

“You Do It Through the Grapevine”: A Bourdieusian Analysis of Under-Age Access to Tobacco Among Adolescents From Seven European Cities

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Abstract

Despite efforts to reduce adolescent smoking via minimum age-of-sale legislation, many young people continue to access tobacco through a mix of social and commercial sources. Little is known about the roles of habitus, capital, and social topographies in shaping under-age access to tobacco. This article draws on Bourdieu’s theory of practice and data generated from 56 focus groups with 14- to 19-year-olds across seven European cities to answer the question “via what sources and by what means do adolescents obtain tobacco?” We find that adolescents use a range of personal capitals (social, cultural, and economic) to access tobacco, with the specific constitution and deployment of these capitals varying according to the regularities of different fields. Since adolescents access tobacco via culturally embedded practices, attempts to curtail this access are more likely to be effective if they are multi-pronged, culturally informed, and attuned to the lived experiences of adolescent smokers.

Keywords

adolescents; smoking; access; Bourdieu; qualitative; focus groups; Europe

Introduction

The vast majority of European countries prohibit sale of tobacco products to minors, with most countries setting 18 as the minimum age of purchase (World Health Organization Europe, 2019). Yet, 20% of 15- and 16-year-olds continue to smoke on a daily basis, with 60% claiming it would be easy to obtain cigarettes if they wanted to (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, 2020). This suggests that tobacco continues to be both desirable and accessible during adolescence—the period in which most lifetime smokers will become addicted (Marcon et al., 2018; United States Department of Health & Human Services, 2014).

Qualitative explorations of adolescent smoking highlight its relational dimensions, including the symbolic role of smoking in signaling group identity (Hoek et al., 2012; Lennon et al., 2005; Stjerna et al., 2004) and the significance of peer and broader social relationships (e.g., family, neighborhoods) in shaping smoking practices (Amos & Bostock, 2007; Ennett et al., 2010; Haas & Schaefer, 2014; Johnson et al., 2003; Katainen, 2010; Nichter et al., 1997). This research underscores the significance of smoking practices for acquiring status and constructing identity during adolescence (Haines et al.,

2009; Triandafilidis et al., 2017). By focusing on these relational aspects, we may better understand how young people’s social worlds interact with their access to tobacco—which may help inform more effective approaches for protecting young people from the harms of tobacco addiction (Poland et al., 2006).

The prevention of under-age access to tobacco presents both practical and ethical challenges. While some researchers regard age-of-sale laws as broadly effective (Chen & Forster, 2006; DiFranza, 2012) others do not, arguing that their efficacy is often undermined by variable enforcement and by young people’s access to alternative (non-commercial) sources of tobacco (Ling et al., 2002; Rigotti et al., 1997). Evidence suggests that retailer compliance with age-of-sale laws is improved with increased enforcement

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(Biglan et al., 1996; Chen & Forster, 2006; Rigotti et al., 1997), although the extent to which this reduces youth smoking is unclear (Dent, 2004; Harrison et al., 2000; Landrine & Klonoff, 2003; Rigotti et al., 1997). A small number of non-compliant retailers—serving a significant number of adolescents—can undermine majority efforts (Forster & Wolfson, 1998; Rigotti et al., 1997), supporting the argument that access laws impact smoking prevalence only when a high compliance “threshold” is reached (Dent, 2004; Leatherdale, 2005). At the same time, adolescents are known to use non-commercial sources (e.g., friends) when unable to obtain tobacco via commercial means (Dent, 2004; Robinson & Amos, 2010). Younger, lower-consumption smokers often rely on social sources, even when commercial sources are potentially available (Borland & Amos, 2009; Harrison et al., 2000), and social sources play a significant role in smoking initiation (Marsh et al., 2013; Robinson & Amos, 2010). Some researchers contend that efforts to reduce adolescent tobacco access should therefore address both commercial and non-commercial sources (Rimpela, 2004) while others oppose such an approach, arguing that “trying to restrict ‘social sources’ of cigarettes is impractical, blames children, their friends and parents, [and] may lead to laws criminalising children for possession of cigarettes” (Ling et al., 2002 p. 3).

Bourdieu’s (1977/2007, 1986/2011) theory of practice offers a useful framework for understanding the significance of adolescent drug use in material, social, and cultural terms (Lunnay et al., 2011; Poland et al., 2006), and how the acquisition, exchange, and use of tobacco interact with adolescent identity and status (Gagné et al., 2015; Haines et al., 2009; Tjelta, 2015). By applying Bourdieusian concepts to analysis of focus group data generated with European adolescents aged 14 to 19 years, we address the question: “via what sources and by what means do adolescents obtain tobacco?” We seek to build on existing sociological explorations of adolescent smoking, considering how peer-networks, social topographies, and the active construction of meaning may facilitate (or impede) tobacco access in the context of minimum age-of-sale laws in cities from seven European countries: Belgium, Finland, Germany, Ireland, Italy, The Netherlands, and Portugal. These sites represent distinct policy contexts (Joossens & Raw, 2017) ranging from those recognized as leaders in youth tobacco control (e.g., Finland [Rimpela, 2004]) to countries with more permissive regulation (e.g., Belgium, where tobacco can be legally sold to 16- and 17-year-olds [European Union Agency for Fundamental Rights, 2017]).

Bourdieu’s Theory of Practice and Adolescent Tobacco Access

In Bourdieu’s (1977/2007) theory of practice, socially embedded practices (such as accessing tobacco) are

explored through the interaction of field, habitus and capital. *Fields* are understood as social spaces constituted by struggles over a central stake (e.g., social status) (Dubois, 2012) in which such negotiations are structured by unwritten logics of practice. Mastery of these unwritten logics occurs pre-reflexively through immersion in the relevant field and subsequent development of a “socialised subjectivity” (Manton, 2012) or *habitus* in which the relevant “rules of play” are unconsciously inculcated (Bourdieu, 1977/2007). The habitus subsequently structures individual dispositions and affect, shaping cognition and preference (Bourdieu, 1977/2007).

Habitus and field interact and reinforce one another by structuring social interactions or practices, such that subjects develop an intuitive feel for the “tempo, rhythms and unwritten rules” (Manton, 2012, p. 53) of their social spaces. Bourdieu (1986/2011) employs the concept of *capital* to describe economic, cultural, and social assets which are acquired and exchanged in establishing an individual’s position within a particular field. Cultural capital encompasses the tastes, skills, and expertise signifying alignment with the values of the relevant field, while social capital refers to the relational resources available to an individual through “a durable network of . . . relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition . . . which provides each of its members with the backing of the collectively owned capital” (Bourdieu, 1986/2011, p. 51).

Practices refer to social interactions that encompass and reproduce the relationship between habitus and capital within a field (Manton, 2012, p. 50). While Bourdieu’s theory of practice primarily sought to elucidate class distinctions, his conceptual tools have been used to explore a range of health-related practices—including drinking (Lunnay et al., 2011; MacArthur et al., 2017; Scott et al., 2017; Townshend, 2013), smoking (Gagné et al., 2015), and other substance use (Haines et al., 2009).

We draw on these concepts to explore *the practice of accessing tobacco* within different but homologous *adolescent fields*, examining how European adolescents engage with economic, social, and cultural capital through the practice of obtaining tobacco. Building on previous analyses of adolescent smoking (Haines et al., 2009) and access practices (Tjelta, 2015), we conceptualize adolescent social spaces as *fields* in which the implicitly regulated nature of adolescent smoking interacts with the organization and signification of social hierarchies. In keeping with Bourdieu’s contention that fields are spaces of struggle, we posit that adolescent fields are organized around the stake of “popularity” in which smoking and tobacco access have relevance as both a source and symbol of social position (Croghan, 2003; Marsh et al., 2013; Michell & Amos, 1997; Robinson & Amos, 2010; Tjelta, 2015). We highlight the

function of adolescent *habitués* in localized practices and expertise relating to the acquisition of tobacco, drawing on the concept of *capital* to explore these practices and their significance within the various adolescent fields in our data. Thus, we use Bourdieu's work as a heuristic or conceptual "toolkit" (Thomson, 2012, p. 72) to highlight aspects of our data and to "think through" the adolescent practice of accessing tobacco as a culturally and socially mediated process.

Method

We draw on data generated from 56 focus groups by the SILNE-R¹ consortium, a multi-institutional research project examining adolescent-targeted tobacco control in Europe (SILNE-R, 2018). The SILNE-R consortium aimed to explore how youth smoking prevention policies can be made more effective based on analysis of data from seven European countries. Participating countries/cities were purposefully selected to represent a range of social and regulatory contexts and to build on research partnerships established during a previous research project (SILNE-R, 2018).

Recruitment

SILNE-R research teams conducted 56 focus groups in 2016/2017, recruiting 319 participants from 17 secondary schools in seven European cities: Namur (Belgium), Tampere (Finland), Hannover (Germany), Dublin (Ireland), Latina (Italy), Amersfoort (The Netherlands), and Coimbra (Portugal). Schools were purposefully sampled from a larger group of 60 participating schools in which SILNE-R research teams conducted student surveys. Sampling was undertaken by the research team in each country in discussion with the principals of participating schools, and included at least two schools in each participating city. Additional schools were selected in Amersfoort (+1) and Hannover (+2) to ensure an adequate student sample in each city.

Schools were selected with the aim of including students from a range of social class backgrounds. It was not possible to select schools on the basis of a single set of institutional characteristics, since school systems vary across different European countries (e.g., while Ireland has a system of "public" and "private" schools, in other countries a more relevant distinction is between vocational and academic schools). Schools were therefore selected based on the characteristics of the neighborhoods they served. Schools participating in the wider SILNE-R study were broadly categorized according to the profile of the geographical area they served (this information was collected using local administrative markers of neighborhood poverty/income/deprivation).

The research team in each city then selected one school serving a population of relatively lower socio-economic status (SES) and one serving a population of relatively higher SES. While students within each of these schools will represent a range of social class backgrounds, schools serving relatively lower SES neighborhoods are likely to include a greater proportion of students from low SES households—and vice versa.

Focus groups were identified as the most promising source of data on adolescents' shared smoking and access practices due to their interactive nature (Morgan, 2010). We used single-gender focus groups since these help create comfortable research spaces for participants, facilitate girls' participation in group discussion, and enable analysis of how gendered conversational dynamics might shape accounts (Stewart et al., 2007; Vaughn et al., 1996). Eight focus groups were conducted in each city with (in most cases) four groups in each participating school (56 in total), in the expectation this number would provide a reasonable basis for data saturation within gender and SES strata (Hennink et al., 2019), both of which are important factors in youth smoking uptake and prevalence (Barnett et al., 2016; Graham, 2012).

In selecting focus group participants we employed purposive sampling within each school, asking teachers of predominantly 15-year-old classes to identify students whom they perceived to be smokers or at risk of becoming smokers (i.e., students with smoking friends or family members). This is a well-established method for recruiting participants in qualitative studies of adolescent smoking (Robinson & Amos, 2010; Van Der Sluijs et al., 2016), reflecting Kuzel's (2010, p. 1465) emphasis on "specialized knowledge and socialization" as the basis of expertise in qualitative research. Across 56 focus groups we engaged a total of 319 students aged 14 to 19 years including 168 girls and 151 boys. Focus groups ranged in size from three to nine students, with most groups comprising between five and seven participants.

In mini-questionnaires (administered prior to focus groups), 50% of participants identified as current or ex-smokers and 43% as never having smoked (smoking status was not recorded for 24 participants). These mini-questionnaires were primarily designed to obtain basic demographic data on focus group participants; smoking status was self-identified and used to give an indication of which participants identified as active smokers rather than a formal assessment of the proportion of participants who used tobacco (which is likely to be substantially higher, since many young people who smoke tobacco occasionally do not identify as smokers [Hoek et al., 2013]). Nearly all participants (92%) were below the legal age-of-sale in their country; we asked the few who were not to reflect on how they (or others) accessed tobacco as minors.

Ethical approval was obtained from the local research teams' institutions. Participants' parents were sent opt-out consent forms in all sites except Hannover, where the school required opt-in parental consent. All parents were provided with information regarding the scope of research and were told their child would be asked about tobacco use, but were not given information regarding participant selection (to avoid potential stigmatization of those students invited to participate in focus groups). Participants were provided with information sheets and provided written consent.

Data Collection

Seven in-country research teams conducted focus groups, following two-day in-person training by the authors. This training included familiarization with a collectively developed topic guide which explored: familial, peer, and personal smoking; access methods; smoking spaces; and smoking at school (e.g., regulation, education). In keeping with established practice (Gibson, 2007), the topic guide was used to facilitate and gently direct discussion between focus group participants rather than as a prescribed list of questions. Focus groups involved three to nine participants (most involved five to seven), lasted 30 to 90 minutes and were conducted in each country's national language. They took place at school, during school hours, but without school staff present. Local teams transcribed focus group recordings before translating them into English and sending them to the authors for analysis. Facilitators provided reflexive research notes and transcript clarifications.

Analysis

Consistent with a qualitative focus on "coherence, insight and utility" (Kuzel, 2010), our analysis drew on Bourdieusian concepts to understand and make sense of adolescent practices in accessing tobacco. Based on immersive reading of 24 initial transcripts, a preliminary coding framework was generated deductively (following consideration of salient theory) and inductively (following a deep read of generated data). Substantive themes were identified, that is, topics with significance which were explored in a range of focus groups (e.g., obtaining cigarettes from friends). Such themes often related to issues prevalent in tobacco control literature (e.g., "proxy sales") as well as sociological theory. We then iteratively re-developed the coding framework following a deep read of remaining transcripts, and used this revised framework to code all focus group data in NVivo. Salient tracts of text were organized into relevant themes, which were carefully read and analyzed. During this initial analysis, the authors gained awareness of the various forms of social and cultural capital participants deployed when accessing

tobacco; thereafter, emergent findings were discussed with reference to key components of Bourdieusian theory. In selecting findings for presentation here, we sought data extracts which best encapsulated the themes they represent.

Epistemologically, we understand participants as engaged in an interpretative process of signifying objective realities, undertaken in ways which reflect their habitus/field positionalities. In addition, we are conscious that participants expressed their views in a group setting and that their contributions developed dialogically. Participant representations of tobacco access may therefore be influenced by a desire to effectively negotiate adolescent social spaces vis-à-vis smoking (Tjelta, 2015), and should be read accordingly.

We refer to focus groups by the country in which data were collected: this is a shorthand rather than implying country-level generalizability. In presenting our findings, we focus primarily on comparisons across location (e.g., countries), paying secondary regard to differences across gender and SES. As intimated, we organized focus groups to enable more axes of comparison, for example, across gender and SES/class divides. Differences in access practices were most notable across locational contexts. Differences in adolescent perceptions and practice were less noticeable across gender and SES/class boundaries, although perceptions of gender and class were important in how young people negotiated access to commercial sources of tobacco (i.e., in how adolescent practices intersected with broader social dynamics).

Results

The Value of Tobacco

In seeking to understand the social logic of youth smoking, it is helpful to first identify how and why young people value smoking. This facilitates an understanding of why adolescents would expend various forms of capital in obtaining tobacco and how an ability to access tobacco may draw on and/or confer particular forms of capital.

In keeping with previous research in this area (Gagné et al., 2015; Haines et al., 2009), our findings indicate that young people frequently imbued cigarettes and smoking with social and cultural value. Participants rarely indicated that smoking directly conferred popularity (e.g., by building reputations or attracting friends), but their accounts indicated that the practice promoted the accrual of both cultural and social capital which (when converted into symbolic capital) was considered, by some, to be "cool." Illustratively, while not explicit about the cultural and social value of smoking, many participants reflected on common (positive) perceptions of the practice:

There are enough people who just smoke because it is simply iconic. Well . . . because everyone else does it and . . . it

makes you part of the group when you smoke . . . and that's why people smoke.

(Germany, Girls, Higher SES)

Relatedly, participants from across locations framed their first experiences of smoking as prompted by a desire to appear mature or emulate others:

My first cigarette was when I was with an older group of people and it was to kind of look more mature, I guess.

(Ireland, Girls, Higher SES)

The other friend we were with, I've known her for 2 years, and we've been close for a year and a half. But she is 16 years old . . . She smoked all the time, so it made me want to.

(Belgium, Girls, Lower SES)

Representations of smoking as iconic, as conferring the symbolism of maturity, and as a desirable performance worthy of emulation, all point to its perceived symbolic value. Accordingly, smoking can be conceptualized as objectified and embodied cultural capital: a material and corporeal activity with cultural value. In keeping with previous research (Haines et al., 2009), this reality was illustrated by the way participants framed learning to smoke as something requiring an investment of time and significant personal endeavor: to accrue embodied cultural capital, Bourdieu (1986/2011) posits, one must "work on oneself," expending time "which must be invested personally by the investor" (p. 48). Illustratively, many participants reported physically unpleasant experiences of smoking uptake, which they pushed through until the practice became comparatively pleasurable:

Participant (P): Yeah . . . a guy here at this school . . . asked if . . . I wanted a pull and then I thought: "Well, I've never tried it before," so I thought: "Well, I'll give it a try." But you won't inhale it, of course, because you're not really sure how to do that. So, he said: "Well, you have to inhale it." And then I asked him how to do that and he said: "Well, you just have to inhale and then . . ." So, I did, and I just started dying.

Researcher (R): Yet you persisted?

P: Yeah, but it was like . . . He said: "Maybe you should just try it a few times and then . . . After that . . ."

(The Netherlands, Boys, Lower SES)

Adolescents' willingness to withstand such discomfort is testament to the value of smoking according to the regularities of adolescent fields, for example, the rules of

adolescent engagement. Building on this, we can frame the disposition to smoke as constituted by an adolescent habitus—arising not individually but relationally in conversation with various social spaces which produce and reproduce the symbolism of cigarettes and their consumption through reproductive processes (e.g., smoking uptake). Here the concepts of cultural capital, field, and habitus enable us to move beyond models of direct peer influence to understand smoking socialization as a diffuse and sophisticated process. This is succinctly illustrated by acknowledging that no individual participant appeared to control the cultural meaning of smoking: rather, all relied on complex processes of collaborative meaning making and social participation.

In keeping with this interpretation and previous research (Baillie et al., 2007), most participants framed smoking as a social activity: a practice simultaneously facilitating, and facilitated by, group interaction:

Yes, every morning we smoke in groups and at lunch we stay in a group to smoke. After classes we are all in a group and we smoke and in general there are no non-smokers in the group. Or sometimes one or two, barely . . .

(Belgium, Boys, Lower SES)

P1: I never smoke when I'm alone, I don't feel the urge, but if I'm in the company of others . . .

P2: I've smoked alone maybe once or twice, but I almost always smoke with my friends.

P3: Yes, with friends

P1: When you are with friends it's easier to get involved, in situations like this, it's easier to get carried away.

P2: Exactly.

(Italy, Girls, Higher SES)

Smoking thus appeared to foster the accrual and maintenance of social capital—peer relationships—while non-smoking could undermine such accrual. Beyond this, across multiple locations, smoking's constitution as a network activity involved frequent instances of gifting and sharing cigarettes (e.g., exchanging social capital for a cigarette). This reflects the complex role of social capital as an asset both accrued through, and used for, cigarettes (discussed below).

Curiously, tobacco did not appear to possess direct economic value in the adolescent fields under study. Previous research suggests that social-commercial markets—where adolescents sell cigarettes for money—are relatively common in the United Kingdom (Croghan,

2003; Donaghy et al., 2013; Tjelta, 2015), the United States (DiFranza & Coleman, 2001; Ribisl, 2003), and New Zealand (Gendall et al., 2014; Marsh et al., 2013). In these locations, a cigarette represents economic capital—easily exchanged for financial gain. In contrast, our participants rarely discussed social-commercial markets, tending to reference anomalous individuals rather than routine modes of access, embedded in social regularities. In Portugal, participants were left somewhat askance by the idea of social-commercial markets:

R: Is tobacco sold here at school . . . ?

P: Ah no! Like buying from a peer or such? No. Usually it's like "give me one, give me one today, and tomorrow I'll give one back to you."

(Portugal, Girls, Higher SES)

It is unclear why the adolescent fields studied here differed from those in previous literature, or why Portuguese adolescents appeared surprised by the implication that social-commercial markets might exist. Bourdieu argues that the cultural and social valuation of an object or practice, such as a cigarette or smoking, relies heavily on maintaining a veil of disinterest: actors understand the accrual and exchange of social and cultural capital as disinterested processes, differentiated from explicitly mercantile activities in ways often integral to their value (e.g., paid-for services may be understood as less valuable than those offered out of personal affection or loyalty) (Bourdieu, 1986/2011). This, in turn, may simultaneously account for participant disavowal of smoking as "cool," and their tendency to disassociate social from economic relationships. In short, adolescent fields may nurture an ethic of sociality, which precludes mercantile exchange. It is unclear why this ethic might differ between countries, although it may be that an entrepreneurial spirit is more highly valued in some contexts, reflecting forces beyond adolescence (e.g., the commercial market).

Access to Tobacco

Having discussed the potential value of smoking, we now discuss how adolescents accessed tobacco in contravention of national age-of-sale laws. We begin by discussing respondent reports that tobacco was accessed directly from retailers before discussing "delegated" modes of access (e.g., utilizing a middle-person).

Direct Access

Participants from all countries except Finland reportedly accessed tobacco via commercial means, i.e., shops or vending-machines. This was generally described as easy,

though many Dutch participants were more equivocal, positing a stricter commercial environment.

Participants described behaving discriminately when selecting retailers to target. Consistent with previous literature (Robinson & Amos, 2010), they avoided franchised commercial enterprises (e.g., supermarkets) which were widely regarded as unlikely to sell tobacco to minors:

R: Where would people of your age never buy cigarettes?

P: Shopping centres.

...

P: You never buy tobacco at shopping centres.

R: Why?

P: Because there's always someone that complains, saying that we're not 18.

(Portugal, Boys, Higher SES)

In keeping with extant literature, participants reported accessing tobacco from small, local, retailers. However, the type of enterprise differed between countries: while Italian adolescents frequented tobacconists, Portuguese participants accessed age-barred vending-machines with the assistance of café owners, and German adolescents reported buying cigarettes from kiosks.

Notably, although participants mentioned specific shops, they tended to talk in typologies—speaking, for instance, of kiosks in general rather than specific kiosks. This indicates that retailer non-compliance was socially (rather than individually) regulated, reflecting field specific trends, rather than retailer idiosyncrasy. If this is the case, non-compliant retailers could be framed less as aberrant actors and more as products of the structures and regularities of overlapping fields. While small commercial retailers feature heavily in the adolescent field vis-a-vis smoking, they are obviously situated in—and formed through—a multitude of social fields. Fields are semi-autonomous and are influenced by the constitutions of proximal spaces (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992), particularly those Bourdieu includes within the meta-field of "power" (e.g., state bureaucracy). They are subsequently subject to the vagaries of neighboring fields, and engaged in a constant process of mutual co-construction (Thomson, 2012). This facilitates an understanding of how macro-social processes (e.g., market topographies and policy) may influence micro-social processes, for example, adolescent fields. This is a particularly pertinent observation when we note that Irish and Belgian participants reported targeting retailers in socio-economically disadvantaged areas (Ireland) or run by members of a minority ethnic group (Belgium):

R: And in terms of the shops, would they be supermarkets or newsagents that you would go to?

P1: Local

P2: Yeah, like corner shops

P3: Yeah, you know the little shops on the [council] estates like. Like extensions on houses and all.

(Ireland, Girls, Lower SES)

Here, adolescent social logic appeared to align social disadvantage with a permissive attitude toward youth smoking and/or access. What is not clear, from our data, is whether participants based these assumptions on objective reality or the stigmatization of disadvantage. Given they were reporting on places they were generally successful in buying tobacco, it is arguably the former, indicating the development of habituses attuned to the peculiarities of particular fields. In keeping with this analysis, our findings suggest that participants attained cultural competencies (e.g., a knowledge of which retailers would sell them tobacco) not primarily by individual trial and error, but by absorbing a collective logic of distinction constituted by the regularities of the fields they inhabited. They acquired such knowledge through native familiarity with these fields (e.g., the experience of being an adolescent in a particular neighborhood) as much as from pedagogic action (e.g., instruction from peers). This knowledge—or cultural capital—then becomes a resource for negotiating adolescent social spaces. In sum, by deploying a Bourdieusian lens, we can frame the way in which young people identify potentially pliant retailers, as speaking intimately to the relationship between social spaces (fields) and cultural resources (capital).

Participants required more than cultural capital to obtain tobacco, however. Most methods—whether direct or delegated—required money, which participants largely obtained from their parents or part-time employment. In some contexts—particularly Ireland and Germany—pre-existing social capital also facilitated direct access to tobacco. In Germany, this was straightforward: identification cards of older friends or family members facilitated access to age-barred vending-machines:

My girlfriend's sister has always bought [from vending-machines], because she uses . . . her dead grandfather's ID.

(Germany, Girls, Lower SES)

Here, the resources of one's immediate contact became one's own. For participants from the Irish lower SES school, however, social capital functioned more complexly, via social networks. Participants reported

accessing cigarettes from retailers by claiming they were buying on behalf of a member of their social network (e.g., a parent), often brandishing a note to confirm their story. However, this tactic's success appeared predicated on the existence of a social association between the person the adolescent purported to represent, and the retailer:

R: So, the shop takes notes from parents?

P: The corner shop knows the people around here, so they do it and they know who their kids are, so if someone walks in and they say it's for the Ma, well, because they know them they are sure it is for their Ma, like.

(Ireland, Boys, Lower SES)

Such practices were not reported by participants from the higher SES Irish school, suggesting that this was a class-mediated activity: a practice made meaningful and possible by (social and geographical) positionalities and interconnected webs of relationality. This points to access methods (and forms of social capital) available to some (less advantaged) adolescents and not others, a point we return to below.

Delegated Access

When participants perceived commercial retailers as inaccessible, they often sought tobacco via delegated means. Delegated access functioned in two ways. Either participants were given tobacco by a social source, as a gift or part of a reciprocal sharing arrangement; or they bought tobacco via proxies. Regarding the latter, participants solicited the assistance of family, friends, or strangers (frequently adults encountered outside shops), asking them to buy cigarettes on their behalf and providing the money for this. Notably, some young people favored delegated access over other sources. If a participant smoked infrequently, could not normally afford their own cigarettes, or wished to smoke immediately but had no cigarettes, a delegated source often represented a preferable mode of access. Respondents from all localities reported using delegated access, though reliance appeared particularly high in Finland (where participants framed direct access as unavailable) and the Netherlands (where participants reported limited direct access).

Obtaining tobacco via delegated means often required social capital. In keeping with previous research (Marsh et al., 2013; Robinson & Amos, 2010), adolescents across localities reported receiving gifted cigarettes from friends, spontaneously or following request:

R: And P, how would you have gotten them when you smoked?

P: Off my mates

R: Would they mind you taking cigarettes off them? Would you give them money?

P: No, I would just ask, “can you give me a rollie?” and they would just give it to me.

(Ireland, Girls, Lower SES)

Here respondents utilized social capital straightforwardly, drawing directly on friends’ resources to acquire cigarettes, and the cultural capital conferred. However, in any gifting arrangement, the gift-giver must have another source. Social sources are not self-sustaining and may be disrupted by changes in other access regularities (e.g., retailer compliance) (DiFranza, 2012). This is similarly true of reciprocal sharing arrangements, where cigarettes are given in the expectation they will later be paid for in kind:

P1: Many of us smoke at the same time, so most of the time there is a pack around. When he has [a pack], he gives [a cigarette] and when he doesn’t have [a pack], another one gives him [a cigarette].

P2: We help each other out.

(Belgium, Boys, Lower SES)

Social capital, Bourdieu posits, is developed via “an unceasing effort of sociability, a continuous series of exchanges” (Bourdieu, 1986/2011, p. 52). In keeping with this observation, reciprocal sharing arrangements constitute a material exchange, as well as the creation and recognition of an obligation which perpetuates the process. They are a symbolic and material practice, in which young people generate social capital, and exploit it, in relation to tobacco. Thus, smoking is more than a social activity: it is an activity which constitutes the social, through the creation and satisfaction of obligation and expectation. Some participants could also draw on familial social capital when seeking to access tobacco:

R: OK what about your parents? Was it easy to get, to scrounge . . . cigarettes?

P: Yes, sometimes I would run out of cigarettes or such and I would say “Look, give me a cigarette because in a while I’ll buy for the both [of us].” I would never give [my dad any] back, obviously.

(Portugal, Boys, Lower SES)

Here, adolescents occupying certain familial fields possessed higher levels of transposable social capital (i.e.,

capital that is valuable across, as well as within, fields) in relation to smoking. As with the use of letters to buy cigarettes in Ireland, adolescents living in less affluent areas were better positioned to obtain cigarettes than their advantaged counterparts—consistent with higher smoking prevalence in low SES areas (Hiscock et al., 2012). This is a notable finding not only because it sheds light on the intergenerational transmission of smoking (Alves et al., 2017), but because it suggests that disadvantaged young people are disproportionately able to achieve ascendency within adolescent social spaces via their access to tobacco. This route may be particularly attractive where social marginalization confers limited alternative routes to ascendency. In short, smoking’s value in facilitating dominance in the hierarchy of the adolescent field may be higher for young people not able to access cultural capital in other ways.

Participants also reported asking older friends to act as “proxies.” Obtaining tobacco via proxies requires social capital that cannot be reimbursed in kind but must be amassed in some other way, e.g., being kind. However, several participants reported an intention to “pay forward” proxy generosity by playing a similar role for others when they came of age, thereby sustaining the regularities of the practice. While some framed proxy access as a straightforward process, others—particularly in the Netherlands—reported complex encounters:

P1: You do it through the grapevine.

R: Through the grapevine. But explain it to me: how does that work?

P2: We have one friend whose cousin has a friend and he can get it for us.

R: So, you call somebody . . .

P1: Yes.

R: . . . tell them that you need cigarettes by Saturday . . .

P3: Yes, that’s really how it goes.

P4 “Could you get us a pack?”

(The Netherlands, Girls, Lower SES)

Here participants used a convoluted series of social connections to access tobacco. Rather than drawing on social capital in the form of a direct relationship, they profited from a network of relationships. Access involved a “diffuse delegation [which] requires the great” (here, the friend’s cousin’s friend) “to step forward and defend the collective honor when the honour of the weakest member

is threatened” (the young person struggling to access cigarettes) (Bourdieu, 1986/2011, p. 55). The above excerpt additionally highlights Bourdieu’s contention regarding differences across forms of capital. Unlike economic capital, social capital often works in slow, indirect ways. As previously intimated, social capital is distinct from economic capital insofar as the “veil of disinterest” means it “necessarily entails the risk of ingratitude, the refusal of that recognition of unguaranteed debts which such exchanges aim to produce” (Bourdieu, 1986/2011, p. 55). For Portuguese adolescents, this dimension of social capital manifested in ‘scroungers’—young people who fail to honour the obligation of exchange:

P1: There’s a lot of people who don’t buy and . . .

P2: There are still a lot of scroungers.

P3: Yes, there are, there are a lot of scroungers.

P1: There are a lot of people that don’t buy and then several days pass without them buying.

(Portugal, Boys, Higher SES)

In addition, some participants reflected on the insecurity of access dependent on the resources conferred by social capital. In one case, a participant linked this instability with an interruption of smoking practice:

R: OK, so essentially, you’re saying: “We have enough people of 18 and above to always have access to cigarettes.” That’s kind of what I’m hearing here, is it?

P: Almost, yeah. Not always when I want to.

R: Not always when you want to?

P: No.

R: And what do you do when there’s nobody who wants it? Who wants to smoke?

P: I won’t smoke.

(The Netherlands, Boys, Lower SES)

Participants also frequently reported obtaining cigarettes via stranger proxies. Much like when selecting amenable commercial retailers, participants described discriminatory practices in selecting proxies. Many reported assessing strangers based on socio-demographics, generally favoring younger men:

P1: Like a stranger, but like someone who is like 20 or something. I wouldn’t ask an old person, no way

R: What classifies someone as an old person?

P2: Like in their fifties.

(Ireland, Girls, Lower SES)

R: But how do you pick the right people?

P1: Okay, 18 to 25, men.

R: Why . . . men?

P2: Sometimes women. But we are women, and men will more easily . . .

P3: Right, and if you look at him with a cute face and ask him if he could get you some, he’ll probably get some for you.

(The Netherlands, Girls, Higher SES)

If we view adolescent perceptions as the internalization of externalities (the regularities of fields), such accounts suggest that men and young people were more disposed toward facilitating adolescent smoking. In keeping with a Bourdieusian lens, such dispositions should be understood as reflecting socialization within generative fields (rather than representing a natural or intrinsic inclination). This adds complexity to the use of stranger proxies, embedding the practice in much broader social dynamics. Adolescent access practices are thus seen as being shaped by phenomena beyond the practice itself (e.g., gender ideology).

Other participants reported relying on more culturally-specific signifiers when identifying a proxy. This was particularly notable in the Netherlands:

The kind of people who work in construction and they smoke really fast and shag and cigarettes and such. I think those are the kind of people who would [buy cigarettes] for you.

(The Netherlands, Boys, Higher SES)

R: What kind of people did you approach?

P1: People with scooters.

P2: With a motorcycle.

(The Netherlands, Girls, Higher SES)

I’ll just wait until somebody who is about 19, 20 years old walks by with a fur collar and such. Then I’ll just ask if they can get me a pack of cigarettes, and then they’ll say: “Yeah, of course, what do you need?”

(The Netherlands, Boys, Lower SES)

The Dutch research team posited (based on their own cultural competencies) that fur collars, mopeds, and working in construction could all be construed as cultural markers of low class status, often intersected with migrant identity. These markers are rendered intelligible by the logic of distinction organizing the social regularities of class in the Netherlands. This knowledge is primarily accessible via immersion in the social space to which it pertains, that is, a habitus finely attuned to the specific regularities and logics of Dutch society. Selecting proxies according to certain characteristics was common, but that the precise constitution of those characteristics differed across cities—thus highlighting the homologous yet distinct nature of adolescent fields, and the necessity of appreciating cultural specificity in seemingly widespread practices.

Participants in Finland reported targeting strangers with more generally recognizable markers of disadvantage:

R: You mentioned the buyers as one avenue. Who are these buyers?

P1: Some outsiders

P2: Alkies.

P2: Addicts . . . Junkies.

(Finland, Boys, Higher SES)

This echoes the tendency of Belgian and Irish participants to target shops run by marginalized people, or in marginalized areas, demonstrating a field logic—or social regularity—that aligns disadvantage with a permissive attitude toward youth smoking. Again, this perceived association should not be construed as accidental or essential, but as a cultural artifact created by the socially contingent organization of field positions and corresponding habituses.

Discussion

Bringing Bourdieu's "theory of practice" into dialogue with focus group data from seven European cities allowed us to identify homologous yet distinct adolescent access practices across diverse geographic and policy contexts. Building on previous research (Croghan, 2003; Haines et al., 2009; Marsh et al., 2013; Robinson & Amos, 2010; Tjelta, 2015), this analysis demonstrates that smoking continues to have cultural, social and symbolic value within a range of adolescent fields, despite the declining prevalence and increasing de-normalization of smoking in Europe (European School Survey Project on Alcohol and Other Drugs, 2020). We find that young people across diverse contexts continue to obtain and expend social capital through the reciprocal exchange of cigarettes.

Our findings highlight how embodied cultural capital enables young people to identify adults (commercial retailers and proxies) willing to help them circumvent tobacco age-of-sale laws. They also underline the frequency with which young people access tobacco via non-commercial sources, as has been found previously in studies in the United Kingdom, the United States, and New Zealand (DiFranza, 2012; Donaghy et al., 2013; Marsh et al., 2013). In addition, our analysis demonstrates functional distinctions between social and economic capital. Young people cannot command social capital in the way they can money: the former is unstable and potentially sluggish. This offers some insight into why, when young people progress beyond experimental smoking, they tend to move from social to commercial sources (Robinson & Amos, 2010).

Limitations

Our approach has several strengths and limitations. Resource restrictions meant we could only recruit participants from a small number of schools and conduct eight focus groups per city. While we observed significant data saturation (we detected similar themes, often seemingly mediated by context), our study may have benefited from more expansive recruitment. While the localized nature of our data limits causal inferences regarding the relationship between policy and access, this contextual variation allows us to consider how different factors may shape adolescent attitudes and practices. The localized nature of our data may also limit the generalizability of our findings, although—as others have noted—consistency of key themes across diverse social spaces may speak to the existence of processes and mechanisms which are salient in other contexts (Bell et al., 2015). Our study expands the somewhat limited qualitative literature examining how young people obtain tobacco in European contexts (Papanastasiou et al., 2018) and contributes to existing work exploring tobacco access as a socially mediated and contextualized phenomenon.

Implications for Research and Policy

Our findings point to a number of policy considerations and research recommendations. Consistent with previous research (Frohlich et al., 2002), our analysis highlights the degree to which adolescent access practices—though seemingly common across locations—are embedded in localized contexts. Such practices are therefore mediated not only by commercial availability, but by a series of mutually constitutive social, cultural and symbolic systems. For example, participants' expectation that men and young people were more likely to act as stranger proxies raises the question: what is it about the social realization

of youth and masculinity that renders the young and men more inclined to assist in contravening tobacco age-of-sale laws? Attempts to reduce adolescent access by limiting commercial access alone will fail to address the complex and locally-constituted practices by which young people obtain tobacco. In Bourdieusian terms: to understand adolescent access practices we need to understand the constitutive roles played by the regularities of adolescent fields, the valuation and manifestations of capital, and consequently developed habituses.

The situated nature of adolescent tobacco access means policy-makers need to consider both the granularities of access practices and their relationships with broader social dynamics (Frohlich et al., 2002). Patterns of access that appear generally applicable across geographical and policy contexts may manifest in distinctly localized ways. To illustrate, our data suggest that young people tend to discriminate when identifying small retailers from which to obtain tobacco, focusing on particular sub-typologies of retail outlets (including small shops, kiosks, and/or cafes) depending on the regularities of their particular fields. Thus, for example, a knowledge of small tobacconists in Latina (Italy) who are willing to sell to minors does little to assist an adolescent in obtaining tobacco in Hannover (Germany) where kiosks are popular sources or in Coimbra (Portugal) where age-barred vending machines require the complicity of café staff. At the same time, adolescents in all contexts had identified likely commercial sources at the margins of local market regularities and embedded this knowledge in localized access practices, allowing them to circumvent minimum age-of-sale laws.

A greater appreciation of this contextual granularity could help policy-makers address retailer compliance with minimum age of sale laws. Our observation that retailer non-compliance is socially rather than individually mediated points to the value of further research in exploring why certain types of shop or café are more amenable to under-age sales than others. Our findings suggest that retailer non-compliance reflects broad social dynamics rather than aberrant resistance to legal norms on the part of particular retailers. Efforts to improve retailer compliance might therefore benefit from a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics and the use of carefully considered, targeted, interventions. Such interventions might not only focus on particular groups of retailers, but could seek to address the social and economic factors which render them more amenable to under-age sales.

Conversely, our analysis demonstrates the importance of looking beyond the local context and situating adolescent access practices within broader social milieus. Participants' tendency to seek out proxies who appeared young, male, poor and/or socially excluded (e.g., illicit

drug users)—a pattern also found in the UK and New Zealand (Donaghy et al., 2013; Gendall et al., 2014)—indicates that access practices are informed and shaped by pervasive social trends which extend far beyond smoking. This suggests that attempts to dissuade potential proxies may be more effective if they speak to particular community subsections (see—for example—the “Not a Favour” campaign by the Scottish Alliance for Smoking & Health [ASH] that seeks to challenge the attitudes and assumptions behind giving cigarettes to children [ASH Scotland, 2019]). It also suggests that broader social projects (e.g., alleviating disadvantage and disrupting gender scripts) may have greater long-term impact in reducing young people's access to tobacco (Hiscock et al., 2012).

Addressing adolescent access practices requires us to move beyond a narrow focus on the practices themselves: we must consider how these are situated and interconnected with both proximate and distal social dynamics. This is reinforced by evidence of asymmetrical access across different socio-economic spaces, with young people from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds finding it easier to obtain tobacco than their more affluent counterparts. Thus, we would echo others who have argued that further significant reductions in youth smoking require more equity-positive youth tobacco control policies alongside policies addressing the wider determinants of inequality (Graham, 2012; Hiscock et al., 2012). In essence, we agree with Ling et al. (2002) in warning against an over-focus on young people, their friends and families, and in promoting a more macro-systemic approach. We differ, however, by suggesting that such an approach can be meaningfully informed by, and directed toward, adolescent access practices. At the same time, we acknowledge the practical and ethical challenges inherent in efforts to limit young people's access to cigarettes and the potential for such efforts to have unintended negative consequences. As our findings show, the practices via which young people access cigarettes are often associated with social vulnerability on the part of retailers and stranger proxies, raising uncomfortable questions about which communities are blamed for facilitating under-age access. Only by understanding and addressing the multiple modalities of inequality can we develop effective and ethical policies for preventing youth smoking uptake.

Our findings also highlight the value of attending to the voices and lived experiences of adolescents. Both researchers and policy-makers have much to gain from engaging with the expert knowledge of young people, whose socialized subjectivities enable them to develop a native familiarity with the particularities and regularities of their immediate social spaces. A better understanding of how relationality, positionality, and meaning-making shape adolescents' access to tobacco may help inform

more effective strategies for protecting young people from developing a harmful and often lifelong addiction.

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Note

1. SILNE-R stands for “tackling Socioeconomic Inequalities in smoking: Learning from Natural Experiments and Realist evaluation.”

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