Reviewer’s report

Title: Perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting in hard-core smokers: a focus group study.

Version: 2
Date: 10 December 2013
Reviewer: Alicja Sieminska

Reviewer’s report:

It is a focus group study aimed to gain insight into the perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting in hard-core smokers. I consider that this group deserves a special interest, and it actually does in the research literature of the last decade. Unfortunately, relatively little is known about the perceived pros and cons of smoking and smoking cessation in the specific subgroup of hard-core smokers. I agree with the authors that knowledge on the attitudes of hard-core smokers towards smoking and smoking cessation may help to develop interventions specifically targeting this group. Therefore, it is important to gain more knowledge about these cognitive determinants of smoking in hard-core smokers that was an aim of the authors’ study.

In their research authors used a structural procedure to analyze the data obtained from the 11 focus group interviews among current and former hard-core smokers, and from the questionnaires. Both the procedures of this qualitative study and the analyses of the questionnaires and transcript data were properly performed, and they are thoroughly described in the paper.

In this focus groups study authors investigated the four different perspectives involved in smokers’ attitudes towards smoking and quitting: pros of smoking, cons of smoking, pros of quitting, and cons of quitting. In this way they obtained the most comprehensive view on these attitudes. The six main categories and 14 subcategories in perceived pros and cons of both smoking and quitting in current and former hard-core smokers were identified and analyzed. The results suggest that these four different perspectives on smoking and quitting (i.e., pros of smoking, cons of smoking, pros of quitting, and cons of quitting) are essentially different. In addition, authors found no pronounced differences in perceived pros and cons between current and former smokers or between participants of high and low SES.

In sum, authors confirmed the perceived pros and cons of smoking do not necessarily mirror the perceived pros and cons of quitting and suggested the "Distorted Mirror Hypothesis".

They also conclude that the major differences between perceived pros and cons of smoking, and pros and cons of quitting, should be taken into account at developing the smoking cessation programs for hard-core smokers.

In general, the manuscript is well-written, clearly and sensibly arranged, and easy to follow. In the Introduction authors clearly state the problem which they
investigated and summarize relevant research to provide context. The Methods
used are accurate and sufficiently described. The results are clearly presented
and discussed on the ground of the relevant literature. At the end of the paper
well justified conclusions are placed.

However, there are following concerns that might be addressed by authors prior
the paper was accepted for publication.

Major concerns: none

Minor concerns:

1. In my opinion, the “Current study” section is unnecessary and includes a
number of repetitions. Some information included there can be found in the other
places of the paper and should be cut out (for instance the whole first paragraph,
the first sentence of the second paragraph, the whole last paragraph). Besides,
this subsection is rambling and difficult to follow, and should be removed.

The paragraph which regards the six criteria to select hard-core smokers could
be for instance attached to the last paragraph of the participants subsection.

Besides, I suggest replacing the following information (suggested little changes
included) to the Discussion section: “Former hard-core smokers who have
successfully gone through the process of quitting might provide additional
insights into the balance of motives to stop or to continue smoking. Current
hardcore smokers, who have not yet permanently quit, might lack the experience
to identify the crucial pros or cons that might tip the balance of motives from
smoking continuation towards smoking cessation. The experiences of former
hard-core smokers may help identify ways (e.g., tackling certain outcome beliefs;
[23]) in which the current hard-core smokers could be targeted and motivated to
participate in future interventions or clinical settings”.

“Socioeconomic status (SES) is also an important factor in the outcome beliefs of
smoking [24], and the prevalence of hard-core smokers is higher among those
with a ower SES [6].”

The first sentence of the “Current study” subsection might replace the last
sentence of the Background.

2. I suggest reorganizing the Methods section. As a first subsection I suggest
placing “Participants”, following by “Procedure” subsection. The “Overview”
subsection should be cut out and information included there replaced to other
subsections. For instance: “All participants were aged 35-79 (M = 54.7, SD =
7.6).”, or „Participants received compensation for their travel expenditures and an
additional 45 euros for their participation” should be placed in the “Participants”
subsection. Remaining information included in the “Overview” subsection (those
regarding focus group interviews and dividing focus groups by authors according
to SES defined by level of education) should be placed in the Procedure
subsection.

3. It is not clear what authors meant using in the paper the term (former)
smokers. Using in the brackets the adjective former is somewhat confusing especially that it has not been used in the article consequently.

For instance:

a) The third paragraph of the “Current study”:
“Since this may influence the perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting, we held different focus groups for (former) smokers of low and high SES”.

b) The last paragraph of the “Current study”:
“In the present study we investigated the perceived pros and cons of smoking and quitting among hard-core smokers by conducting a focus group study among low and high SES current hard-core smokers, and among low and high SES former hard-core smokers”.

c) The second sentence of “Overview”:
“We held separate focus groups for (former) smokers of low and high SES, based on the highest completed level of education (Dutch abbreviations in brackets).”

If the term “(former) smokers” meant both former and current smokers (it becomes more probable along with reading the text) I would suggest using instead of it: participants, subjects or smokers.

4. Improper referring to references here and there in the article, for instance in the second paragraph of the “Current study” section the number 23 of the reference should be placed at the end of the sentence.

5. For more clearness of the paper, I suggest place all quotations which regard main six categories of perceived pros and cons of smoking and smoking cessation in the separate table that could include for instance three columns: 1/ Categories of perceived pros and cons of smoking and smoking cessation, 2/Exemplary quotation, 3/ Participant

6. Table 1. I do not think the information on the significant difference between current and former mean age might be of any importance. If authors consider otherwise and decide to leave this information, the statistical test used should be mentioned in the Method section.

7. Language needs a little improvement (e.g., in the Study limitations: “The aim our study was…”, in the Conclusions: “…should be taken in the account..”, etc.)

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Needs some language corrections before being published
Statistical review: No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

Declaration of competing interests:

I declare that I have no competing interests