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**The practise and practice of Bourdieu: The application of social theory to youth alcohol research**

Belinda Lunnay<sup>1</sup> (corresponding author)

Paul Ward<sup>1</sup>

Joseph Borlagdan<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Discipline of Public Health, Flinders University of South Australia, Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Australian Drug Foundation, Melbourne, Victoria, Australia.

Address for corresponding author:

Discipline of Public Health

Flinders University

GPO Box 2100

Adelaide SA 5001

AUSTRALIA

## **The practise and practice of Bourdieu: The application of social theory to youth alcohol research**

### ABSTRACT

Some years ago Australian anthropologist David Moore criticised the predominant form of understanding youth alcohol consumption for residing with biomedical approaches that individualise and ultimately stigmatise drinking behaviour and 'ignore' the social context of consumption. Of interest here is the *ongoing* insufficient integration of alternative approaches to understanding young people's drinking. This paper presents theoretically informed qualitative research that investigates why young Australian females' (aged 14-17) drink and how social and cultural context form the basis, rather than the periphery, of their drinking experience. We demonstrate the utility of Pierre Bourdieu's sociological framework for delving beyond the dichotomy of young people's drinking decisions as either a determination of their cultural environment or the singular result of a rational individual's independent decision-making. The paper is presented in two parts. First, we provide the interpretation, or '*practise*', of Bourdieu's concepts through an outline and application of his complex theoretical constructs. Specifically, the concept of symbolic capital (or social power) is applied to youth alcohol research. Second, our explication of Bourdieu's '*practice*', or epistemological contributions, offers a methodologically-grounded example to other researchers seeking to attain more complete understandings of the complex social processes underpinning youth alcohol consumption. A sociological approach to exploring the complex relationship between drinking and contextual social factors among young Australian females is an uncharted area of enquiry. We contribute new theoretically supported insights to create a more complete picture of young females' drinking behaviours.

Key words: alcohol, young females, Bourdieu, symbolic capital, social theory.

## INTRODUCTION

A seminal paper published some years ago in the *Drug and Alcohol Review* (Moore 1990) offered critical observations about the trends in Australian research literature on alcohol and other drug use among young people. Anthropologist David Moore remarked that Australian research on young people's drug and alcohol use favoured epidemiology, an approach he criticised as implicitly individualistic in 'ignoring' the social context of drug and alcohol use. Moore noted that drug and alcohol researchers overlooked major theoretical developments in youth sociology and instead emphasised pathological explanations for drug use or drinking behaviours. Following from this initial review Moore revisited his former observations and extended his critique of research published pre 1990s to find the Australian drug and alcohol research landscape largely unchanged:

'Despite calls from within and without psychology to find a place for the social and cultural context in theories of human development, such a context rarely finds adequate expression in psychological work, and when it does, it appears 'added on'; the social and cultural environment is seen to 'shape' or 'colour' processes seen as being 'internal' to humans' (Moore 2002 p 16).

This insufficient integration of sociological approaches to drug and alcohol research is of interest. In this paper, we take up the question '*how might alternative truths be infused more fully into the [alcohol] field?*' (Moore 2002 p. 50). Here we show how French social theorist Pierre Bourdieu's sociological approach helps us to tap into the 'alternative truths' Moore referred to – that is, to go beyond the dichotomy of young people's drinking decisions as either a determination of their cultural environment or the result of a rational individual's independent decision-making.

### **A sociological approach to youth alcohol research**

Sociological thought facilitates more complex understandings of the social organisation of drug and alcohol consumption. France (2000) critically examined explanations of youth and risk taking and emphasised the value of a sociological approach to understanding the diverse and complex social processes that influence young people's risk taking, including excessive drinking. Despite

this known potential, there remains a disjunction between alcohol research and sociological theoretical frameworks (Rhodes, Stimson et al. 2010). Zajdow and Lindsay (2010) question why, if recreational alcohol consumption is inherently a social practice shaped by the immediate social context, does sociology not have a stronger presence in alcohol research? Perhaps the emphasis sociology places on wider social processes as shaping drinking does not readily fit with the typically individualistic and problematised approach to understanding alcohol use. For sociologists to contribute to the alcohol field, they must be prepared to ground their explanations in theory. Public health academics advocate the use of theory to arrive at credible research findings (Popay, Rogers et al. 1998); and similarly most theorists would insist their ideas be tested empirically (Seale 2004). Theorising takes purely descriptive research further so that a drug and alcohol issue can be examined, compared and understood rather than simply described:

The purpose of social enquiry is to produce enhanced and more accurate renderings of particular groups, milieu, or social problems under study than has hitherto been the case...and is reflected in the drive to develop ever more powerful explanations of social phenomena (Layder 1998 p. 9).

Moore's challenge to Australian alcohol researchers to infuse 'alternative truths' into youth alcohol research goes beyond the use of 'alternative methods'. We take up Moore's challenge by addressing the utility of Bourdieu's concepts as a means of translating sociological ideas to youth alcohol research at two levels<sup>1</sup>: first, the *practise* of Bourdieu's concepts through an outline and application of his theoretical constructs to youth alcohol research using our research on young females and alcohol; second, the *practice* of Bourdieu or his epistemological contributions to reflexive sociological research practice. Our work provides an example that researchers in the alcohol field can draw on to attain more complete empirical understandings of the complex social processes underpinning youth alcohol consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> The *practice* / *practise* distinction is used to distinguish the practical methodological and/or empirical application of Bourdieu's work (*practise*) from the guidance he offers for rigorous research conduct (*practice*).

## Lost in translation

With the exception of some well-conducted studies that adopt a theoretical framework (e.g. Lindsay 2009; Lindsay, Harrison et al. 2009; Borlagdan, Freeman et al. 2010), the translation of sociological concepts into alcohol research is often piecemeal. The reduction of theory to 'component parts' is common and results in decontextualised theorising that separates concepts from their epistemological and theoretical roots. Such a piecemeal approach to theory integration reduces the explanatory power of analysis (Popay, Rogers et al. 1998; Daly, Willis et al. 2007). Critically absent from alcohol literature is practical guidance and an example of how to achieve theoretically-informed research findings. This paper addresses this absence by offering a socio-cognitive framework for conducting empirical qualitative research. We draw on our experience with applying Bourdieu's concept of *symbolic capital* situated within the framework of *distinction* (the *practise* of Bourdieu), to understand the social mechanisms that underpin young females' alcohol-related behaviours. We turn to Bourdieu for guidance with our endeavour to undertake reflexive sociological research (the *practice* of Bourdieu); that is, how we develop an understanding of young female's drinking and what the nature of understanding might be. By virtue of elucidating the *practise* of Bourdieu, that is the *process* of applying Bourdieu's theoretical constructs, we show that when applied in a rigorous format and accompanied by empirical data, the concept of symbolic capital and the theory of social relations in which it takes shape helps to gain a more complete understanding of youth drinking.

## APPROACH

Bourdieu provided hints on how to apply his concepts to understand people's choices and behaviours. He suggested an entry point is to first, identify their behaviours in the context of their values, then determine how individual interests relate to the interests of the friendship group, and to the strategies of accumulation of capital employed by people within the group (i.e. how these interests reflect or become sources of capital) (Johnson 1993). The researcher establishes the interests of the 'field' and the strategies of capital accumulation employed by the agents in that field. For this research, young females were purposively recruited within their existing friendship

groups to give insight into the group dynamics and struggles for position-taking within the group hierarchy. This is observable as participants achieve group consensus while they depict their alcohol-related values and interests. Bourdieu's model necessarily involves different levels of analysis that account for different aspects of practice including the relationship between the friendship group and the broader field of power to the strategies employed by different young females in their social drinking settings. Using an approach Layder (1998) terms 'adaptive theorising', questions about the group dynamic based on Bourdieu's theory were asked. Information was sought about the commonalities of the group (e.g. how they come to know each other; what activities they typically engage in, obtain most enjoyment from and gain a sense of being a 'group' from). Also of interest is how young females distinguish themselves and their group from other groups (e.g. are there things the young females would do in their group but not alone; is their group known for a particular characteristic or image). Questions about the formation of the social group were framed within alcohol-specific questions on the importance of drinking, the identification of drinking occasions, the group's drink preferences, and the experience of not drinking while others in the group drink.

There exist other sociological approaches, similar to Bourdieu's, that focus on how people act toward things based on the meaning those things have for them; and how people generate meaning from social interactions (e.g. symbolic interactionism). Bourdieu's concepts, however, also deal with social structure and macro sociological issues by revealing the interrelationships and degrees of importance between systems and actors. They reveal that young people do actively and reflexively interpret their environment. New understandings generated through his concepts challenge the notion of peer pressure, which provides some philosophical foundation for current Australian alcohol policies. Young females are not passive subjects who simply absorb external pressures to drink.

## METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

This ongoing research is undertaken in metropolitan South Australia with groups of young females aged 14-17 (below the South Australian legal drinking age of 18<sup>2</sup>) who have experience with drinking alcohol and who come from familial backgrounds with varying levels of economic and cultural capital (see below for an explanation of these terms). Ethics approval to conduct this research was granted by the Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee. An interview guide, with open-ended questions derived from key themes identified through the literature is used to direct group discussion. Questions about drinking relate to the following themes: group identity (composition and membership), symbolisms, tastes, lifestyles, cultural capital, social status, prestige, symbolic power, reputation, social inclusion/exclusion. Following the group interview one young female from each group participates in an in-depth semi-structured interview. Individual interviews allow exploration of drinking perceptions from the young female's perspective and insight into the dynamics and status positions comprising the group. Participants also take photographs they consider to be symbolic of their social drinking experiences (Prosser 1998; Pink 2001). A *photo-elicitation* method rooted in visual anthropology (Collier and Collier 1986), enables photographs to be triangulated with verbal data collected through interviews to elicit a response from participants and explore how they construct their worldview. There is a theoretical rationale for using photo-elicitation. Bourdieu postulated that photography performs social functions. In *Photography: a middle brow art* (Bourdieu 1990b) Bourdieu's focus extends beyond the literal meaning of what the photographs depict to the aesthetics and tastes that are revealed through the process of selecting what to photograph. Participant's photographs and how they determined what is photograph-worthy is intrinsically linked to their social class. Photographs capture the social hierarchies, power differentials and distinctions inherent in young female's everyday social lives and practices. The narrative participants give to their photographs is key to our analysis more so than the images themselves.

## Sample

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<sup>2</sup> By the Australian legal drinking age of 18 years, almost all young Australians have consumed a full serve of alcohol (data from 2007 NDS Household Survey). This data set also indicates that young Australians who have consumed a full serve of alcohol at age 14 years represent the majority rather than the minority.



Young females known to drink alcohol in social contexts were identified through BL's existing networks (e.g. through settings frequented by youth such as sporting clubs and youth organizations, and through friends of friends) and recruited within self-selected friendship groups (3-5 members) in which they naturally socialise to retain the social structure in which drinking-related decisions are made. Sampling is theoretically and purposively driven. Participants are drawn from different socio-economic status backgrounds using the notion of social class embedded in Bourdieu's ontology. Bourdieu expanded the Weberian notion of class to include non-economic, socially-determined aspects of 'opportunity' like social and cultural resources (Bourdieu 1984; Bourdieu 1985). Theoretical sampling was initially undertaken on the basis of economic capital (financial resources) using 'place' as a guide (e.g. school attending, geographical area of residence). Once Bourdieu's theoretical insights can be applied to the social group, the forms of capital used to generate economic capital including *cultural capital* (Bourdieu 1986): forms of knowledge and skills that for young females is largely derived through upbringing and education) and *social capital* (Bourdieu 1986): social connections, used to position young females in a social class, can be observed. This helps to locate the specific interests of the social group within social spaces and physical places where culture differs/varies quite dramatically. Of the participants discussed in this article, all were from middle to high income familial backgrounds, residing in metropolitan Adelaide (Adelaide CBD, Brighton, Springfield, Mitcham, Unley, Daw Park) and outer metropolitan Adelaide (McLaren Vale) and attend private schools. All participants represent middle to high levels of cultural capital, and use alcohol as symbolic capital to maintain their popularity within the broader, school-based peer group.

Ongoing research is responsive to the emerging research findings and is driven by the need for in-depth understandings of the complex and varied social meanings young females attribute to their drinking. Recruitment is iterative and guided by emergent findings to ensure the sample produces the knowledge necessary to understand the structures and processes within which research participants from differing social positions form their alcohol-related behaviours. Further recruitment will identify young females with lower economic capital, attending public schools, and

from less “socially privileged” positions (i.e. less popular young females with a smaller network of friends). Critique of the theoretical and conceptual adequacy and applied reflexivity of the methodological approach in generating research findings and ensuring interpretative validity will occur as recruitment continues (Popay, Rogers and Williams, 1998).

### **Data analysis**

The approach used for data analysis is based on the framework analysis method designed by Ritchie and Spencer (1994), which involves identifying key issues, concepts and themes for data analysis *a priori* through review and critique of the alcohol literature. Data was then analysed deductively within the frame of Bourdieu’s theory by looking for both consistencies and inconsistencies with the theory. Whilst photographs taken by participants are not analysed, the surrounding discussion and the captions participants give to their photographs is a core element of the interviews and of the methodology underpinning the interviews. Group and individual interview discussions are recorded, transcribed and coded using NVivo qualitative analysis software. Data excerpts provided hereupon are derived from these transcripts. The objective of analysis is, using Bourdieu’s concepts, to reveal the specific interests of the friendship group, identify how individuals are positioned within the social field comprising the friendship group and the sources of symbolic capital that exist among young females. Also analysed are the ways that symbolic capital can be won, lost or negotiated to gain insight into the role of alcohol in this process (e.g. where does alcohol sit as a source of symbolic capital? Do different groups use or perceive alcohol in different ways? What are the ramifications of this on whether the drinking leads to the accrual of symbolic capital?).

### **Theoretical perspective**

This research is situated in a critical realist paradigm which, as sociologist Margaret Archer argues, views society as ‘inseparable from its human components because the very existence of society depends in some way upon our activities’ (Archer 1995 p 1). This view is largely consistent with Bourdieu’s ontology (Bourdieu 1991; Danermark, Ekstrom et al. 2002; Reed

2008). Central to critical realism is that the explanation of social phenomena is achieved through revealing the causal mechanisms that produce them (Archer 2010). The nature of society as an open system makes it impossible to make predictions as can be done in natural science. By basing this research on the analysis of the causal mechanisms of behaviour, it is possible to arrive at an informed discussion about the potential consequences of mechanisms that operate in different settings. But, uncovering these causal mechanisms is not a linear process whereby the researcher can ask their participants why they act in a certain way or for what cause. Previous work has critiqued studies of health behaviour for 'overestimating the significance of conscious health considerations in everyday life' (Katainen, 2010 p. 2). According to Bourdieu's *practice*, people are not aware of the factors affecting their behaviour, nor the implicit logic behind that behaviour (Bourdieu 1977 p. 18). One of Bourdieu's key epistemological critiques of the research process was the inability of study participants to critically reflect upon their behaviour because as humans our 'practical logic' - the inherent association between what people do and their location in social space - is limited (Bourdieu 1977; Bourdieu 1990a). Bourdieu suggested that 'the principles embodied in this way are placed beyond the grasp of consciousness and hence cannot be touched by voluntary, deliberate transformation cannot even be made explicit' (Bourdieu 1977 p 94; Bourdieu 1984 p 466). Difficulties with this concept are raised by Sweetman (2009 p 494), who through his work on 'revealing habitus', suggests that some forms of contemporary dispositions or *habitus* that is a 'socially constituted system of cognitive and motivating structures in which the agents' interests are defined and with them the objective functions and subjective motivations of their practices' (Bourdieu 1977 p 76) are more 'reflexive' than others. Other contemporary uses of Bourdieu provide evidence for less 'structured' or 'modifiable' conditions of an individual's habitus (Friedman 2011; Ingram 2011). Further, it seems possible that research participants can be made consciously aware of aspects of the habitus through the process of the research. Custers and Aart (2010) argue that although motivations and 'will' are seemingly unconscious and subliminal, the research process allows people to reflect and 'make conscious' such motivations, allowing participants and researchers 'access'. In the section on *practice* below we share techniques for stimulating participants to articulate 'unconscious' behaviours. Explaining

risky drinking necessitates some consideration of the behavioural response of individuals who drink. Using Bourdieu's ideas (or his *practise*) around symbolic capital and distinction, drinking is interpreted as a symbolic and powerful activity young people engage in to influence their position in social hierarchies, with the potential of changing the social arrangement through inclusionary and exclusionary distinctions made according to what is valued by the social group at a given time. Within this theoretical frame, we can test hypotheses on: the role of drinking behaviours and outcomes in the formation of social groups; the meanings attached to alcohol (including product types, brands, consumption patterns, etc) as representative of social identities that may be negotiated to form distinctions between and across groups of young females; the use of alcohol as a source of power to gain acknowledgement and enhance reputation; and, the social dynamics in how this is 'played out'.

#### FINDINGS: THE PRACTISE OF BOURDIEU

##### ***The influence of both social structure and individual agency on drinking decisions***

Bourdieu contributed to the long existing sociological debate over whether social structures or human agency determine an individual's behaviour by emphasising an *interaction* between the two (Bourdieu 1984). He was part of a broader movement in which social theorists tried to move beyond the structure/agency binary (see also structuration theory proposed by Anthony Giddens (1984)). This account of the dualism between structure and agency in shaping behaviours is fitting for alcohol research. It bridges the divide between approaches where the cause of drinking is either attributed to the individual (agent), as evident in developmental psychology models, or to external social forces encountered within the drinking setting (structure). The individual agent expresses a strong sense of being an active part of the social scene, the need for social contact and group inclusion is coupled with drinking alcohol. The prominence of drinking only in social situations is consistently reiterated by young females in our study. The following excerpt from a group interview with Carrie and friends, age 16, provides an example:

*Interviewer: Is drinking something that you do quite a lot?*

*Carrie: Only on occasions, like I wouldn't just have like a drink for the sake of it, I'd make it occasions*

*Interviewer: . . . to celebrate?*

*Carrie: If you're just going out....like parties.*

Applying Bourdieu's understanding of structure and agency to young females' alcohol consumption drinking is informed by a range of complex and constantly changing individual and social processes. Young females recognise they occupy a position within a social structure (or peer group) where there exists an inherent societal acceptance of drinking as a valued social activity, that is, a source of symbolic capital. The following excerpt indicates a social imperative to drink: *"all of our school drinks alcohol. Every teenager drinks...its just part of it [being a teenager]"* (Emma, young female participant, age 15, group interview). This is coupled with an infixed individual pursuit to engage with and reap the benefits from being an active participant in the social realm, as indicated from our discussion with Charlotte, age 17, during a group interview:

*Interviewer: If none of your mates were drinking, but you still wanted to, would you still drink?*

*Charlotte: Not if I was ...if I was just going out with a group...like that one group and I wasn't seeing anyone else for the whole night I wouldn't get drunk by myself.*

Young females consistently reject the notion of peer pressure, as one participant explained *"no one pressures you to drink, you just want to"* (Holly, young female participant, age 15, individual interview). Despite a concerted decision not to drink made before entering the social setting, once among their drinking friends, young females' depict the social imperative to drink: *"you'll say you're not drinking and you'll end up drinking"* (Dani, young female participant, age 16, group interview) she further explains *"you just want to be a part of like being crazy and having a good time"*. If not peer pressure, what then, can account for the incongruity between a young female's stated attitude and decision not to drink versus their actual drinking behaviours?

Bourdieu referred to this phenomenon as the sociology of symbolic power. His concept *symbolic capital* is demonstrably useful in understanding the relationship between young females' social

structures and how their individual actions like drinking, respond to and interact with these structures. Symbolic capital is translatable to anything recognised by social agents as having value in a social context that affords the individual prestige, honour and a bolstered social status (Webb, Schirato et al. 2005). To understand symbolic capital and the exercise of social power, it is necessary to consider the concepts of *field* and *habitus*. Bourdieu envisaged society as various 'fields' of cultural production (Bourdieu 1993). A field can be defined as a social space in which agents are positioned in certain roles and relationships and with given resources that he termed 'capital'. He explained that the positions individual agents take within the social realm, or the structure of the field, determines actions for control of capital. According to Bourdieu, attitudes and behaviours are learned and socialised through interpretation of the external social environment. Social reproduction therefore occurs through decisions and choices made within broader societal constraints and influences. The social fields our research participants operate in espouse a way of socialising that is derived from broader societal norms where abstaining from alcohol, without a socially acceptable reason, is not a valid or valued behavioral pattern. This is captured by 17 year old Laura during a group interview:

*"like if you say [to your peers] I'm not going out [and drinking] because of netball, you'll like cop a bit of flack for that...because they [peers] don't understand the pressure to perform...and your performance would be like totally affected [if you drank]...there's been a few times where we've gone out not intending to drink and have ended up drinking".*

Evident here is that young females reproduce within their friendship groups the dominant practices of wider society, giving value and power to heavy drinking as a habitual expectation and a 'natural' way to socialise: *"if it [drinking] were socially unacceptable we wouldn't do it"* (Kelli, young female participant age 17, individual interview).

Using Bourdieu's terminology, social drinking is part of and reflects our participants' 'habitus', or in other words, their tastes and dispositions. The habitus is young females' socially constructed view of the world. It reflects the 'embodiment within individuals of systems of social norms, understandings and patterns of behaviour....ensuring that individuals are more disposed to act in

some ways than others' (Bourdieu 1997b p 3). Bourdieu contends that external structures are internalised into the habitus while the actions of the agent externalise interactions between actors into the social relationships in the social field. Young females both internalise or 'take on' external structures (here we mean dominant drinking norms) and reproduce them by externalising (or acting out) internal structures within the confines of a social space. One group of young females aged 17 years talked about liking the way they feel when they drink but sometimes not liking who they become. For example, a young female (Tammy, age 17, during a group interview) spoke of nights spent drinking where "*you...feel disappointed in your performance*". This complicated *précis* is important to understanding how drinking behaviours are a source of dominance in young female's social fields. For Bourdieu, the construction and shaping of 'habitus' through fields of 'cultural production' also comes to comprise young females' schema of perception through which they make distinctions, categorise and value things and people (Bourdieu 1993). For young females, drinking is a habitual expectation and a sought after pattern of behaviour that provides opportunity for accrual of high volumes of symbolic capital. Social gains can be made through the accumulation of symbolic capital by consuming alcohol in whatever form is legitimised by the dominant social group – conferring upon the young female a sign of distinction within a wider habitus and audience of those who are predisposed to recognise such distinctions. These key forms of symbolic capital: social recognition and distinction are discussed next.

### **Drinking for social recognition**

Of particular relevance to understanding young females drinking is not just Bourdieu's theory on struggles for recognition through the fit for, accrual and display (activation) of symbolic capital in drinking settings but the means by which symbolic capital is recognised and given value so it can be exchanged for desired outcomes (Webb, Schirato et al. 2005). The notion of recognition helps explain the "performative" nature of the alcohol consumption behaviours young female participants describe above. It also highlights the requisite that drinking behaviours must be validated and appreciated by the friendship network to become sources of symbolic capital. The ratification of a witnessing audience is an essential strategy for the accrual of symbolic capital

among our young females participants. This explains the popularity of social networking sites like Facebook among participants, which provides an expansion of their “offline” lives and an opportunity to display personal information in a public forum. During the photo elicitation component of a group interview, a young female (Tammy, 17 years) explained that *“there are heaps more photos of us drinking on Facebook...we can show you”*. Common among our research participants was to post photographs of themselves in social and drinking contexts for their extended peer network and others to view and form a (positive) perception. The necessity to capture, record and communicate displays of drinking is a central distinction asserting strategy. Part of the young female’s process of affirming congruence with socially sanctioned drinking behaviours and aligning their behaviour according to what is deemed socially ‘correct’ or ‘legitimate’, is to highlight unacceptable behaviours and use this to create distinctions between their social position and that of ‘lesser’ others. Bourdieu termed this a ‘symbolic struggle’ over capital (Bourdieu 1989). Prestige is defined and distinction reasserted through the exclusion of particular individuals or groups of young females who exhibit behaviours that are not congruent with the dominant and legitimated ways to drink socially. This was evident when the young females discussed engaging in risky sexual conduct or what they termed “slutty” behaviours while drunk. The following excerpt from a group interview illustrates this process of ‘othering’:

*“I’m not a fan of girls who get really drunk and then do things [of a sexual nature] with guys and then blame it on the fact that they were drinking...I really don’t like that because I kinda go, well I’d never get to that point”* (Laura, age 17).

Here, young females are recognised and alienated for drinking and exhibiting sexual behaviours deemed inappropriate by more dominant peers. This description of ‘slutty’ behaviours demonstrates that alcohol behaviours are not value-free but are loaded with cultural and symbolic meanings. Misreading or undermining the impacts of behaviour that is out of sync with the culturally valued norm affects participant’s status in the field. In this sense, very specific aspects of drinking behaviour are socialised according to a system of monitoring, recognition and reproduction that is constantly in flux. Evident through the research presented here is that



drinking behaviours can be interpreted as symbolically significant activity with the potential to create and maintain social differentiations among young females (Bourdieu 1984).

### **Drinking for distinction and inclusion**

Understanding how individuals are structured into social positions in a field helps to understand how drinking behaviours are shaped. Bourdieu explained that dominance works through utilisation of the forms of capital, and because young females' access to capital (disposable income, friendship networks, social connections) is ever changing by the nature of development and youth, so too is a young female's position within social hierarchy. When young females engage in social practices like drinking, they enter a game-like scenario where they draw on their capital to make social gains or 'wins'. Participation in the 'game' of drinking relies on previous accrual and use of capital (e.g. an invitation to a party where drinking occurs requires access to social networks) and knowledge of the rules and engagement in 'symbolic struggles' to improve social positioning. By consuming a certain alcohol product or adopting a particular drinking behaviour, young people express their affiliation to a social group (Featherstone 1991) or rejection of lifestyles or groups to which they do not relate or do not wish to be perceived as related (Miles 2003). In this way, drinking behaviours are more complex than they appear at the outset; they are also meaningful, figurative, and an important element of social dynamics (Chaney 1998). Drinking alcohol is not an end in itself, but a means to activating behaviours through which social competencies can be demonstrated and symbolic gains or capital can be achieved according to what is valued by the social group. Jarvinen and Gundelach (2007) used Bourdieu's theory to help explain the normative position of heavy drinking among Danish young people described as a culturally derived pattern of drinking to intoxication. They focused on whether patterns of alcohol consumption can be used to identify particular *lifestyles* using Bourdieu's conception of 'lifestyle', that is, a system of classified and classifying practices (Bourdieu 1984). Jarvinen and Gundelach explored the company teenagers seek and their degree of integration in the peer group to determine if and how drinking patterns are embedded in the formation of social groupings among teenagers. To this end, they introduce Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital to

understand how *lifestyles* are demarcated and to indicate how different drinking patterns lead to social cohesiveness or dissociation. This work provides a foundation for understanding the group dynamics or causal processes that lead to group memberships structured around drinking behaviours, and highlights how these legitimated drinking lifestyles operate as a form of distinction. Using Bourdieu's theoretical frame and based on BL's research with young females, we argue that the sense of fun, relaxation and confidence young females attribute to drinking arises from the feeling of acceptance and belonging achieved through emulating social competencies in drinking behaviours. Acting in congruence with the behaviours displayed by dominant social norms, which is verified by more popular peers who have the social authority or 'cultural capital' to know what is in vogue and who possesses symbolic capital to dictate, alleviates discomfort in drinking settings. For example, one group of young females (age 16) said:

*“if its an out of school thing [social gathering] it's the worst than ever to be sober, like if you don't know anyone then it's awful [not to be drinking] and like I reckon with friends at school it wouldn't be as bad” and “you just feel more at ease with talking with new people and like meeting new people”.*

For some participants, gaining entry to drinking contexts such as parties hosted by young people outside of their immediate peer or school group, entering the night time drinking economy while underage and participating in a party where free alcohol is supplied, is a source of symbolic capital. Here, alcohol is transformed from a commodity with literal utility, to a socially symbolic and value-laden object capable of communicating social distinctions. As in the above example, drinking confers upon the young female symbolic capital accrued from subscribing to a way of being that represents the 'popular aesthetic' (Bourdieu 1984) and subsequently brings a sense of social ease. This is more of an imperative to young females than ever before as all aspects of social life and particularly the drinking realm is becoming increasingly commodified. Alcohol advertising and popular culture aesthetic encourages young females to demonstrate endorsement of product branding (McCreanor, Greenaway et al. 2005). Products are embodied with particular meanings and associations and young females adopt what the branding symbolises and build it into part of their identity repertoire. For example, many of the young

females who participated in this study identified with “classy” and “sophisticated” drinks like pre-mixed vodkas. One young female participant explained:

*“drinking is promoted. Ad[vertisement]s for Smirnoff are really classy and you really want to drink them cause they look awesome. Because everyone’s doing it [drinking Smirnoff] you want to do it too”* (Kelli, young female participant age 17). Another participant suggested *“when I get older I’ll start drinking beer and wine...I think they’re classy drinks like they’re drinks you’ll have at a restaurant rather than the one that like you drink at a party”* (Summa, young female participant age 15).

Simultaneously, participants distinguished themselves from undesirable drinks as indicated by this statement:

*“the dero group they would drink like goon [cheap cask wine] and they would drink like Jim Beam and like and heavy like cheap drinks that will get them easily, easily drunk”* (Holly, young female participant age 15, group interview).

Here we see that drinking behaviours are not simply the result of differences in taste. The effects of classification rest on the volume of symbolic capital afforded to individuals and their subsequent power and authorisation to classify. Taste therefore is based on popular regard, and power in a Bourdieuan sense is ‘the ability to classify successfully, the capacity to make one’s definition of the situation as the situation’ (Jenkins 2002 p xiii). Participants reveal this in their distinction between ‘dero’ less-desirable drinks (e.g. cheap cask wine, Jim Beam) and more sophisticated, less ‘cheap’ drink types.

An important caveat needs to be made in relation to the deployment of Bourdieu’s theory here. Social positions or the ‘symbolic order’ of social groups is, ironically, disorderly in the sense that not all young females have access to equal social footings. Young females bring different levels and different types of capital to any social setting. Using the drinking setting of a party as an example, social and cultural capital enables the young female entry to the party. Without social networks young females would not be permitted to enter this social field. It is also important to clarify the social ‘levels’ referred to when interpreting Bourdieu’s theory in the context of young

female's drinking behaviours. Among participants, competition for social status occurs at two levels: at the macro social level in which social power is dependent on school type, location and reputation; and, at the micro level, in which power struggles take place within school-based social groups. Thus, changing one's social status does not occur by chance. From the outset, the competition is unequal, the stakes and opportunities for accumulation of capital are not evenly distributed, and young females bring a social history of success or loss in capital accumulation to each new social engagement. A utopian society would renew social history allowing the individual a fresh start for each social encounter. In reality, the accumulation of capital is intrinsically linked to previous social encounters and therein, opportunities for the accrual of capital. Further, social boundaries are imposed by the school structure. Drinking occasions are highly valued and commandeered by young female participants for the opportunity they provide to transgress these boundaries. In attempting to transgress other social structures/fields, the participants end up subscribing to other dominant norms around heavy drinking representing a nuance of how liberating versus constraining drinking is. The following excerpt from a group interview with 16-year-old friends Summa and Bella discussing an intra-school eighteenth birthday party indicates this:

*Summa: "At an eighteenth [birthday party] one of the girls in year 11 had a whole bottle of vodka like before she got to the party, at like pres [pre-drinks] and she got to the party and then like passed out*

*Bella: And she had to leave straight away and that was in the gossip stream and everyone was talking about how that was silly*

*Interviewer: So it wasn't something where people thought that was cool?*

*Summa: No, no everyone thought what a waste of a night*

*Interviewer: So by waste of a night do you mean she missed out on the opportunity to socialise?*

*Bella: Yeah...yeah she wasted a whole night...like it was an eighteenth as well, like lots of people it was a good thing to go to*

*Summa: Yeah a high status social event.*

Drinking alcohol may not be something from which young females directly accrue symbolic capital. It does seem though, that *through* drinking alcohol functions as a source of symbolic capital because it gives leverage to other avenues for capital accumulation. The following excerpts from an interview with 15-year old friends Jenna and Jessica illustrates how capital is accrued through drinking, only if drinking behaviours are legitimised:

*Interviewer: ...are there things people do when drinking that you don't like?*

*Jenna: Oh umm...yeah like just being annoying when they're drunk...like...pretending to be drunk*

*Jessica: This friend of ours will be like 'oh my god babe like I've drunk so much...'*

*Jenna: It's annoying and its just like shut up....because you know that they're not truly drunk, like this one girl...*

*Interviewer: Why's that a problem?*

*Jenna: Because they're trying to be cool*

*Jessica: ...and confident.*

In this instance, a certain way of being drunk is a means of capital accumulation. Through being 'truly drunk', displaying confidence and therefore 'being cool' prestige can be gained, but faking or acting drunk is unacceptable and a dead-end for accruing capital. Later in the same interview, a statement from 15-year old Jenna outlines how alcohol is a vehicle for capital accumulation through other social relationships and behaviours:

*Interviewer: So...you talk about talking about the party the next day, what are the things you talk about most?*

*Jenna: Probably the relationships...it's not so much about what you're drinking it's more about how you act...there never is a focus on the alcohol I don't reckon.*

These findings emphasize the centrality of social influences on young female's drinking outcomes.

## DISCUSSION: THE PRACTICE OF BOURDIEU

## **A methodological toolbox**

In addition to his theoretical contributions, Bourdieu provided a methodological toolbox (his way of *practice*) that can be usefully applied by youth alcohol researchers to overcome contentions between structure and agency, to ameliorate researcher bias through promoting reflexivity and heightening objectivity and move beyond problems associated with positivism. This brings to light how the research setting can construct rather than elicit responses and meaning from research participants. Here we provide a reflexive discussion of how well Bourdieu's epistemological arguments can be used to gain access to young female's voices and lead to more complete understandings of why young females drink.

## **How we used Bourdieu's thinking tools**

Bourdieu intended for his concepts, which he coined a set of 'thinking tools' (Wacquant 1989 p 50) visible through the results they yield, to be applied in this way:

The ground for these tools lies in research, in the practical problems and puzzles encountered and generated in the effort to construct a phenomenally diverse set of objects in such a way that they can be treated, thought of, comparatively (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992 p 160).

In spite of the scrutiny and many attempts to apply Bourdieu's theoretical work (Calhoun, LiPuma et al. 1993; Swartz 2003; Swartz and Zolberg 2004), the way in which he saw his 'thinking tools' being deployed is often overlooked. We take on advice from Webb and colleagues (2005 p 49) who stated that:

Bourdieu's concepts are not simply theoretical filters which process social practices; rather they are technologies, which are transformed, and need to be re-thought as they are applied.

He intended for his concepts to have malleable characteristics, and stressed that good quality research marries theory and empirical investigation so that his concepts come to life through application. We have applied Bourdieu's concepts fully and in appreciation of this flexibility. For example, Bourdieu's conceptualisation of symbolic capital focused on enduring outcomes (e.g.

long lasting dominance of elites in political systems), whereas the overlapping nature of the social fields contemporary young females engage in and the transitory nature of friendships suggests opportunities for accrual of symbolic capital is ever changing. This means the social status earned by an agent is never fixed. This may explain why parties and other drinking occasions represent such revered opportunities for our participants to engage in symbolic struggles compared to other settings (e.g. school and sport). Parties offer young females a chance to use alcohol as a key resource to demonstrate their aesthetic tastes and potentially achieve ascendancy in their social group. Acknowledging and analysing these 'ill-fits' helps to develop the theory, and captures the flexible characteristics Bourdieu intended of his ideas. Hence, we applied all components of Bourdieu's theory, inclusive of theoretical complexities and nuances, to determine its applicability to young Australian females and alcohol. To ensure our sample produced the type of knowledge necessary to understand the structures and processes within which participants formulate their drinking behaviours we sampled according to Bourdieu's notion of social class. That is, according to categories of people who occupy positions within a social field (a social arena within which struggles take place over resources and access to these resources). It would be at odds with Bourdieu's ontology of social collectives to define classes as constituted through aggregate statistical data or classified according to occupation identity (e.g. social stratification research). Access to status-defining drinking practices relies on the possession of a mixture of economic, cultural and social capital. Acknowledgment of the relational nature of Bourdieu's 'capitals' (economic, cultural, social, symbolic) is essential to *making the theory work*. This enabled us to capture the detailed and diverse drinking-related views, perceptions and experiences that may be attributed to situational and social positional differences experienced by the different young females.

### **Reflexivity and participant objectification**

Bourdieu's key tenets about the construction of social space (Bourdieu 1989) can also be applied to the process of conducting research. Bourdieu regards researchers as agents negotiating relationships within the field of research, and according to Bourdieu, the principal cause of

variations in perception is one's position in social space (Bourdieu 1989 p 19). As researchers, our views of reality are primarily constructed and differentiated through economic and cultural factors. In terms of research into young people and alcohol, researchers typically occupy a position of power superior to their research participants. This has important ramifications for the research outcomes and the validity of analysis. Failing to reflexively construct the social space of positions that comprises the research 'game' (researcher, research participants), makes it difficult to understand the conditions and factors that produce drinking outcomes from the perspective of independent young females acting within the constructed sphere of the research. To remedy this, a research strategy used by Bourdieu in his own research for *The Weight of the World* was adopted. In this approach, he advocated for 'the development...of a particular form of sociological habitus, through which they [are] able to help respondents deliver up their truth, or, rather, ...be delivered of it (Bourdieu 1999 p 621). In exercising reflexivity of the unequal relationship between the researcher and the research participant, control over the conditions of the research interactions was relinquished as much as possible. Young female participants selected the setting of all interactions; they had access to BL's contact details and personal social networking page, which achieved a sense of reciprocal sharing of information that encouraged rapport. Participants also dictated the narrative according to what photographs they chose to take and show.

### **Techniques for encouraging participants to reveal what is 'unconscious'**

As earlier outlined, Bourdieu suggested young females' distinction asserting 'strategies' (as a product of the habitus) are not based on conscious calculation but rather results from unconscious dispositions toward a particular way of being. The experience from this research is that young female's can be made aware of certain aspects of their habitus or 'why they do the things they do' through discussions of the values of their immediate social group relative to young females from other social class positions. The following excerpt from a group interview with 16 year old Mel and Ellie indicates this:

*Interviewer: Facebook has really changed the way people socialise compared with when I was growing up*



*Ellie: Yeah it has*

*Interviewer: It's full on; do you ever feel like having a break?*

*Ellie: I wish we did*

*Mel: and if you don't go on there you feel like you're missing out on stuff*

*Ellie: Yeah I just reckon I wouldn't know any...like three quarters of the stuff that I see about other schools [if not for facebook]...it's all the out of school stuff...*

*Mel: It just feels like inadequate; they [girls from other schools] just look cool*

*Interviewer: So how do you see what girls from other schools are doing? Do you just become their facebook friend?*

*Mel: Yeah they add you*

*Interviewer: So they invite you, so they want you to see?*

*Ellie: Yeah, yeah...I never really thought of it like that.*

Here we see that as Bourdieu theorised, 'dispositions' that are embodied become naturalised or 'second nature' that is, not (initially) recognised let alone questioned (Bourdieu 1990a p 54). This makes asking participants to reflect on and articulate the social influences behind their drinking difficult, yet not impossible. This was evident when young females were made aware of aspects of the taken-for-granted *habitus* through the interview. As shown in the above excerpt, the participants did not initially recognise that Facebook posts are a form of symbolic capital used by peers who wish to bolster their social status. Prompting discussion of the power dynamics behind these virtual social interactions assisted participants to make conscious previously taken-for-granted peer group distinctions.

The use of photographs in the research methodology also aided the unraveling of the unconscious will by prompting discussion about how deciding what to photograph is manifest in value judgments and the social and cultural influences that guide the photograph-taking. Participants are encouraged to look at their photos through 'conscious' eyes. Young female research participants undertake a 'double distancing' or an objective detachment from the subject under investigation (Jenkins 2002 p 50). This is an objectification technique that Bourdieu

recommended researchers use as a process of standing back from the subject to get as close as possible to reaching objective reflection.

## CONCLUSION

Sociological explanations offer 'alternative truths', which argue that drinking is entwined in a complex, diverse and dynamic model of social structures and relationships where social groupings and strategies are important. In this paper we contextualise the broad reach of alcohol into a complex set of relationships, classification schemes and social dynamics that Bourdieu discusses in his work on the social field through the concept of symbolic capital or social power. In doing so, a balance is reached between the role of alcohol-related structures and the role of the young agent in achieving the end point – drinking behaviours. By explicating our use of Bourdieu theoretically (his *practise*) and methodologically (his *practice*) to *understanding* alcohol consumption we concomitantly offer guidance on the process of conducting theoretically informed youth alcohol research to facilitate a more robust use of Bourdieu and indeed, of social theory, in alcohol research. Through our outline of a reflexive process of applying social theory to further understandings in youth alcohol research, some important 'alternative truths' come to light surrounding the social and symbolic aspect of drinking.

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