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Disturbing the 'spoiled-unspoiled' binary: Performances of recovering identities in drug-experienced youths' friendship narratives

Abstract:

In existing recovery studies, binary distinctions between 'spoiled' identities defined by drug-related practices and relationships on the one side, and 'un-spoiled' drug-free identities on the other, are dominant. Similarly, in contexts of youth drug-treatment, substance-using friends are generally viewed as 'bad company', while non-using friends are considered as recovery promoters. This article, however, joins the growing chorus of qualitative researchers beginning to question critically this 'spoiled-unspoiled' distinction. Based on 30 qualitative interviews with 15 young people recruited from a Danish drug-treatment database, we investigate how drug-experienced youth perform recovering identities vis-à-vis their still-using friends. Employing a performative approach to identity formation, we demonstrate how such identity processes play out, and the dilemmas and ambivalences they entail. For example, while drug-using friends are regularly positioned as 'bad company', this is often accompanied by sentiments such as loss and frustration. Our analysis suggests that young people in recovery are easily trapped between societal expectations related to factors such as education on the one hand, and comfortability and connectedness with friends on the other. However, by means of carefully balanced 'borderwork', participants did occasionally manage to integrate using friends into their recovering identities without positioning them as 'bad company' per se. On this basis, we discuss whether breaking bonds with friends who still use drugs is imperative for any process of recovery, and argue that treatment programmes should focus on reconfiguring drug-related friendships, while taking seriously the notion that recovering youth are not necessarily interested in abandoning relations with drug-using friends.

Keywords: Young people, friendship, drug use, recovery, identity, borderwork.

Introduction

Research suggests that giving up or changing one's drug use patterns requires significant identity work in tandem with reconfigurations of one's social relationships (e.g. Gibson, Acquah, & Robinson,

2004; Herold, 2015; Irving, 2011; Keys, Mallett, & Rosenthal, 2006; Liebregts et al., 2015; Rodriguez & Smith, 2014). Furthermore, studies have shown that youth drug use is a social activity, often carried out in the company of friends (e.g. Farrugia, 2015; Thurnell-Read, 2016), and therefore "*intricately woven into friendship*" (Foster & Spencer, 2013, p. 224). In light of these observations, it is remarkable that the role of friendships in relation to drug use recovery among young drug users has gained very little attention from researchers, especially in comparison to the sizable body of research on the role of peers in drug use initiation (e.g. Bauman & Ennett, 1996; Griffin, Botvin, Nichols, & Doyle, 2003; Grigsby, Forster, Soto, & Unger, 2016; Kandel, 1985; la Haye, Green, Kennedy, Pollard, & Tucker, 2013). This article addresses this gap in the literature by exploring the significance of drug-related friendships for young people engaged in processes of giving up extensive drug use. Based on qualitative interviews with young people from Denmark who are in recovery from extensive drug use, the article more specifically explores how young people engage in borderwork (e.g. Thorne, 1993) to create identities vis-à-vis friends who continue to use drugs. Applying a micro-level, performative approach to identity formation (e.g. Thorne, 1993; Riessman, 2012), we aim to show how such identity processes play out, as well as the dilemmas and ambivalences they entail.

In the existing literature on young people and drug use recovery, drug-using peers are generally conceptualised as risk factors in terms of drug use initiation and post-treatment relapse, while (new) drug-free friends are viewed as a protective factor or as promotors in the recovery process (Ciesla, 2010; Gonzales, Anglin, Glik, & Zavalza, 2013; Nash & Collier, 2016; Nash, Marcus, Engebretson, & Bukstein, 2015; Ramirez, Hinman, Sterling, Weisner, & Campbell, 2012). Moreover, drug-using friends are presented as 'negative recovery capital' (Hennessy, 2017), and as a major risk-factor for continued drug use in many youth treatment approaches such as, for example, 'alternative peer group models' (e.g. Collier, Hilliker, & Onwuegbuzie, 2014) and 'recovery high schools' (e.g. Finch & Frieden, 2014), which besides being relational oriented are based on medical models of addiction. The notion that drug-using friends constitute a significant risk-factor is also a pronounced discourse in the Danish treatment system, and in reports produced by social authorities in Denmark to inform the work of professionals (e.g. National Board of Social Services, 2017; Mortensen, 2015).However, studies which take young people's own perspectives into consideration suggest that young people in drug treatment and/or recovery are often reluctant to let go of close

but still-using friends. Thus, drug-using friends are not necessarily perceived merely as *either* enablers *or* preventers of drug use (cf. Chung et al., 2015; Passetti, Godley, & White, 2008). Adding to the complexity, young people with 'behavioural problems' such as drug use tend to report similar or slightly higher levels of caring, loyalty, confiding and contact with their drug-using friends than so-called 'pro-social' youths (Boman, Krohn, Gibson, & Stogner, 2012; Kandel & Davies, 1991; Terrion, Rocchi, & O'Rielly, 2015). In recent years, a growing number of qualitative researchers have emphasised the importance of focusing on young substance users' own interpretations as a means of providing a more nuanced understanding of the complex dynamics of drug consumption, risks and friendships. On this basis, researchers are now using qualitative approaches to challenge the "simplistic accounts of peer pressure" (Farrugia, 2015 p.240) which often inform drug treatment programmes and public health campaigns. Farrugia (2015), for instance, argues that notions of peer pressure fail to capture the fact that youth drug use is often fuelled by a desire to share corporeal and affective experiences with friends. Furthermore, for example Pilkington (2007) shows how young drug users experience their friend groups as safe and supportive environments where they can receive guidance and enact drug decisions. Similarly, using a narrative approach, Foster & Spencer (2013) demonstrate how drug consumption is interwoven with affective relationships of trust, and how young drug users engage in identity work by drawing boundaries between their own friendship group's responsible drug use and the irresponsible drug use of others (see also MacLean, 2016; Mayock, 2002). Thus, the dominant picture of young drug users as being either passively drawn into a world of drug use through socialisation processes (i.e. peer pressure) or actively choosing a deviant lifestyle through processes of peer selection is gradually becoming more nuanced. In addition, qualitative research suggests that young users in drug treatment often maintain a relationship with still-using friends (Passetti et al., 2008) which is why there is a need a for better understanding of how recovering youths negotiate these relationships.

In an effort to address this latter issue, and to avoid a good/bad dichotomy of friendships, in this article we wish to highlight a more nuanced understanding of friendships as complex and shifting relations of comfort, intimacy and belonging, as well as disagreements, dissolution, betrayal, and sentiments such as anger and sadness (Becker, 1992; Fehr, 1996, Solano, 1986). It is against this background that we wish to explore how young drug users, as part of their recovery process,

negotiate their relationship with still-using friends through complex performances of recovering identities.

Performing recovering identities in relation to friends: Analytical framework

Early qualitative research on natural recovery has been influential in establishing recovery as a process of individual identity change. This research often drew on Goffman's work on stigma (1963) in order to argue that drug users have a 'spoiled' or 'damaged' identity marked by drug-related practices and relationships. From this perspective, recovery therefore involves a binary form of identity repairing (e.g. Biernacki, 1986) by creating distance between a new, 'unspoiled' or 'clean' identity and one's former, drug-using self (e.g. McIntosh & McKeganey, 2000, 2001). However, this body of early recovery literature, and particularly the use of the term 'spoiled identity', has been criticised for conflating drug use practices with a singular master identity, and for reproducing an understanding of identity as unified and totalising (Neale et al., 2011; Dahl, 2015; Fomiatti et al., 2017). While acknowledging that individuals often need to rework their narratives as part of the recovery process, recent studies have instead used Mead's theories of the self (Järvinen & Ravn, 2011, 2015), or concepts such as 'dramaturgy' (Andersen, 2014) and 'boundary work' (Järvinen & Demant, 2011) to emphasise the constructed and changeable nature of identity in relation to drug use. These approaches have enabled researchers to go beyond the spoiled/unspoiled dichotomy so as to provide more nuanced understandings of the complex identity processes involved, e.g. by considering that recovery processes may not necessarily include total abstinence, but rather a reconfiguration of social roles and practices, for instance, in balancing moderate drug use with being a caring parent or a responsible employee (Neale et al., 2011). Following this line of thought, we draw inspiration from performative narrative theory (Bamberg, 2004; Riessman, 2003; 2012) and from social psychological studies of borderwork (Thorne, 1993; Davies 2006; Foster & Spencer, 2013) to demonstrate how young people perform recovering identities *vis-à-vis* their still-using friends.

From a performative perspective, assignments of subject positions in personal narratives are seen as "*key features of identity performance*" (Riessmann, 2012, p. 374). When talking, narrators continuously position themselves in different ways, for example as agentic or moral beings, through their specific use of language. Narrators may also shift position as the narrative develops, for example from 'normal' or 'mainstream' to 'edgy' depending on the specific

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content of talk or on the audience (Ibid.). Thus, the use of a performative narrative approach enables us to explore, at a micro-level, the situational and fluid ways in which our participants perform recovering identities *vis-à-vis* their friends. Furthermore, by drawing on the notion of borderwork, we are able to strengthen our focus on the relational aspects of such identity processes. The concept of borderwork, as first proposed by Thorne (1993), refers to processes of gender performance among schoolchildren through different kinds of peer interactions, spatial/physical separation from and intimacy with peers. As such, rejecting or differentiating oneself from certain peers becomes a way of establishing oneself as an intelligible (gendered) person. Since identity categories, from this perspective, are conceptualised as multiple and fluid, becoming a member of a preferred identity category entails one's relationship to the Other (gender) being situationally ejected and differentiated from oneself through acts of what Davies (2006) refers to as category-maintaining borderwork. However, borderwork is by no means always a strictly categorical endeavour. On the contrary, it is often marked by ambiguity, volatility, and emotional sentiments such as aggression and sadness (Thorne, 1993; Davies, 2006). When shifting focus from gender performances to the study of friendship among youths in drug use recovery, borderwork translates into a matter of performing recovering identities by situationally relating to and separating oneself from drug-using or non-using friends in different ways. This notion in combination with a performative narrative approach thus enables us to demonstrate how our participants, as part of their recovery process, narratively position themselves in relation to different (groups of) drug-using friends (cf. Foster & Spencer, 2013). It also allows us to emphasise different dilemmas and ambivalences in how close friendships matter for young people attempting to give up on extensive use of drugs. As we aim to show empirically, our participants' borderwork does not merely maintain binary categories of 'spoiledness' and 'unspoiledness' (cf. Davies, 2006), but is also marked by accomplishments of composite forms of borderwork that arguably disturb this binary.

Methodology

Our data consists of 30 in-depth interviews with 15 drug-experienced young people – eight males and seven females – between the ages of 16 and 20, all of whom were interviewed twice[i]. The interviews were carried out in Danish by the article's first author and translated into English following the analysis. The majority of the interviews were conducted in the young people's homes.

At the time of the interviews, participants were living in various parts of Denmark. Eight were based in larger cities, while seven were living in mid-sized provincial towns or rural areas. Six were not in employment, education or training, four were actively pursuing youth education, two were in employment, and three were participating in some form of training. Three had experienced homelessness, and eight had had experiences of been placed outside the family home. At the time of the interviews, six participants were living with their parents, and nine were living alone or with a partner. We recruited our participants through a research database of young people who had been enrolled in municipal outpatient drug treatment. The database was run as part of a larger Danish research project on youth drug treatment, and consisted of information derived from a screening tool (YouthMap) for monitoring of psycho-social problems and resources, as well as AOD use patterns, of young people in drug treatment (see Pedersen et al. 2017). The screening tool was developed in collaboration between researchers and practitioners, and administered by treatment providers. At the time of recruitment, the database contained information on 380 young people who had all completed a municipal drug treatment programme, and who had agreed to be contacted for future research purposes. 49 young women and 105 young men were screened as relevant for this study. Besides their treatment experiences, participants were recruited on the basis of their low drug use initiation ages (maximum age: 14 / median age: 12) and regular and extensive experiences with using cannabis plus at least two other types of illegal drugs (mainly different forms of CNS and hallucinogens, and more rarely opioids/heroin). All of the young people we contacted, except 2, agreed to be interviewed for this study. One rejected because he felt he had 'moved on' in his life. Another participated in the first interview, but was not available for the second interview. The 15 young people, who did participate in both interviews expressed different reasons for this. The most dominant reason was that they wished to support the study's ambition of forefronting young drug users' own perspectives on ways out of extensive drug use.

Cannabis was the most commonly used drug, both in terms of lifetime use and current use. At the time of the interviews, all participants had either ceased or significantly reduced their drug use. Seven were still using. Of these, three were using cannabis on a daily basis but had ceased or significantly cut down on other drugs, three were still using cannabis occasionally and had ceased other forms of drug use, and one had ceased using cannabis, but was still using CNS at weekends. However, active use did not necessarily imply that participants self-identified as 'drug users', just as

discontinued use did not necessarily imply that they considered themselves to be wholly recovered or that they no longer engaged with still-using friends. Thus, when we refer to participants' current use, it is merely descriptive of self-reported levels of use within the past thirty days and not of their recovery status. We ascertained this information from a short questionnaire administered following the second interview.

The two interviews were carried out on average a month apart, and were different in form. The first was a participant-driven narrative interview, with the primary aim of letting the young participants decide on and articulate important topics to enable us to establish an overall impression of both their pre- and post-treatment life circumstances (cf. Koro-Ljungberg, Bussing, & Cornwell, 2010). Each participant constructed their narrative using the analogy of book chapters in a table of contents (cf. McAdams, 1993). Using blank pieces of card, they headlined each chapter and provided them with descriptive key words of their own choice. Subsequently, the cards served as informative props for both the participant and the interviewer. Among other things, the initial interviews indicated that friends played a major role in the participants' drug use practices, but also in their recovery process. The first interview lasted between 30 and 130 minutes (median length: 83).

The second interview was semi-structured and had an explicit focus on friendship as well as other personally significant relationships (e.g. family, romantic partners and teachers). In respect of friendships, participants were asked to elaborate on their five most significant friends/groups (cf. Tyler & Melander, 2011), including interactional contexts, common activities, the significance of friends, and interpersonal dynamics in groups or dyads. Other pre-defined themes included experiences of comfortability in different contexts, experiences of self-efficacy and agency. The second interview lasted between 30 and 120 minutes (median length: 74).

Due to our micro-level orientation towards linguistic details in the analysis, all talk, including emotional expressions such as sighs, intonation and pauses were recorded and transcribed verbatim using a detailed transcription guide (cf. Wetherell, Taylor and Yates, 2001). Furthermore, bodily gestures were noted by the interviewer in the interview situations. In the first part of the analytical process, all interviews were coded by context and relationship type (e.g. family, friend, romantic partner). Narratives which simultaneously revolved around friendships and issues related to giving up drugs were then selected for further analysis. The selection process was based on both

explicit expressions of 'being in recovery' (narrative content) and on more subtle expressions, such as how participants positioned themselves *vis-à-vis* still-using friends (positioning patterns) (cf. Bamberg, 2004; Riessmann, 2012). The latter constituted the main analysis, which was informed by the analytical concepts and the understanding of friendships outlined in the previous sections, and by an overall knowledge ambition of understanding intersubjective and identity-related aspects of giving up extensive drug use.

Participation in the research project was voluntary, based on informed written and signed consent, and unconnected to any treatment requirements. The study is registered with The Danish Data Protection Agency[ii].

Analysis

Ending Drug-Related Friendships: Future prospects, education and work

In congruence with the dominant tendency in the literature to view drug-using friends as barriers to recovery (e.g. Ciesla, 2010), drug use does constitute a central factor in how our participants evaluate their friendships. A frequently occurring form of borderwork in the aggregated interview data involves seemingly binary forms of boundary drawing between still-using friends on the one side, and the recovering young person on the other, through statements such as: "*we are no longer on the same team*". This implies that drug-using friends are effectively positioned as 'bad company', leading to an unwanted, uneducated and drug-infested future life, and that the creation of distance forms part of the participants' performances of 'unspoiled' recovering identities. This, however, is especially prevalent when the context of talk is the participants' educational or career ambitions, and should possibly be viewed in the light of both our participants' drug-treatment enrolments which might favour negative views on drug use, including using peers (cf. Järvinen & Ravn, 2014), and of prevalent public discourses stigmatising drug users (Nieweglowski et al., 2018). As one example of this, Mia (20 y/o, not using) describes how she is still striving to "*dispose of the bad*" (referring to her still-using friends) in order to obtain a socially valued and well-educated future, as opposed to a future as an "*unskilled factory worker*" who associates with the wrong people. Another example is Christoffer (18 y/o, not using), who describes his current relationship with a group of still-using (former) close friends as follows:

Christoffer: To be honest, you feel a bit scared and sad. I mean, I actually feel lucky, because I still see them, I mean, I don't actually talk to any of them anymore. I have drawn a line, told them that if they didn't stop smoking cannabis, I wouldn't be able to be friends with them anymore. It's that simple! Then they said "fine". They stopped answering my calls and texts, and then I said "Fine, that's cool. That is totally up to you. I'll be laughing when I see you in the gutter. I'll be making money, what will you be doing?" […] I think I am worth much more than they are. I'm sorry, but I really do. Because I know how far out they are. It may be cruel, but [deep breath] that's actually what helped me move on.

By rhetorically placing his friends "*in the gutter*" while at the same time stressing that he has "*move[d] on*", Christoffer projects himself into a well-employed and drug-free future, to which the others do not have access due to their continued drug use. As such, this act of borderwork illustrates a performance of an intelligible recovering identity by means of a 'spoiled' (*gutter*)/'unspoiled' (*moved on*) binary. Moreover, by stressing that he was the one who cut them off, Christoffer positions himself as being in control of his recovery process, which arguably adds effectively to his performance. However, similarly to many of the other young people we interviewed, Christoffer's narrative simultaneously indicates that their separation is emotionally difficult: he feels both "*scared and sad*". In addition to this, bodily expressions such as his deep breath indicate the difficulty of the loss of his friends. This both shows that breaches between close friends in the context of drug use recovery is a two-way process, and that recovering young people's experience of being socially excluded by still-using friends can generate emotional challenges. Thus, while binary 'spoiled/unspoiled' acts of borderwork occur frequently across the aggregated data, they are often accompanied by more or less explicit expressions of emotional difficulty. Furthermore, as also noted by Dahl (2015), cessation from drug use can be experienced as betrayal by friends who are still using. Taken together, this indicates that young people in recovery may experience being caught between societal demands related to mainstream youth development, such as, on the one hand, obtaining an education and being friends with 'the right people', and on the other, sentiments such as belonging, loyalty and confidentiality between close friends.

Tilde's (18 y/o, using cannabis regularly) narrative exemplifies this dilemma in more depth. The context of her account is her recent school enrolment and her decision to end her relationship with her best and still-using friend, Eske. Tilde informs us that she is still using cannabis about 15 days a month, and that this constitutes a significant reduction from her earlier use. More important to Tilde than whether or not she uses is the fact that she has recently returned to formal education. She emphasises that she now enjoys school for the first time in her life, thus positioning herself as someone who takes her future seriously and who is able to comply with societal expectations. The focal points in the extract below are her friend Eske's high level of cannabis use and Tilde's concern about how Eske's use pattern might affect her future prospects. However, she starts out by elaborating on the growing void between them:

> **Tilde:** …I can't really compare myself to him anymore. I mean, Eske was so stoned [last week, his place]. He smokes a lot right now; he's fucking his life up, and I feel so sorry for him. When I look at him, I want to help him, but I can't, and that's why I keep my distance. I just can't look at him when he's like that […]
>
> **Interviewer:** What does it do to you?
>
> **Tilde**: Well, it makes me sad, and… he reflects me very much […]
>
> **Interviewer:** What do you mean, he reflects you?
>
> **Tilde:** When he's sucking his bong… When he sucks [Tilde imitates the sound], I mirror myself. I mean, I know exactly how he feels. It's like I'm reading myself [onto him]. I've been in his position. I've been that person. I see Tilde in Eske's body. That's why I am distancing myself […]. Even though they [a shared group of friends] were my close friends, they are gradually becoming acquaintances because I know if I start being friends with them again, I'll be out of school in three weeks. It's not only about Eske, it is also something inside of me saying "it's no good, Tilde" […]. His place is littered with garbage, there's old junk on the table, a bong, and I have a hard time looking at it. I mean, my place used to look like that. I want to clean it up and throw out the bong. But I can't, because it's not mine. It's his.

By stressing her new orientation towards getting an education, Tilde positions herself as someone who is 'future oriented' and committed – a recovery-related position that she proceeds to

strengthen by describing Eske as her counterpart: someone who is basically lost, and thus 'bad company'. Nonetheless, in the interview, Tilde repeatedly refers to her friendship with Eske in the present tense, and she does so to the extent that the interviewer needed to clarify whether or not she still sees him. Thus, while on one level she emphasises that they are no longer friends, she simultaneously describes a still-present group of friends characterised by easy-going, comfortable and caring interactions. She even stresses that they refrain from smoking cannabis when she is around. The extract also exemplifies how Tilde strives to disentangle herself from Eske, and shows how she is currently struggling to separate herself from him and from his cannabis use, which she describes in a highly emotional, even bodily manner. Thus, Tilde interchangeably connects with, cares for, and distances herself from Eske.

Overall, when drugs or drug use become a focal point in the participants' friendship narratives in amalgamation with educational or work aspirations, friends are in most cases positioned as bad company leading to an unemployed, uneducated and, hence, unwanted future. And yet, when intimate and caring aspects of the same friendships are brought up, they become significant sites for trust, intimacy and support. This latter point is emphasised explicitly by Tilde, who stresses: "*I already miss him* [Eske] *one hundred percent*".

Maintaining Drug-Related Friendships: Shared histories, loyalty and intimacy

While narratives on ending relationships with friends who still use drugs occur regularly in the data, they are frequently, and often in the same interview, challenged by narratives regarding maintaining drug-related friendships. As shown in the previous section, the positioning of drug-using friends as 'bad company' is often accompanied by sentiments such as sadness, loss and frustration. Furthermore, relations between recovering youths and still-using friends represent moral complexes governed by norms such as loyalty and reciprocity (cf. Brewer, 2005; Kadlac, 2012). For the young people we interviewed, this implies that they emphasise and identify with certain qualities of these friendships, whilst simultaneously distancing themselves from other aspects in order to perform and accomplish an intelligible recovering identity. For example, Axel (18 y/o, uses CNS at parties) strongly emphasises that he still sees and identifies with his still-using close friends, but also that they are all "*more criminal*" than he is, and that he is the only one in the group with a clean record.

Many participants explain how allowing themselves to continue to be friends with people who are still using drugs entails being able to disclose their problems and everyday life challenges in a supportive and comfortable environment. In such narratives, having similar drug use experiences is presented as a valued source of belonging and connectedness. Furthermore, being able to remain close friends despite having different use patterns becomes an expression of loyalty and trust. In the extract below, Elias (16 y/o, uses cannabis daily/other drugs occasionally) touches upon the importance of friendship loyalty and continuity in his description of his best friend:

> **Elias:** … The friends you've had throughout it all, from before you started smoking, you know they're your real friends.
>
> **Interviewer:** The ones who stuck by you?
>
> **Elias:** Yeah […] because it's a different environment, and a bit harder to keep your friends there, because you'll watch them drift further and further away. And I've been further out than, for example, Neung [still-using best friend], so he's had to watch me out there, but he stood by me anyway. It really means something when people hang on.

Interviews also showed that what might at first appear as breakdowns of relationships with friends are presented by the participants only as temporary breaks. This is evident, for example, in the narrative of Julie (20 y/o, uses cannabis, but rarely), who states that: "*We are on standby at the moment, because she does not want to smoke in front of me, and she does not want me to smoke because of her*". Julie explains that the current pause in her relationship with her still-using best friend Ditte is *not* a break-up, and that she is still her best friend with whom she has various life experiences in common. Importantly, Julie explains that they are not distancing themselves from each other *per se*. Rather, they always support each other, which sometimes implies that they avoid seeing one another. Thus, spending time apart from drug-using friends is not necessarily experienced as a permanent friendship termination, but in some cases rather as a reciprocal moral activity. This way of performing recovering identities, in other words, does not imply positioning one's still-using friends as 'bad company'. On the contrary, friends are positioned as people who scaffold the recovery process through their care and support.

Performances of Double Borderwork: Becoming normal or remaining edgy?

The meanings ascribed to substances such as cannabis vary over time, context and by situation. This implies that narratives on substance use can be used variously to perform edgy traits, such as rebelliousness, free spiritedness and open-mindedness (Sandberg & Tutenges, 2014). Similarly, some participants in this study express a preference for having friends with drug-experiences, because this allows them to maintain an understanding of themselves as someone who is 'not like everyone else'. Thus, while some narratives are indeed focused around striving towards 'becoming normal' and fitting in amongst 'normal friends', others are marked by concerns of not becoming 'too mainstream'. Some participants therefore engaged in what we call 'double borderwork' to perform recovering identities while at the same time identifying with drug use and drug-using friends. For example, Mette (18 y/o, not using) explains that it is difficult for her to be around when people are smoking cannabis, and she therefore seeks to avoid social situations where smoking may occur. However, she carefully emphasises how she nonetheless prefers the company of people who are 'open' towards cannabis use. She states that "*they have a totally different approach to things*" and therefore "*are the people that fit me the best".* Mette is particularly explicit about how her cannabis affiliations are related to her view of herself as a young woman who is not 'mainstream' and who has no wish to become so. Thus, as part of her identification with her still-using friends, she simultaneously distances herself from a group of non-using girls of around her own age who she has known since primary school and still sees occasionally:

> **Mette:** They say so many stupid things, I mean, [they are] the kind of girls who thrive on their good looks… Well, it's okay to be a part of it, and to talk to them, but basically, their relationships are totally superficial. So, I want them as acquaintances, but not as close friends. I couldn't. There's too much drama involved.

This extract illustrates Mette's performance of herself as different from her 'mainstream' friends in terms of qualities such as *"personal values"*, *"wits"*, *"loyalty"* and *"maturity"*, while she nonetheless identifies with them on areas such as appearance ("*…though I look like them…*"). Moreover, she emphasises how she still wants to hang out, but only to a limited extent ("*… it's okay to be a part of it…*"). Hence, Mette positions herself as being able to *pass* as mainstream but carefully avoids

establishing herself *as* such. For Mette, then, performing a recovering identity requires a careful balancing act between not wanting to continue to smoke while at the same time not becoming (too) mainstream. Similarly to Mette, Axel (18 y/o, uses CNS at parties) stresses how he has always preferred the company of his old friends, who he still sees frequently, and who still smoke cannabis on a regular basis, just as he used to do himself. Unlike Mette, however, Axel does not find it difficult to be around when they smoke, but he is nevertheless careful to stress that he is 'the sensible one' in the group, and thus differentiates himself from his friends, but without rejecting them. Axel's and Mette's 'collective we' (cf. Guldbrandsen, 2003), in other words, is not all-encompassing; rather, their acts of borderwork allow them to position themselves as being *in* their group of using friends, but not *of* it (cf. Foster & Spencer, 2013).

Concluding Discussion

In youth recovery studies, friendships are often conceived of as *either* developmental barriers *or* resources (e.g. Sulimani-Aidan, 2017), and, furthermore, young drug users' own friendship experiences are seldom taken into account in research on problematised drug use (Farrugia, 2015). Thus, while research has shown that young people in drug treatment often maintain a relationship with still-using friends in some form (Passetti et al., 2008), little knowledge exists on how recovering youths negotiate or reconfigure these relationships, or how this relates to identity-performances of the recovery process. In this article, however, we have explored how youths in drug use recovery perform recovering identities vis-à-vis still-using friends through different acts of borderwork, including the dilemmas and ambivalences of this process. We argue that if we are to develop a nuanced understanding of drug use recovery among young people, we need to include perspectives that recognise identity formations as situational accomplishments (cf. Thorne, 1993; Riessmann, 2012) as well as the complexities of friendship ties (cf. Fehr, 1996).

A key finding of our study is that some young people in drug use recovery actively seek to integrate their relationships and experiences with drug-using friends into their process of recovery, rather than excluding them from this process. As demonstrated in the analytical section, friendships with still-using friends are narratively constructed in various ways and with different identity implications, depending on the context and content of talk. When drug use becomes a narrative focal point in amalgamation with education and job possibilities, friends are often (but not

always) positioned as bad company, but when aspects such as loyalty or caring are put forth, the same relationship may (not surprisingly) be constituted quite differently. As noted by Järvinen & Ravn (2014), enrolment in drug treatment, which is a shared experience between the participants of the current study, "probably favours specific ways of telling one's drug-related life story" (Ibid., p.139) in which drug use is represented in more negative terms. Similarly, we argue that enrolment in drug treatment probably favours drug-free social relationships over drug-related ones. At least partly, this might explain the high occurrence of participant narratives in which still-using friends are positioned as 'bad company'. In other words, treatment enrolment might scaffold certain ways of performing recovering identities vis-à-vis friends, and repress others. Nonetheless, our findings support the observation that drug-experienced youths' friendships are neither as homogenous nor necessarily 'bad' as the dominant literature suggests (Kerksiek, Bell, & Harris, 2008). On this basis, we argue that if we wish to understand the complexities of drug-experienced young people's recovery processes in more depth, it is important to grasp the dynamic and composite aspects of drug-marked friendships, and not merely to categorise them as being either 'good' or 'bad'. As we have shown empirically, our participants do not merely maintain binary categories of 'spoiledness' and 'unspoiledness' (cf. Davies 2006), but continuously engage in recovery-related identity performances that disturb this binary.

Informed by Neale et al.'s (2011) critique of how the notion of 'spoiled identity' was categorically deployed in early recovery studies, we have used an analytical framework in our study that emphasises the situational dimensions of identity. Exploring the relationship between friendships and recovery from a performative narrative perspective has made it possible to show that performances of recovering identities often require complex relational (dis)entanglements, involving both disruption and maintenance of relationships with still-using friends, sometimes even simultaneously. Existing research has already highlighted how friendships constitute an important site for young people's use of drugs, their identity work, feelings of intimacy, trust and belonging (e.g. Foster & Spencer 2013; Pilkington 2007; Martin 2010; Farrugia 2015). In supporting these findings, our study furthermore suggests that the understanding that young people in drug-use recovery must necessarily distance themselves from or end friendships with drug-using friends can result in moral dilemmas, sadness and frustration, all of which can potentially impact negatively on the motivation to recover. Furthermore, in congruence with studies arguing that recovery should

not merely be equated with total abstinence (e.g. Neale et al, 2011, Järvinen & Ravn, 2011; Dahl, 2015), our findings suggest that, rather than breaking bonds with still-using friends, recovery can also involve a moderation or reconfiguration of such friendship relations. This was evident in for example the interview with Julie, who explained how, instead of ending the relationship with her still-using best friend, they took temporary breaks. By pointing to such complexities, which are easily lost to the binary absolutes of 'spoiled' and 'unspoiled', we hope to pave the way for further investigations of the embedded relationships, emotionality and contexts in which drug use recovery takes place.

Furthermore, our findings have implications for prevention and treatment of drug use among young people. Just as treatment programmes should take into consideration that young drug users are not always interested in quitting drugs altogether (Järvinen & Ravn, 2011), treatment programmes may also benefit from the notion that recovering youths are not always interested in ending relations with drug-using friends. Thus, rather than calling for total abstinence and cutting of friendship ties to drug-using friends, treatment programmes could work with graduated goals. This supports the understanding raised by Järvinen and Ravn (2011), who suggest that such an approach could involve allowing young people to take part in defining the meanings of problematic and unproblematic drug use. Similarly, the perspectives of young people in recovery should be taken seriously on issues related to their friendship relations, for example, regarding the influence of still-using close friends on their own patterns of use; which part of their drug use and their friendships they want help with and when; and how professionals can best assist them. Lastly, we suggest that scholars and treatment providers are careful to remember that recovering youth is not a homogeneous population, and that they might hold different views about what they need in terms of treatment (Kollath-Cattano et al., 2017). Pursuing the above questions in future research may hold the potential to produce valuable insights that can be used to inform and scaffold the processes whereby drug-experienced youths grow into adults who are not problematically marked by drug use.

Limitations

This is one of only a very limited number of studies which have explored the significance of drug-using friends for young people who are in recovery from extensive drug use by means of a

qualitative methodology. The strengths of the study include that it draws on a rich empirical basis with detailed descriptions of our participants' friendship ties, as well as an analytical framework which has enabled a nuanced understanding of these friendships and the recovery processes they are set in. However, the study is also marked by a number of limitations. A main limitation is our small sample size (15 participants, 30 interviews). Despite being consistent with other qualitative youth treatment or recovery studies (e.g. Kerksiek et al., 2008; Kollath-Cattano et al., 2017; Passetti et al., 2008), the small number of participants has prevented us from exploring potential differences within our sample in terms of e.g. gender, sociodemographic characteristics and treatment experiences. A larger sample size in future studies would thus be beneficial, both in order to address this limitation and in terms of generalisation. Another main limitation is that the study design is not longitudinal, which means that we have not been able to follow up on the participants' recovery processes in terms of e.g. levels of drug use and how this amalgamates with their friendship experiences and identity performances.

Declaration of interest

The authors report no conflicts of interest.

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[i] Despite interviewing all participants twice, the study design is not longitudinal, and exact follow-up data on their levels of use has not been obtained. Also, in terms of data analysis, the intention with the two interviews was not to use them as 'waves' in the analysis. Rather, the intention was

to strengthen the quality of the data, i.e. by having enough time to dwell on and delve into the experiences and descriptions brought in the interviews.

[ii] According to Danish research regulations, no further ethical approval is required.