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Title:

Between Decency, Maturity and Oppositional Unity:

Exploring Young Women's Romantic Identity Work Following Extensive Drug Use

Abstract:

This article explores the interconnectedness of romantic identities and the in/appropriateness of drug use for young women who are in a process of cessation or decline from extensive use of illicit drugs. By applying a discourse psychological framework to the analysis of seven young women's romantic partner narratives, it is examined how they are informed by prevailing cultural understandings of young femininity as they position themselves vis-à-vis their romantic partners, and how these positioning patterns relate to their conceptualizations of drugs and drug use. Three overall positioning patterns characterize the young women's romantic narratives: Heroic boyfriends vis-à-vis decent girlfriends; irresponsible boyfriends vis-à-vis mature girlfriends; and constructions of equal partners-in-crime. Each of these patterns enables different meanings of the presence of drugs within the relationship. Thus, the study supports the notion that romantic relationships are significant contexts to consider as a part of an in-depth understanding of what it entails giving up drugs for romantically engaged young women. It is suggested that researchers need to consider this significant context in light of prevailing cultural understandings of young womanhood.

Keywords: Romantic relationships; young femininity; drug use; identity work; positioning

Between Decency, Maturity and Oppositional Unity:

Exploring Young Women's Romantic Identity Work Following Extensive Drug Use

Introduction

The literature on substance use and young people has long established that peer relationships are major influencing factors in regards to initiation into alcohol and drug use (for example de la Haye et al., 2013; Verkooijen et al., 2007). Within this broad body of literature, not only friends but also romantic relationships are found to be of significance, especially for young women (Fleming et al., 2010; Gudonis-Miller et al., 2012; Liebrechts et al., 2013; Martin, 2010; Rhule-Louie & Mahon, 2007). Yet, romantic relationships are still understudied as a context of importance for cessation or decline of use. The current study addresses this gap by an explorative investigation of the interconnectedness between romantic identity constructions and conceptualizations of drug use as in/appropriate within the romantic narratives of seven young women who are in a process of changing their drug-use habits. The analysis is based on fourteen in-depth qualitative interviews with these seven women, who were all interviewed twice.

Because the body of literature that examines romantic partners and drug use cessation/decline among young women is limited, it is relevant to turn to the slightly more developed literature on adult women. Taken together, these studies paint a highly complex picture of the relational dynamics between the women and their partners who are often drug-experienced too (Leverentz, 2006; Liebrechts, et al., 2013; Tuchman, 2010). In one study, Falkin & Strauss (2003) found that romantic partners often act as overt or unintended enablers of drug use after treatment while at the same time being important social figures in the

women's lives. Adding to this complexity, McCollum et al. (2005) found that women with partners who judged the relationship to be of high quality were more likely to experience life difficulties and to use drugs during treatment than women with partners evaluating the quality of the relationship more negatively. Also, Laudet and her colleagues (1999) concluded that drug using male partners have a negative attitude toward female drug use, while their behavioral support as to their partners' treatment is passive and inconsistent. As these findings suggest, issues related to drug use and romantic relationships are crucial topics of research, not only in relation initiation of use, but also in relation to decline and cessation.

In spite of the highly gendered qualities of the existing findings, they are not considered vis-à-vis prevailing cultural understandings of gender (femininity and/ or masculinity). In this article, however, I aim to contribute to the existing literature by showing how drug experienced young women's romantic narratives are embedded within such master-narratives, and not least how their romantic identity work amalgamate with the ways that they evaluate the use of drugs within their romantic relationships. This aim is inspired by feminist literature on romantically involved young women that emphasizes how identities are formed by cultural expectations yet also negotiated by young women as they convey their romantic experiences (e.g. Harris et al., 2000; Jackson, 2001; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Korobov & Thorne, 2009; Maxwell, 2007). The current study accordingly suggests that cultural understandings of gender are relevant to consider in an in-depth understanding of cessation/decline for drug-experienced young women who are romantically involved.

Theoretical Framework

Within the field of youth alcohol and drug research, notions on identity work are commonly used in order to explore how participants actively construct, negotiate and maintain their identities discursively, albeit mainly in relation to mainstream populations and/or matters of recreational drug use (for example Bogren, 2006; Dahl, 2014; Demant, 2007; Ravn, 2012). By applying such notions in the current study, a rare conceptualization of 'problematically' drug-experienced young women as active identity workers is put forth. Thus, it becomes possible to explore how these young women negotiate the restraints and opportunities of their everyday lives.

In order to explore these issues, a discourse psychological perspective is applied. Accordingly, the participating young women's in-situ narrations are conceptualized as social activities that produce identity claims (cf. Bamberg, 1997; Davies & Harré, 1990; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Wetherell, 1998). This implies that identities are understood to be relational phenomena constructed in complex interplays between 'structure' (cultural master-narratives) and 'agency' (individual possibilities for negotiation) (Bamberg, 1997), as opposed to 'fixed' and naturally occurring entities. According to discourse psychological theory, people continuously construct themselves and others through discursive practices which are carried out within, in opposition to, or in continuation of existing cultural understandings of for example drug use, romance, gender and age. By engaging with such 'interpretive repertoires' (Wetherell, 1998), we position ourselves and others, for instance as 'strong' or 'helpless', 'childish' or 'mature' in the process of narrating our everyday life experiences in the shape of a culturally informed storyline. Social interactions, in other words, enables subject positions, that are 'saturated with cultural meaning' (Søndergaard, 2002, p. 191), and which hold specific possibilities for being. Such notions allow for an analytical focus on how the participants 'take up' and negotiate culturally nested subject positions for themselves and

their partners as they develop their personal narrative. Hence, the study applies a 'bottom-up' approach that allows for elements of agency (Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Søndergaard, 2002). How narrators compose their expressions of selves from the repertoires available to them is thus of major concern.

Data and Methods

The study is based on interview data from an ongoing study of fifteen young Danes (seven females and eight males) with a history of extensive drug use and their everyday life experiences of social participation and identity constructions following drug treatment. The interviews were undertaken in 2011. Participants were recruited through a university research database of young people who have been enrolled in substance use treatment, and had agreed to be contacted by a researcher after discharge. Participation was voluntary, based on written and signed informed consent, and unconnected to any treatment requirementsⁱ.

Given the aim of the article, it is relevant to stress that none of the interviewed young men and women were in romantic relationships with each other. Hence, the partners of the young women, who form the fulcrum of the current article, have not been interviewed. The female participants (aged 17-20), were all in steady romantic heterosexual relationships (median length 24 months), and talk about romantic relationships was pervasive in these young women's narratives. Moreover, they all had extensive experiences of illicit drug use with initiation ages ranging from 10-14 (median age 12). Their experiences included a variety of drugs: Cannabis, CNS stimulants, tranquilizers, solvents, hallucinogens, and opiates. At the time of the interview, all participants had significantly changed their patterns of use either by cessation or by substantially reducing their consumption. Six of the young women started

dating their current partner while still using, and one started the relationship after cessation. Two were attending school, two were attending job training programs, while three were not in employment, education or training at the time of the interviews. Three cohabited with their partners, three lived by themselves, and one young woman lived with her parents. Finally, one young woman had a small child with her cohabitating partner.

The material for the analysis is taken from fourteen qualitative in-depth interviews with the sevenⁱⁱ participating young women each of who were interviewed twice. Hence, while 'naturally occurring interactions' is usually used for discursive oriented analysis (Potter, 2012), in-depth interview data forms the empirical basis of the current study. It is thereby emphasized that the interview situation is conceived of as a social and interactional setting (cf. Fina, 2009). The first interview was a narrative life history interview. A card-chapter method was applied in order to optimize the conditions for life story telling as well as making the interview as participant-driven as possible (Koro-Ljungberg et al., 2010; McAdams, 1993). Life story telling can be a difficult task, and consequently by offering a specific structure, the aim was to reduce potential stress connected with the task, while at the same time ensuring that 'rich' data be collected. The participants were asked to think of their life in the form of a table of contents in a book with 4-7 chapters, and to write headlines and cue words down on cards representing each chapter (cf. McAdams, 1993). They were then told to put the cards in front of them in any order they wished for the purpose of the storytelling process. Interviewing the participant a second time, on average a month later, provided the opportunity to pursue and further develop themes constructed in the first interview. The second interview was semi-structured and focused on everyday life among family, romantic partners, friends, school and individually important social spheres in the life of each participant, as well as pertinent themes such as future plans and expectations. Hence,

while 'romantic issues' often arose spontaneously both within the first and the second interview, they were also a specific focus in the guide for the second interview. Finally, participants' current levels of use (types of drugs / frequency of use within the last thirty days) were investigated following the second interview. Each interview lasted on average 90 minutes and was carried out and recorded in the participants' homesⁱⁱⁱ, then transcribed and made anonymous.

The analytical process involved thorough readings of the interviews in order to acquire an overall sense of them. They were then coded in order to extract all passages on romantic partners with drug use as a co-theme. Hence, each narrative extract reflects a triad of the young woman, her romantic partner, and issues of drug use or affiliation. This made it possible to draw connections between the ways that the young women positioned themselves and their partners, and the ways that they added meaning to the use of drugs. Finally, the extracts were analyzed in order to examine which subject positions the participants' actively (albeit not necessarily intentionally) engaged with for themselves and their partners in the course of narration, cf. the discourse psychological framework outlined in the previous section.

Findings

The findings are structured into three sections which reflect the dominant positioning patterns in the young women's romantic narratives. Importantly, this division is an analytical handling designed to present complex empirical material, and therefore, overlap between the sections does exist. Throughout the findings section, however, differences and similarities are highlighted and discussed. As has already been put forth, positioning patterns are not

descriptive of the individual young women. Rather, they tend to position themselves and their partner in various ways throughout their narrations depending *inter alia* on the conversational topic. Hence, all three patterns presented below may apply to one and the same young woman. Accordingly, it is relevant to stress that the young women's narratives are not understood as 'true' stories revealing the objective nature of the participants' 'true' selves or romantic relationships (cf. Søndergaard, 2002).

1: Heroic Boyfriends vis-à-vis Decent Girlfriends

A significant discursive enactment in the interviews is the young women's positioning of their boyfriends as saving and motivating figures who are able to keep them from using drugs. As we see in the following, potential drug use of the 'heroic male' partner is thus not articulated as a significant problem. Instead, it is either defused or left unarticulated by emphasizing his ability to influence her positively. As a binary opposite to the 'heroic male', the young women take up a subject position of 'decency' for themselves – a position which is highly incompatible with drug use. The positioning pattern thus takes the form of a traditional hetero-romantic storyline imbued with positions of men as active and women as passive.

Solvej (aged 19) exemplifies a remarkably unambiguous utilization of this narrative resource. She lives with her partner, and is at the time of the interview actively pursuing new job possibilities through a job training program. She describes her future as bright and herself as happier than ever before. In Solvej's personal narrative, her partner Thomas represents a turning point, offering hope for a good, stable and tranquil life. In the course of the interview, I ask Solvej to share a positive memory. Without hesitation, she replies:

Solvej: Well, I went through a really difficult time with abortion and HIV, and then I met my boyfriend who simply was the best thing for me. It changed everything.

Interviewer: In what way?

Solvej: I actually think that he kind of pulled me away from it. I mean, he could feel that something new had to happen and, erh, that I wasn't happy, and that my life couldn't continue like this in the long run. I'm actually really happy that he did that. I am really grateful. It means everything to me.

In the extract, Solvej refers to a past incident in a drug use setting, where she was attacked by a man who stuck her with a used needle. She presents the incident, and the following intense fear of infection as her worst memory, and in doing so, she understandably emphasizes her own powerlessness. However, this powerlessness is more explicitly pronounced when her partner is the main point of reference. It is thus Thomas and not Solvej, who has the capacity to recognize her needs, and to act successfully upon them. In other words, he becomes 'the prince who is the solution to all the princess's problems' (cf. Walkerdine, 1990). But noticeably, when Solvej does not refer to her romantic partner, she actually positions herself as responsible for her '*new life*'. The tendency for young people to draw on a traditional hetero-romantic storyline is not unusual in narrations of heterosexual relationships, which may reflect that it is subject to intense cultural repetition and distribution (Banker et al., 2010; Maxwell, 2007; Søndergaard, 2002). In order to understand exactly what this positioning pattern does for the young women, however, their current life situation must be taken into consideration. One interpretation is that boyfriends constitute a sense of (future) security and stability in a present (still) imbued with all sorts of social and personal struggles and uncertainties. His capacity to provide her with a sense of safety is thus paramount.

Similar to Solvej, Tilde (aged 18) is explicitly oriented towards leading a drug-free and well-educated life. In the interview, she unfolds how being with Omar affects her plans positively by noting his good influence on her. At the time of the interview, Tilde is no longer using CNS stimulants and thus she considers herself to be 'clean', albeit she smokes cannabis regularly. She is also attending school and is for the first time in her life both enjoying school and doing well. Unlike Solvej, however, Tilde's engagement with a traditional hetero-romantic storyline interacts with other narrative resources. In the interview extract below, it is especially noticeable how Tilde starts by positioning herself in opposition to Omar's experimentation with drugs, confronting him with the bad influence his use may have on her:

Tilde: ... Then I told him that 'you have to keep it away from me, Omar, because I've been clean for five months soon, and I don't wanna use again. I think about it often these days, and feel like taking drugs, but I can't start again'. I told him that, and then he said that normally he doesn't take anything, not all the time, and stuff like that. And that it had been a bad thing of him to do lately, and that he had been doing it way too much, and so on

Yet, as the narrative proceeds, Tilde gradually places Omar in a position from where he, despite his use, becomes able to motivate her not to use, stressing the notion that 'decent girls' do not use drugs:

Tilde: ... And then he said that 'I really think that's a good thing, honey, and you really got to hold on to that, because even though I do drugs, I don't want to be with a girl who takes anything, and I know that this might seem double standard, but I don't want my girl to do drugs. I'm gonna leave her if she does', he said. And I think that's good that he would leave his girl if she takes anything, because then I

have that feeling of 'hey, don't do drugs, cause then he'll leave you' [...] He just keeps on motivating me. I am not sure how he does it, but he does it more and more these days.

Tilde moves from one storyline to another, creating positions where at first irresponsible Omar becomes heroic in relation to the before pro-active but now decent Tilde. In this process, drug use becomes a purely masculine act excluding decent girls (Tilde) from doing drugs. Hence, the meaning of Omar's drug use shifts from problematic to unproblematic. In effect, it becomes possible for Tilde to transgress the potential trouble of being in a relationship with a drug experienced boyfriend – trouble that possibly relates to the interview context, as well as other contexts in her life (e.g. school or family). But simultaneously she ends up in a differently troubled subject position of passivity and female submission, which strongly contrasts with the way she positions herself at other times in the interview, for example as an 'alpha-male' in relation to male friends and as being 'in control' of her own life situation. Tilde actually points to the asymmetrical power relations entailed by the hetero-romantic storyline by explicitly referring to Omar's attitude as '*double standard*', but then again by using his voice, she minimizes the effect of her statement. This may be understood as her way to achieve a balance between subject positions of the suitable-for-rescuing decent girl, and a position of self-responsibility. In a feminist informed study on girls dealing with health issues within their hetero-romantic relationships, Banister & Jakubec (2004-2005) alternatively point to the girls' inability to speak up for themselves due to hetero-normative restraints as a possible interpretation of narrations like this. However, other scholars suggest that while young women often do position themselves as passive within traditional gendered storylines, they do not necessarily settle within this position (Harris, et al., 2000; Jackson & Cram, 2003; Korobov & Thorne, 2009). In light of the above, I suggest that while drug-experienced young women's use of hetero-romantic storylines may have a disempowering

effect, they also work as narrative resources for them to engage with, in order to make sense of their life circumstances on different social occasions.

2: Irresponsible Boyfriends vis-à-vis Mature Girlfriends

Another dominant positioning pattern occurs when the young women create their romantic narratives on the basis of storylines of personal development. These storylines are imbued with subject positions related to responsibility and maturity vis-à-vis positioning of romantic partners as irresponsible (drug using) others who are reluctant or unable to change. In research on young people's discussions of substance use, maturity and responsibility are often identified as central discursive markers (e.g. Bogren, 2006; Demant & Järvinen, 2006; Ravn, 2012). However, the young women in this study adapt the above notions to their current life circumstances by aligning them with abstinence rather than use. Additionally, feminist researchers note that positions of responsibility and maturity within heterosexual relationships are often associated with becoming adults (Griffin, 1993; Harris, et al., 2000), which in itself may be a central concern for the participating young women. Drugs are accordingly constituted as disruptions when related to issues of becoming responsible adults and therefore they become highly inappropriate. For example Mette (aged 19) who is cohabitating with her boyfriend emphasizes that '*there just isn't a middle ground in this regard*'. She notes that she has tried hard to '*make him understand that he has to quit smoking cannabis*' while he '*has some kind of idea that it is idyllic*.' Such disagreements are often linked to reflections on whether or not to pursue a shared future.

Heidi's (aged 17) personal narrative is particularly noticeable in this regard. At the time of the interview, she does not have a job, and is not in education, or training. She is

intensely concerned with her partner Jesper's cannabis use, and not least her own role in keeping him from using. The couple lives separately at the moment, but previously Jesper used to stay with her at her parents' house. In the following extract, Heidi explains how Jesper has changed because of her:

Heidi: ... I have taught him a lot. I have made him into a new person, actually

Interviewer: A new person?

Heidi: Yes I have. I pulled him away from crime, drugs, abuse, bad company and stuff like that [...]. I am definitely the reason why, I mean, if he hadn't met me at the time, or if I had just told him 'you know what, that's your own business', I am afraid to think of where he would be today. If he would be dead, or in prison, or...

Below, she continues to explain her ability to act on Jesper with her personal strength and insight into the negative consequences of drug use, stressing her own development. In doing so, she positions Jesper as an irresponsible child unable to take care of himself. Furthermore, the way in which Heidi replaces her former self in favor of a clearly matured Heidi (who knows that money should be spent on debts - not on drugs) is significant:

Interviewer: How do you think you have been able to help him with these things then?

Heidi: I think I've been kinda strong in my attitude towards drugs, that they simply shouldn't exist. I wasn't into it at all, erh, because I also became wiser, and more mature and better able to understand some stuff and feel how it affected me and stuff like that [...] I felt like 'God, you're so, I mean, idiot, I mean, are you stupid or what the hell are you doing?' I simply couldn't tolerate it and I wouldn't want him (Jesper) to use [...] I mean, he spends so much money which he should be spending on other stuff, like debt or whatever, I mean, but to spend that kinda money on stuff like that, I don't respect it at all. I just don't.

What happens discursively is that Heidi 'feminizes' the structure of a traditional hetero-romantic storyline by reversing its subject positions so that she becomes a saving figure, and he becomes the one who needs to be saved. In other words, she intersects the structure of a hetero-romantic storyline with cultural understandings of proper adolescent development and transitions to adulthood in which she is able to take up agentic subject positions. Unlike a traditional hetero-romantic storyline, however, this does not legitimize drug use for the saving (now feminine) figure; hence drug use is signified as an improper act for *both* him and her. Yet, while succeeding in positioning herself as strong and proactive, she consequently devalues her romantic relationship, which altogether underscores the difficulty of transgressing the notion of 'true' hetero-romance. Next in her narrative, Heidi brings on the possibility of actually losing her partner due to his negative reaction to the way she is 'mothering' him. Consequently, she discursively seeks to level out the differences between them and states that (because of her efforts) he is '*actually starting to act a little more mature than he normally does*'.

The fact that neither Heidi nor Mette wish to end their relationship despite the described range of trouble, and that they instead seek to mend it by positioning their partners as 'maturing', and thus worthy of a common future, is easily understood as a consequence of hetero-romantic hegemony. But additionally, I suggest in line with Harris and her colleagues (2000) that the young women are cautiously seeking to balance contrasting cultural demands and ambivalent personal desires related to their age and gender i.e. becoming mature and independent adults without compromising traditional femininity, both of which for young women are closely linked to being in heterosexual relationships (Griffin, 1993; Korobov & Thorne, 2009). One way to navigate this tension, then, is by constructing a personal narrative

in which they position themselves as independent and proactive *within* their relationships, specifically by the way they relate to drug use.

In contrast to Mette and Heidi, Tine (aged 20) stresses how she is *not* able to act successfully on her partner Robert's occasional use of drugs. Hence, Tine's narrative accentuates that the positioning pattern of irresponsible boyfriends vis-à-vis mature girlfriends relates to issues of 'breaking out'. Tine notes how Robert after seeing his friends '*always comes home high on drugs*', and states that she '*can't accept it, and he on the other hand can't understand why I can't trust him*'. She explains that just like Robert she sometimes feels like using drugs, but does not do it '*because I have a responsibility, I have Jonas (their son) and he means more to me than taking drugs*'. While Tine's positioning of herself as the primary caregiver may fit with a traditional hetero-romantic storyline, she vividly opposes to the way things are. She expresses immense concerns with the situation and calls for partner equality in order to get an education or a job, and in that way secure the future for herself and her son. Yet, her plans do not comply with her current life situation which is why she strongly considers ending the relationship.

3: Partners-in-Crime

In some instances romantic partners are neither constructed as a motivational force for reducing drug matters, nor as drug using 'others'. Thus, the young women do not necessarily position themselves in binary opposition to their partners with regard to matters of drug-use. On the contrary, the couple occasionally becomes an oppositional unit, a 'we' standing in contrast to mainstream contexts where experiences related to drug use become troubling. This points to a possible transgression of the notion that the heterosexual relationship is essentially

a context for reproductions of unequal power relations and sexual double standards (cf. Hollway, 1984).

While it is possible to glimpse a positioning pattern of 'oppositional unity' in several of the young women's narratives, in a few of the interviews it is much more prominent. Mia (aged 19) is not using drugs anymore, she is currently finishing school while having two jobs, and she lives alone in a small apartment, but sees her partner Michael almost every day. Whether or not Michael uses, and at what level, remains unknown as Mia stresses that she has no wishes to control him. Similar to Solvej (positioning pattern 1), Mia describes the start of her relationship with Michael as a 'turning point' in her life. But unlike Solvej, Mia does not hold her boyfriend responsible for her transformation. Instead she stresses how his support and the stability of their relationship have empowered her to start trusting other people again, and to show them that '*I can do it!*' On matters of drug use, she consistently avoids narrations in which he becomes heroic-powerful (positioning pattern 1) or she becomes mature-responsible (positioning pattern 2). On the contrary, Mia states how she enjoys being able to be '*neutral*', or un-gendered, in his presence. Moreover, it acts as a recurring positive circumstance for her that Michael also has experiences of troubled subject positioning related to drug use, such as being the black sheep of the family:

Mia: He has been a bad boy, right, so you can easily say that he is the black sheep [of the family]. So, on that matter we are a good match, because we both know what it's all about. For me it's just been wilder. Erh, but at the same time, you can sense that, well he lives at his parent's, so he kinda likes coming home to Mom who prepares his breakfast and his lunchbox.

Mia positions herself and Michael as an experiential 'we': A unit with certain strengths and insights related to '*the flipside*' who '*knows what it is all about*'. Yet, Michael's quite

comfortable upbringing constitutes a potential disturbance between them because of the traditionally gendered expectations that Mia associates with this context. Mia's positioning of her and Michael as knowledgeable resembles the way Heidi (positioning pattern 2) positions herself as mature and responsible. But unlike Heidi, Mia positions herself *with* her partner and not in opposition to him. Instead, she positions herself and her partner in opposition to her in-laws, possibly representing a broader audience of mainstream Danish society. She refers to them as '*The Normals*', who '*don't know the problems life brings. They only know the traditional society and have no clue what else is happening*'. Reversely, Mia and Michael become someone who have the courage to deal with the problems life brings, which clearly relates to the way Mia addresses their drug use experiences. Unlike Heidi, Mia does not distance herself from her drug using past by associations of immaturity. Rather, she emphasizes how her drug experiences are useful in broader sense: They are (still) a part of who she is and how she relates to and engages with the world. Another young woman, Julie (aged 20), even expresses how she and her partner '*actually feel kinda sorry for people who just sit there, who never experience anything*'. On such occasions, gender and age do not serve as focal points for subjectification. Instead the morality of mainstream society does.

However, this positioning pattern may hold a potential for quite contrasting effects. At one level it serves to transcend troubled subjectifications related to being drug experienced. Experiences of being excluded and repeatedly positioned as troublesome in mainstream settings is quite common for the participants. Therefore the prevalence of intimate relationships (potentially with a drug-experienced partner) supporting them in overcoming this is highly significant. On another level, however, a strong alliance or loyalty between drug experienced romantic partners may act as an interfering circumstance in relation to reducing or giving up drug use (Falkin & Strauss, 2003; Tracy et al., 2010).

Discussion and Conclusion

Considering that drug experienced young women are likely to be involved with drug experienced partners (Laudet, et al., 1999; Liebrechts, et al., 2013) and that romantic relationships are found to be a highly influential social context (Rhule-Louie & Mahon, 2007), the realm of romantic relationship is relevant to consider in understanding the complexity of drug cessation or decline among romantically involved young women. Existing but sparse findings indicate that drug-experienced adult women are not only marked by their own histories, but also by their partner's pasts and attitudes towards drug use in processes of cessation (Falkin & Strauss, 2003; Leverentz, 2006; McCollum, et al., 2005). Overall, the article supports these conclusions in relation to young women.

Taken together, the participating young women's romantic narratives and the identity work they hold provide some important insights into the complexity of their romantic relationships. Besides being romantically involved, the interviewed young women shared a common goal of giving up problematic drug use and/or maintain a life without drugs. However, being with a partner who is also drug-experienced adds significant challenges to this goal. One overall implication of the current study is that these challenges should not be viewed as intrinsic properties of the young women, their male partners, nor their intimate relationships with each other. Rather, they should be considered vis-à-vis prevailing cultural understandings of age, romance and especially gender. Thus, the study develops existing findings on romantically involved women's recovery from problematic drug use further by taking notice of the ways that (conflicting) cultural expectations related especially to young womanhood impose on and are taken up in personal romantic/drug narratives.

Despite of occurring ruptures and intersecting storylines, the impact of a hetero-romantic storyline definitely stood out in the young women's narratives. As also suggested by existing literature on young women and hetero-romantic relations (e.g. Banker, et al., 2010; Korobov & Thorne, 2009; Maxwell, 2007), it is tremendously difficult to resist traditional hetero-romantic storylines for young women, while at the same time constructing a hetero-romantic relationship in a culturally intelligible way. This became especially noticeable as the young women positioned themselves in opposition to their partners; either as decent young women vis-à-vis a heroic boyfriend (positioning pattern 1), or as mature and responsible young women vis-à-vis an irresponsible boyfriend (positioning pattern 2).

Despite their similarities, these two patterns had quite opposing implications with regards to conceptualizations of drugs and drug use: Where drug use in positioning pattern 1 was incompatible with being a decent young woman, it is still compatible with a heroic male subject position, and is thus still a potential appropriate factor within the relationship. However, in positioning pattern 2, drug use was highly inappropriate for both the mature girlfriend and for her irresponsible boyfriend. Not surprisingly, the latter storyline was difficult for the young women to obtain while constructing a shared future. Therefore, they would often 'slide' out of this pattern by positioning their partners as 'maturing'.

By positioning themselves and their partners united as 'partners-in-crime', some of young women actually did manage, at least momentarily, to disturb the power of a hetero-romantic storyline (positioning pattern 3). Yet, while constructing storylines on partner unity vis-à-vis mainstream settings may enable the young women to position themselves and their partner as knowledgeable, it may also entail a possible interference with the aim to become drug-free. It is thus critical to keep in mind, not only how (feminine) subject positions of passivity may lead to vulnerability (drug use) within romantic relationships (cf. Jackson,

2001), but also how equality in some instances may have a similar effect. Thus, it is arguably fruitful to consider in what ways issues of influence/power within romantic relationships (that young women are easily influenced by their romantic partners) is a consequence of wider societal norms that reaches beyond the intimate twosomeness of a drug marked romantic relationship.

Noticeably, narrations about infatuation and intimacy are by and large absent from the presented romantic narratives. A main reason for this may be the study's implicit conceptualization of the young women as reflexive actors, which potentially excludes or impedes 'emotional' narratives which are culturally constituted as 'something we cannot help' (cf. Fraser, 2003). Moreover, it is critical to keep in mind, that while the analytical approach of the current study is able to put forth how young women in a vulnerable situation actively negotiate the 'trouble' of for example their romantic relationships, it also risks making their everyday life hardships invisible (see for example Jackson, 2001). Thus, applying the theoretical and methodological apparatuses of the current study should be done with some caution.

However, as mentioned earlier, one advantage of applying a discourse psychological perspective in a study of drug-experienced young women is its focus on resources (such as what they are able to achieve discursively). Paraphrasing Korobov and Thorne (2009, p.67), the young women in the current study skillfully display 'social fluency' as members of a western culture in doing what is 'required to answer to a wide range of ideological tensions'. Following this line of thought, I understand the concrete ways that the young women narrate their romantic relationships as personal and local attempts to 'hold their own' in relation to their embeddedness in a complex nexus of cultural, interpersonal and

personal expectations related to being drug-experienced, romantically engaged, emerging adult and, not least, female.

Finally, a comment on the study's small sample-size is essential. Due to the exploratory nature of the study and the low number of participants, it is quite possible that additional positioning patterns to the ones presented here may appear if a larger study were carried out. Still, the hope is that the findings of the current study will provide an increased focus among professionals on the importance of amplifying drug-experienced young women's narrative resources. In terms of behavior that contravenes traditional femininity such as (extensive) substance use (e.g. Griffin et al., 2009) young women are typically portrayed as highly relational oriented or even 'passive' in relation to male partners, for example with regard to drug use initiation (Bryant & Treloar, 2007). These women are in other words easily positioned as unfeminine, at-risk and associated with a lack of self-control (Harris, 2004), because 'real' femininity is not compatible with 'that kind of behavior'. Research accordingly finds that concerns about for example loss of decency are reflected in personal narratives of especially young women who do not readily comply with cultural master-narratives of 'proper' femininity (cf. Griffin, et al., 2009; Jackson & Tinkler, 2007; Jackson & Cram, 2003). Thus, for romantically involved young women who wish to give up or reduce their drug use, a greater awareness on them as active 'identity workers' may bring to the fore that they do play an active part in forming their heterosexual romantic identities. Yet, it is also crucial to take notice of the circumstance that especially long term romantic relationships for young women like the participants in the current study may be the only intimate relationship they hold. Therefore, breaking off a drug-marked relationship is not an easy decision and may not reduce their levels of drug use *per se*. The complex nexus of young women, drug use recovery and romantic relationships should therefore be further related to the wider social

situation of the young women (peers, family etc.), and not merely to cultural master-narratives on gender and to women as active 'identity workers' as in the current study. This is arguably an important task for future research.

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ⁱ The study is registered with the Danish Data Protection Agency. According to Danish research regulations, no further ethical approval is required.

ⁱⁱ The small number of participants follows a qualitative psychological tradition and the intention of performing exploratory, in-depth data analysis (e.g. Flick, 2002; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

ⁱⁱⁱ 1/14 interview was carried out at the young woman's work place at her request.