research is funded by governments is constrained within limits defined by policy decisions, and often also shaped by the current orthodoxies as expressed by members of grant review committees. The government interest in revenue tied to alcohol sales or in the growth of a national industry – for instance, wine – may influence its decisions on research funding, though this seems to be a rarer occurrence in the alcohol field than, say, for gambling research (Room, 2005). Alcohol industry interests have certainly influenced government decisions on alcohol policy agencies, including the framing of research funding programs, but this influence is more likely to be expressed in closed-door political lobbying than in efforts to influence grantmaking decisions and processes (Room, 2006).

As noted above, influences which shape research extend beyond funding sources. The researcher him/herself is the strongest source of potential bias in the findings. In my own work, the ethic I try to keep to is distinguishing between my role as a publicly-supported technician of social policy (“if you pull this policy lever, this is the evidence on what will happen”) and my role as citizen (“This is what I think should be done”). Quite often my political views on what should happen and the research

evidence on what will happen are not in agreement. Those of us whose research is publicly funded, in my view, have a duty to try to distinguish between the two roles, and to answer in the technician role to public authorities and in public discourse when asked what happens when the lever is pulled.

REFERENCES

Caetano, R. (1991) Psychiatric epidemiology and survey research: contrasting approaches to the study of alcohol problems. *Contemporary Drug Problems* 18:99-120.

Fox, A. (2015) *Understanding behaviour in the Australian and New Zealand night-time economies: an anthropological study*. Silverwater, NSW: Lion Beer, Spirits and Wine Australia. <http://www.lionco.com/content/u12/Dr%20Anne%20Fox%20report.pdf>

Kuhn, T. (1962) *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Kypri, K., McElduff, P. & Miller, P. (2014) Restrictions in pub closing times and lockouts in Newcastle, Australia five years on. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 33(3):323-326.

Lindgren, Å. (1973) Some results from an international series of drinking surveys. *Drinking and Drug Practices Surveyor* 8:34-45.

Mäkelä, K. & Viikari, M. (1977) Notes on alcohol and the state. *Acta Sociologica* 20(2):155-179.

McCambridge, J. & Hartwell, G. (2015) Has industry funding biased studies of the protective effects of alcohol on cardiovascular disease? A preliminary investigation of prospective cohort studies. *Drug and Alcohol Review* 34(1):58-66.

Menéndez, P., Weatherburn, D., Kypri, K. & Fitzgerald, J. (2015) Lockouts and last drinks: the impact of the January 2014 liquor licence reforms on assaults in NSW, Australia. *Crime and Justice Bulletin* 183. <http://www.bocsar.nsw.gov.au/Documents/CJB/CJB183.pdf>

Miller, P. (2015) The alcohol industry and their merchants of doubt. Posting on Drinktank website. Canberra: FARE. <http://drinktank.org.au/2015/03/merchants-of-doubt/>

Room, R. (1984) Alcohol problems and the sociological constructivist approach: quagmire or path forward? Presented at the Alcohol Epidemiology Section meetings of the International Council on Alcohol and Addictions, Edinburgh, Scotland, 4-8 June. <http://www.robinroom.net/quagmire.pdf>

Room, R. (2005) The wheel of fortune: cycles and reactions in gambling policies. *Addiction*. 100:1226-1227.

Room, R. (2006) Advancing industry interests in alcohol policy: the double game. *Nordisk Alkohol- & Narkotikatidskrift* 26: 389-402. <http://www.nordicwelfare.org/PageFiles/9945/Advancing%20industry%20interests%20in%20alcohol%20policy%20the%20double%20game.pdf>