

# **Exploring tentative lives:**

Reflexive social work with adolescents who stay in the space between respectability and disrespect with regard to substance use and law abidance

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*Abstract - Much social work practice with adolescents involved in activities known to be risky, such as experimentation with substances or petty crime, seems to have been influenced by the conventional input-output model which assumes an unreflected relationship between the present manifestation of risk and adverse future outcomes. This model relies on an uncertain scientific basis and does not really allow for the adolescents' own reflexivity. This article aims at contributing to the shaping of more reflexive concepts for social work in this area, and is based on material derived from a focus group made up of 17 adolescents from Central Norway, aged 16–18 years old. The major foci of analysis were: i) how the adolescents positioned themselves with regard to conflicting notions of respectability, ii) which constructions of meaning might be attached to this positioning and iii) how the positioning might inform social work practice.*

*An analysis revealed that participants manoeuvred themselves in highly tentative and predominantly pre-reflective ways between notions of respectability. Thanks to insights primarily derived from pioneering work previously undertaken in cultural criminology and from certain concepts provided by Bourdieu, it became easier to understand this tentative manoeuvring as intentional and partially functional in terms of discontinuity from further deviance. However, the manoeuvring tended to hinder a more determined direction. In order to develop a collaborative and reflexive line of communication with an identified target group, the challenge for social workers is primarily to understand the pre-reflective character of the tentative positioning, the intentionality of belonging implied in it and its potential for a more conscious identity formation. Only then is it possible to develop a line of communication with the target group which is collaborative and reflexive.*

**Key words:** adolescents, experimentation with intoxicants, petty crime, conformity to standard norms, pre-reflection, reflexivity

## Introduction

This article focuses on social work with adolescents who do not fulfil the diagnostic criteria of intoxicant abusers or addicts, but who yet still experiment with intoxicants and are involved in minor delinquency in ways that are generally considered disrespectful and may lead to social exclusion. These adolescents have thus far succeeded in maintaining their position in accordance with dominant norms in society while simultaneously approaching social environments with potentially deviant norm sets.

Adolescence is considered a phase in which “normal” patterns may be difficult to distinguish from deviant ones (Ferrer-Wreder et al., 2005; Wichstrøm and Backe-Hansen, 2007). There seems to be no firm scientific basis to support the assumption that youthful experimentation with potentially harmful psychoactive substances (both legal and illegal), involvement in minor delinquency or violent episodes inevitably leads to negative behavioural patterns unless experts intervene. Although contemporary patterns of substance use tend to be more unpredictable than before (Schulenberg and Maggs, 2001; Tucker et al., 2005), a decline in excessive substance use among adolescents, problematic behaviour and sub-cultural orientation seem to be far more common than a slide towards persistently adverse habits (Maume, Ousey and Beaver, 2005). Furthermore, the mechanisms involved in such a development tend to be somewhat enigmatic, as factors other than classical risk factors may well be involved (Parker, 2005; Pedersen, 2006; Pedersen, 2009).

As no outcome is predetermined, an approach based on rigid categorizations or an overemphasis on risk factors is not likely to appeal to the adolescents concerned, thus potentially becoming counterproductive and stigmatising. Instead, unpredictability could be positively exploited by social workers when encountering adolescents in the described situation. It has been suggested that the correct approach when assisting them in refraining

from further acts of deviant activity is to sit with them and reflect on the basis of their own conceptualisations (Backe-Hansen, 2007).

A consequence of the unpredictability of the matters in question could also be a more focused attention towards signs of ambiguity and discontinuity. However, the traditional substance and crime prevention approach, which assumes an un-reflected continuity between initiation and continuation, has prevailed over recent decades and heavily influenced both the development of methods and the language in this area, although there is no version which is more “natural” than the other (Sahlin, 2000). Thus, it is not easy from any perspective to maintain an emphasis on the ambiguity and discontinuity typical of the adolescents in question. Such phenomena are epistemologically troublesome. As we live in a culture dominated by assumptions of “either/or” rather than “both/and”, concepts aimed at covering “both/and” situations are normally scarce (Archer, 2004). According to Archer, only Urdu provides terms that signify “both/and”.

It has been suggested that less nuanced language and theoretical concepts derived from rigid categorisations of, for instance, substance abusers may significantly obscure individual variance, thus representing a challenge in rehabilitation work (Thommesen, 2010). It is also important to avoid that adolescents who only occasionally experiment with substances in potentially harmful ways, and subsequently have not become entrenched in any persistent pattern, are judged to have developed a pattern of permanent deviance.

Despite recommendations to include reflexive practices, service providers seem to have few appropriate theoretical concepts to draw on that could promote open-minded communication and better ways of assisting the adolescents in the relatively indeterminate space they find themselves in. For instance; the conventional use of nouns to designate problems as categories indicates a focus on singular and finite identities. If verbs were used instead, the focus could to a greater extent have been on continuous identitymaking and thus on processes.

Generally speaking, little has been written on substance abuse or crime prevention that is based on the perspective of “the reflexive self”. This applies, at least in part, to social work literature on the topic. On the basis of a review of papers in both British and international social work journals, Sharland (2006) has suggested that professional roles have at best been contradictory, while coercion and control tend to overshadow approaches that promote welfare and empowerment, despite the well-established tradition in social work which places an emphasis on the latter principles. According to Sharland (op cit: 248), there is a need in social work to go beyond the “*presentation of subgroups, presenting distinct problems, for targeted concerns*” when studying young people and activities that involve risk taking.

The overall aim of this article is to contribute to the development of a conceptual framework for social work involving adolescents who find themselves in a position between relative normality and relative deviance with regard to substance use and law abidance. In order to do so, it is particularly important to identify factors that obstruct open-minded reflection, though it is also important to be able to describe the indeterminate position of the adolescents in light of relevant theoretical perspectives. This article is based on material generated by a focus group study. The study sample consisted of 17 adolescents (aged 16-18), all of whom resided in central Norway and who corresponded to the description given above. Participant conceptualisations that could influence reflexive practices were of particular interest for the analysis. *The major foci of analysis were: i) how the adolescents positioned themselves with regard to conflicting notions of respectability, ii) which constructions of meaning might be attached to this positioning and iii) how the positioning might inform social work practice.*

Hopefully, the results will benefit both the development of theories and practices related to the subject area.

## Theory and relevant research

### *Understanding tentative manoeuvres in the space between the respectable and non-respectable*

When it comes to the development of a relevant conceptual framework for social work practices involving the adolescents in question, perspectives from cultural criminology (Ferrell, Hayward and Young, 2008) could provide valuable contributions. As a part of “the linguistic turn”, cultural criminology has contributed to drawing attention away from the assumed continuity between background factors and subsequent outcomes towards factors of intentionality and construction of meaning. Hence, more than any other perspective on norm deviance this tradition has focussed on “*movement of doubt, non-commitment and sidetracking*” (Cohen, 2002). In doing so, cultural criminology challenges assumptions within current thinking on the issue of substance prevention, in which a value-based contrast between immediate concerns and the fruits harvested by long-term planning seems to be assumed (Yi, Gatchalian and Bickel, 2006; Rossow, 2008). Manoeuvres that from a conventional perspective appear to be arbitrary and aimless “tumbling around” could under closer scrutiny be viewed as highly purposeful, although not in the most rationalistic sense of the term.

Cultural criminology, for example as represented by Sykes and Matza (1957), emphasises a relational perspective by assuming that youths who transgress or comes close to violating moral and legal codes, despite representing quite different individualities and social situations, predominantly evaluate themselves in relation to social values that are considered legitimate by the general population. Involvement in illegal or disrespectful acts, even when temporary, tends to increase the fear of being excluded. The fear of losing face and becoming subjected to potential exclusion is viewed by Sykes and Matza as the driving force behind manoeuvres taking place in the space between normality and deviance.

At this point cultural criminology represents a rebellion against sub-cultural theory that defines young delinquents as individuals who are particularly susceptible to subcultures of deviance. However, the support of standard norms that Sykes and Matza claim to have identified among youths involved in things such as petty crime may not be evident to the general population. Norwegian literature that supports similar findings (Hauge, 1980; Ericsson, Lyngby et al., 1994) emphasises that society is not ready to grasp the “both/and” manoeuvring manifest in experimentation with substances and minor delinquency. Consequently, youths who occupy the space between normality and deviance tend to be judged on the basis of their acts and not on the basis of their fundamental moral principles, between which there is a significant discrepancy. Even the youths themselves tend to evaluate their peers on the basis of their acts, without taking their more profound principles into consideration.

Assisted by the findings of Sykes and Matza, we may become aware of the tentative or at least stagnant position in the space between normality and deviance that the adolescents in question may occupy over time, without necessarily moving towards more persistently deviant patterns. In order to neutralise feelings of guilt or shame related to norm violation, the adolescents in question use nuances in the language to create a space in which they remain irreproachable and difficult to categorise. For instance, they tend to downplay the consequences of activities that run counter to common notions of decency: “*It is not that bad*”. In other cases they tend to normalize them: “*Everybody does it*”. Clearly, notions of respectability have become more differentiated in the most recent phases of modernity (Marthinsen, 2010). Expressions of shame and guilt related to the violation of such notions also change, though the need to neutralise potentially disrespectful acts tends to persist (Peretti-Watel, 2003). According to Peretti-Watel, today’s young cannabis smokers, who are influenced by an increasing individualism, do not externalise guilt by appealing to

authorities. Instead, they anticipate criticism from others by demonstrating that they are fully aware of the health risks, which they deliberately choose to ignore.

A positive trait viewed from a perspective of prevention is the emphasis in cultural criminology on the need for recognition and inclusion evident in non-directional manoeuvres. In many cases, adolescents are still open to impulses that promote discontinuity from further deviance. Life is uncalculatedly, but nevertheless intentionally, put on hold for a period of time due to the lack of a more determined direction. Still, when respectability is at stake and we feel the need to trivialise our deviance, the language we use tends to become more furtive – something that seems at odds with the ideals of an open-minded reflexivity or strategic intention. As shown in the previously mentioned literature, furtiveness could cause the primarily embodied character of neutralisation to be misunderstood at several levels. For example, Maruna and Copes (2005) have demonstrated how researchers have mistakenly relied on a concept of neutralisation within a perspective of causal directionality: They view neutralisation as the first step on the path towards a more durable deviance, something which to social workers involved in prevention may mean the same as arriving “too late”. Reasoning like this also reflects notions of the identity as single and infinite rather than many-sided and continuous.

In order to illuminate an alternative approach to the phenomena of non-direction and pre-reflectiveness, it is necessary to take a closer look at the theory that focuses on reflexivity.

### **The basis for reflexivity in relevant theory**

In a reflexive approach to substance and crime prevention, identity formation in terms of answers to the question of “who am I going to be?” seems to be a theoretical core issue. Authors such as Anthony Giddens (1991) and Charles Taylor (1995, 2004) have both accentuated the view that identity formation needs no longer involve adaptation to external and authoritative established norms. Instead, it is seen to occur on the basis of a reflexive moment-to-moment process of evaluation in light of ever-emerging new perspectives and risks. As noted by the philosopher Hannah Arendt (1971), it is the *present* that stands out as the very locus of reason in contemporary society. One may speak of a change in future ontology. In such a light, instrumental predictions of future outcomes (and hence prevailing prevention ideals) stand out as obsolete: The future has simply become too opaque to make it an object of foresight or an instrumental prediction of risk (Reith, 2004). According to Reith, the only way statisticians may get close to the “truth” about a future prospect is by aggregating knowledge around highly inconsistent individual cases and presenting the results as something that just *might* happen. Nothing is doomed to remain as it is, and the reflexive self exploits this fact. In the previously referred to article, Sharland asks if it could be so that young people have something to teach adults about reflexivity and not merely the other way round.

Nonetheless, it has been stated that the extent to which youths manage to be reflexive in their process of identity formation is a matter of social status. In a study on US high school students, Threadgold and Nilan (2009) approach the topic of reflexivity on the basis of Bourdieu’s perspective on symbolic power. According to Bourdieu (1986), a good (material or immaterial) such as reflexivity attains symbolic value when it is scarce and immediately attainable to privileged groups only, whether deserved or not. Threadgold and Nilan’s material suggests that while youth who are well off and comfortable in their situations in a self-evident and careless way shape their lives on an approximate moment-to-moment basis, less prosperous and less comfortable youth often have difficulties catching sight of their objective possibility of self-shaping. They tend to be subjected to “doxic submission” (Freire, 1977; Bourdieu, 1998: 67, 81), which may entail that a status that is respectively marginal or disrespectful is accepted as self-evident. In order to achieve a more self-determined self-shaping, the arbitrariness or unjustness that the doxic mentality is based on

has to be recognized, meaning that the now rather than the past must become the basis for further orientation.

More precisely, what seems to be happening in the now that may affect our identity formation? Arendt (op cit :208) maintains that when staying in the “*mysterious and slippery now*”, which describes the “place” we visit infrequently when we think - we momentarily see ourselves as being superior to space and time. This implies that we are also released from the often unconscious and enchainning succession of events embedded in our daily life routine and from the categorisations imposed both by oneself and by others. Although our capacity to forestall expected events is an inherent function of the mind, it is only when we are in this conceptless position that we may be able to catch sight of new directions and new possibilities.

How then may the path be described from pre-reflexivity and non-directionality towards more reflexive and directional positions? Whereas Arendt does not go into detail in explaining how we arrive at the reflective gap between the past and future, a theoretical basis for this to occur is provided by Charles Taylor’s (1995) work on identity formation. Taylor (op cit: 24 - 25) assumes that there is an intimate relationship between the arbitrariness and carelessness of those daily life arrangements that do not seriously affect our self-image (weak evaluations) and moments of deeper contemplation, in which our current arrangements are evaluated against a set of more persistent principles and against the type of self-image that all ultimately prefer (strong evaluations). Taylor simply advances that we have to recognise that there is something good that attracts us, which also can arise out of condemned acts. Immediate feelings such as shame, remorse and loss of dignity or a sense of moral obligation, all of which are rooted in our ability to create meaning and quite apparent in the use of neutralisation techniques, actually lead us to evaluations of a deeper kind.

All the perspectives mentioned here may highlight the phenomenon of non-direction in the space in-between relative normality and deviance. The concrete empirical examples provided later on take forward at least some of the issues that have been discussed here.

## **On the study**

### **1. The sample**

The sample consisted of 17 adolescents (11 boys and 6 girls) from central Norway, who were recruited from five different sites by frontline social workers or teachers. Most of the participants were 16 years old at the time of inquiry, and nearly all of them were ethnic Norwegians. Most of the participants had backgrounds which corresponded to prevailing scientific discourse on risk and had additionally been involved in minor acts of delinquency and occasional substance abuse. Though all of the participants attended school (involving a special school programme for five of the participants), they mainly lived with their parents, and a significant number of them worked in their spare time. In this particular sample, parental occupation and socioeconomic status did not seem to deviate dramatically from average Norwegian standards. The extent to which participants received professional support varied; they did not seem to have the most comprehensive problems, and the degree to which individual participants were involved in the described cluster of activities also varied. Not all adolescents in the study said they were worried about their future: however, they did understand that adults were worried on their behalf.

The composition of the sample primarily reflects an informal professional discourse concerned with possible early intervention strategies for members of the target group. Still, participants were asked to fill out an ASEBA YSR (“Youth Self Report”) (Aschenbach and Rescorla, 2001) at the end of the last group session. The YSR is a standardised approach

derived from a clinical, diagnostic culture which aims at charting so-called behavioural problems at the pre-diagnostic stage and builds on more instrumental notions of risk. Thus, it was not employed for selection purposes, and is not further referred to here. Instead, the purpose was to make sure that the study sample was significantly distinguishable from same-age general population norms, which also proved to be the case. For wider purposes, its use could have been theoretically questionable.

### **The focus group as a method in relation to the current study**

This study deals with phenomena that are vague such as future orientation and the link between future orientation and current activities. An interview guide was made that revolved around the following research questions: How did the participants envision their future? To what extent did they perceive a link between their present situation and their images of the future? What did they seem more eager to talk about right now than future prospects? How did they tend to stand out when discussing such themes in focus groups?

Due to focus on in-between positions as described in the previous part, the lack of appropriate predefined terminology represented a challenge. Even so, the focus group method proved to be helpful in this situation as it is a method known to be ideal for capturing pre-reflected elements of reason and concepts that are not too categorical (Morgan, 1998). This is principally due to the collaborative sense-making that the method comprises (Wibeck, Dahlgren and Öberg, 2007), which protects against oversteering and thus also enhances the data's trustworthiness.

Additionally, there was a specific focus on how the participants tended to stand out when taking part in the focus group discussion. The focus group was viewed as a society in miniature in which the relative positions in the social hierarchy, outside of the group setting, were likely to assert themselves. Although this method could result in some information being suppressed or under-communicated, social positioning during the group talk was not conceptualised as something that might "disturb" the data. Rather, situations loaded with power are particularly adept at letting real-world phenomena come forth (Haraway, 1995: 62). To the degree that extreme utterance occur, something which may not be unlikely in studies on youth, who tend to try and impress their peers more than adults, may be outweighed by the correctional or modifying effect inherent in the method (Hyde et al., 2005).

According to Bourdieu (for example, see 1995), the ideal in research that aims at capturing pre-reflected phenomena and aspires to be reflexive is the employment of multiple methods, which is done in order to attack the phenomena from as many angles as possible. Like subjects in general, study participants are not expected to achieve full insight into their own practices (Bourdieu, 1990:81), and the opacity of the phenomena that were focused in this particular study may further have complicated this. Certainly, a technique such as ethnographic observation (used in conjunction with the focus group method) might have been fruitful, yet this was held to be not practicable.

### **Procedures and analysis**

To take part in the study, written consent was required from both the participants and their next of kin. In total, 18 focus group interviews were carried out. Each group, which consisted of 2-4 members, typically met three times. For the majority of meetings, there were two moderators, including this author who was present at all meetings. A decision was made to limit the number of participants in each group because of the relative sensitivity of the subject matter. Sensitivity concerns were also the reason why the moderator prompts were formulated in a way that allowed the participants to be free to respond in either personal or more general ways. Since they were already in a dialogue with the providers of support, most of the participants were somewhat familiar with speaking about the worry they caused to others, or about possible worries of their own for the future. In addition, the group members already knew each other to some extent, which was a major factor in facilitating group conversation.

The focus group discussions were audio recorded and verbatim transcriptions were made. Where the data are presented and discussed in the next section of this article, the names of the participants have been changed to protect their anonymity, with certain other details also changed in order to make the material as unattributable as possible.

The analytic approach may be labelled as hermeneutic-critical and reflexive. The critical element builds on the assumption that a deeper meaning, reflecting a hierarchy of interest, is embedded in the language. One must therefore go beyond the face value of language (see for instance Bourdieu, 1992). In the way Bourdieu (2004) has described it, reflexivity implies that data are viewed to as great an extent as possible in light of the social conditions under which the subjects of the study are living and vice versa. However, the process was also reflexive in a more technical sense; in terms of preliminary categorisations data were continuously discussed versus relevant theoretical perspectives and the other way round, which was also taking place even during the writing up process. The disadvantage of this reflexive approach from a perspective of data trustworthiness is that it is difficult to systematically describe. Even so, some examples of the process can be provided:

The first phase of the analysis was as free of pre-defined concepts as possible. As I was prepared to deal with modes of orientations that were fairly embodied and non-calculative, I did not expect that a deeper meaning would be captured at once, but all the same I tried - in the first rounds - to interpret data as much as possible "on their own terms". After the de-identification of material that was representative of the initial face value categories, second opinions were asked for from other researchers, practitioners and those who possessed personal experience of the matters at issue. Validation of this kind was expected to enhance study rigour in terms of questioning the researchers' "taken-for-given-ness" (Armour, Rivaux and Bell, 2009). Besides, the validation made it easier to catch sight of what Corbin and Strauss (2008) call (though on the basis of grounded theory) "a more unifying explanatory scheme". Among others, co-analysers pointed to instances in which participants did not seem to understand the moderator prompts, which nurtured an interest towards embodiment and pre-reflection as theoretical concepts. At a relatively early phase of the analysis in which induction prevailed over more theoretical approaches, the major tendencies to which this section of the article section makes reference thus served as a clue into theoretical terrains that were not intended from the start, e.g. such as cultural criminology. At least indirectly, the use of co-analysers in this way also helped to avoid researcher bias.

In order to check whether the most apparent tendencies reflected a substantial phenomenon and had not merely emerged as an effect of the method, a sequential analysis was carried out on each participant's manoeuvring throughout all focus group interviews. For reasons of confidentiality, this mode has been referred to only in part. When making reference to such individual sequences of manoeuvring, it may well have proved easier to identify the participants.

## The material

An overall tendency observed in this study was that attempts at upholding the status of the most recognized fields in society at large were made at the same time as the symbolic capital and tastes related to these statuses were questioned and alternative manners tested out in adjacent social fields. Yet, decisive steps towards more "sub-cultural" environments seemed to be avoided.

Within this space of indeterminacy, it was possible to categorise the manoeuvres into three major positions, all of which seemed to facilitate the option of remaining non-directional as long as possible in the absence of perceived paths of their own and, not least, to avoid social exclusion: i) *Keeping attention away from oneself*, ii) *positioning oneself in "both/and" positions* and iii) *inconsistency*. The position of "*momentary rudiments of reflexivity*" was also identified.



Before the positions are presented in detail, we need to pay some attention to how the participants related to standard norms and how they seemed to perceive their space of opportunity, as these tendencies shape a kind of rationale for the positioning.

### **Social constraint vs. agency and reflexivity**

For instance, when the focus group participants were challenged on their images of distant futures, the participants generally seemed to be in accordance with standard templates on adult life in a Norwegian context, such as settling down before the age of 30 in order to establish a family, find a decent place to live, receive an education which brings greater challenges than merely the kind to be found at *“the pay desk of Rema 1000”* (the name of a Norwegian supermarket chain), etc. To not obtain an education or receive unemployment benefits seemed to be out of question. The reasons for this point of view were: *“(otherwise) you’re gonna be looked upon as a scamper without education ...”*

Expressions of respectability therefore tended to be in line with what has been suggested as the greatest virtue in contemporary Norwegian society, namely to exploit your “own potential” (Hylland Eriksen and Fines Tretvold, 2006). Some, who so far had successfully avoided illegal substance use, even tended to demonstrate their acquirement of this virtue to an extent that could possibly put potentially less successful others in a subordinate position:

**Guri:** *You have to keep away (from drugs) ...I have managed – I’m good! (..)*

*(Addressing Gunnar): I know you haven’t managed to stay away, you see...*

**Malla:** *yeah, everyone knows...*

**Gunnar:** *I haven’t managed?*

**Arne:** *have you never touched drugs? (...)*

**Guri:** *(still addressing Gunnar) yeah, you were all green-faced one day... please...*

One may conclude from the following utterances that there is no excuse for bad utilisation, whether it be in relation to personal potential or of objectively accessible welfare goods. Rather, there is an emphasis on the options of reorientation implied in reflexivity:

**Mette:** *...yeah, you see ...everybody has got the possibility to go to school, then ...and if they drop out of school it is always their fault, I think...*

**Mod 1:** *(...) hm...and thus they shall not get any help, or?*

**Mette:** *well...that’s not what I’m saying...but I think they themselves have kinda caused it ... (...)...they’re losers in some sense, actually, cuz I think they have got a possibility to make things well ...for instance: (even) if they had come from a poor family and that...(.. ) I don’t mind that... kinda...people from ...eh...Iran and Iraq and places ...where there has been war and stuff...they cannot help it ...but Norwegian citizens ...who end up at the street... (....) well, I think it’s a little...*

What makes up an interesting contrast to such utterances, however, are utterances with strong connotations of doubt about one’s capacity to exploit options and utterances that downplay the significance of long-term planning. One may object that a reluctance to demonstrate rational foresight may be a genuine expression of the reflexive spirit of the times, although the material on this point is ambiguous. Despite attempts at tracing counter-evidence during analysis, it generally did not seem as if the participants were fully prepared to forestall the individualised pathway of their own, whether on a momentary basis or from a long-term perspective. From time to time utterances such as *“It’s my mum that is worried - not me”* were heard, which seemed to trivialise the necessity of foresight.

Also, the reasons given by the participants for their particular vocational choices contrasted the expressed wish to lead an adult life in accordance with standard norms, with an emphasis on the exploitation of one’s potential: *“I cannot not choose anything”* one of the male participants responded when he was forced by the other group members to explain why he had chosen a study line in which he had only moderate interest. Additionally, there

were other worries centred around their own capacity to carry out their study plans. These worries are understandable against a backdrop of group talk around school issues, as most of the participants were dissatisfied with their academic achievements. Some (aged 17) even said that they longed to reach retirement age *“so I can enjoy life!”* First and foremost, the background for this view proved not to be a desire to escape duties, but rather a wish to have arrived at the phase in life in which one may look back and think *“...now I am done; now I have made my contribution...”*, as one of those participants expressed it. The seeming disparity between ambitions and the capacity to follow-up may be interpreted as a lack of significant experience, which is “natural” at this stage in life. Later on, when the adolescents have acquired experience from vocational life, the life shaping process will probably stand out to them as more concrete and personalised. Still, the following utterance by Mette seems to support the impression that even though there were some standard future images to cling to, life as an adult appeared to be somewhat scary, or at least fairly opaque, to the participants when they were challenged on this in the groups.

**Mette:** *“I actually think it is a little sinister to make plans and things like that...because all of the sudden you can get disappointed... (...)....and it isn't really...then you ruin all of your ...I nearly said all your dreams...(....)....the way I'm thinking is a little complicated, but ... ( ... ) ...I nearly said ...it isn't necessarily probable that things will run in that direction, ...a dream has to be really feasible, I think.*

The quotation above has a somewhat subtle content, but against the background of previous utterances we may conclude here that Mette seems to prefer being reluctant to making plans instead of being concrete towards her future prospects. She seems to have well founded reasons to advance this point of view; for instance, she may speak from the experience that unpredictability has so far been a more likely feature in her life than predictability. In any case, she does not seem indifferent to what the future might bring. Her reason for being reluctant is the fear that standing out as unrealistic in the eyes of “ordinary” people. At the same time, she seems aware that a reluctance to make plans may also be condemned in society at large; in a former sequence, she has been accentuating the need to exploit one's own opportunities in quite determined ways. Actually, a reluctance to make any long-term plans of a type that may seem unrealistic could become for her what Marthinsen (2003, 2010) has called “symbolic burdens”: Something which yields condemnation rather than social status and which therefore signifies the negation of a symbolic good. She seems to be in a “catch 22” kind of dilemma: No matter what type of temporal orientation she chooses, it might be viewed as wrong in most legitimate social fields. What we may learn from this is that reflexivity certainly does not occur unhindered by social hierarchical orders.

### **Keeping attention away from oneself**

By using various means to distance themselves, the study participants could tentatively draw attention away from their own relatively deviant tendencies in order to help preserve an image of normality. Attempts at distancing oneself from less successful peers were apparent. Those peers who were in residential care because of behavioural problems were referred to in a somewhat condescending way as those who had been *“sent away”*. The tendency to put oneself at a distance by way of semi-scientific discourse, analysing phenomena of deviance, also occurred with remarks such as: *“she should never have become the girlfriend of that guy”*. However, the latter type of endeavour was encouraged by monitors from time to time, so it is therefore uncertain as to whether this was a technique that tended towards creating distance. For instance, it was emphasised in both the introductory letter and the group sessions that the participants were regarded both as experts and as researchers with the capacity to analyse issues concerning themselves and peers in similar situations. In the following excerpt Knut manages to both draw attention away from himself and to neutralise his use of cannabis, which he introductorily evaluated as a negative behaviour:

**Knut:** (on his own cannabis smoking) *well...I realise... I have to ...scale down .....*

**Mod 1:** *m-m...*

**Knut:** *it is not healthy ...*

**Mod 1:** (...) *the fact that you don't tell anybody who probably might have helped you (referring to a previous sequence) ...that ...eh...I don't quite get ...why so? ...*

**Knut:** *Pride...I dunno...I don't wanna change, you know... Oh! I've got a question!*

**Mod 1:** *Yes?*

**Knut:** *I've got a friend who is in deep shit (...) she is dependent ...my god, ...she is so young and has withdrawal trouble when she stops drinking (..) ...and I don't manage to make her understand that she will peg out before summer vacation if she goes on drinking every day... So ...isn't there a kind of ...free mental help service...psychologists...arrangements... for such people...?*

In addition to the fairly distancing term “such people”, what seems interesting to note in the above excerpt is that Knut may in fact be relatively uncondemnable as he has a point, both medically and morally: From Knut's perspective, cannabis smoking is hardly lethal per se when he views it in relation to regular alcohol intoxication, which in a young body really puts one's life at risk. Still, he seems to acknowledge that smoking is unhealthy. At this particular moment of conversation it seemed as if the potential of dwelling on this topic was fairly unbearable to him.

Reference to strict “either/or” categories seemed to be another way of preserving indeterminacy around oneself. According to Ivar's account in the next excerpt, the “masses” seem to exclusively consist of nerds or whores:

**Ivar:** (telling about students at several schools he went to): *In fact, most of them “were perfectionists”.*

**Mod 1:** *Hm....*

**Ivar:** *If they couldn't get an A...they actually started crying ...*

**Tore:** (ironically) *Pity on them!!!....*

**Mod 1:** *hehe...well ... (...)*

**Ivar:** *They started crying cuz they had got a B...a strong B ...*

**Kåre:** *You're serious? ...(..)*

**Ivar:** *The rest (of the students) were mostly whores...*

By implicitly referring to himself as “someone else”, Ivar manages to put the focus on a standard of normality against which he is strategically and advantageously evaluated. Even so, the content of this “else-ness” is not further defined, nor is it reflected by the person being discussed. Non-categorisation is achieved by the categorisation of others.

### “Both/and” positions

When no forward path is evident, an arrangement that implies “both/and” seems as likely and reasonable as manoeuvring, thus implying “either/or”. Most of the participants had already established an affiliation in subfields, or at least some approximation of such an affiliation, but as previously noted the statements advanced suggested that the participants were reluctant to give up social bonding within more legitimate social fields. Above all, the avoidance of being categorised as “deviant” seemed essential. The tentative manoeuvres of Kjell in the next excerpt also take on the character of protecting one's retreat. Kjell has proclaimed that he is against drug use because he would not “*ruin my life that hell of a lot*”, yet he spends much of his leisure time with drug-using peers. In advance of the following sequence and in accordance with well-known assumptions from prediction discourse, another participant named Trond had been warning Kjell against any affiliation with “the wrong people”:

**Kjell:** *what's "wrong people"?*

**Trond:** *people who already have made a mess of things...*

**Kjell:** *well, then I only mix with wrong people...*

**Trond:** *well, of course it's up to you...*

**Kjell:** ... (Continues the interrupted phrase) *...it still doesn't mean that I'm doing it (taking drugs) ... (...) No problem having a load of pals that smoke weed ...*

Nevertheless, we still may be puzzled about what Kjell's moves between normality and deviance really mean: Are his utterances primarily an indication of a reflexive awareness, implying that risk is highly calculable and thus avoidable, despite an apparent closeness to his more deviant peers? Or rather, is he trying to mitigate or neutralise the effects of an ongoing backslide into more deviant patterns of behaviour? The "both/and" position was referred to by the majority of participants as a chosen solution for limited periods: "*Regardless of how many that were smoking weed around me, I was determined I wouldn't do it, and I managed for almost two years*" a participant in another focus group reported. It is difficult to determine in these cases whether we are really dealing with deviance. A certain attraction towards deviance and the urge to uphold bonds to the most legitimate social fields seem to stand out as relatively equivalent alternatives. The main point here is that a more profound or stronger evaluation simply seems to have been postponed. At the moment, Trond's attempt at criticising the "both/and" positioning, using language which is based on input-output notions on risk, does not seem to be working.

This "ostrich policy", to which the manoeuvring may be compared, also seems to be a characteristic of communication between adolescents and their next of kin, and is closely related to a fear of losing face:

**Mod 1:** .... (about Geir's assumption that his father knows about his cannabis smoking but is avoiding taking it up openly up with him): *would you have wanted him to say anything?*

**Geir:** *Yeah... (...)... it would've been better to know what he's thinking, than...*

**Mod 1:** *but... is it still impossible to start asking, kinda.... "have you been observing anything special lately?" Can you do it like that, or?*

**Geir:** *yeah...then I'll make a fool of myself... and then... (...) I don't fucking know if he wants to know or if he's just living "in denial" as they say...*

What this excerpt seems to tell us about the general shamefulness of the topic of illegal intoxication and how difficult it is to approach seems indeed to be worth noting.

### **Inconsistency**

In particular, the sequential analysis made it easier to pay attention to the often inconsistent shifts in tentative positioning among the participants. To the same extent as "both/and" manoeuvres, or manoeuvres that tend to draw attention away from oneself, inconsistency seemed to represent an attempt at discontinuity and avoidance of condemnation. If not avoided, it could at least be delayed. Somewhat in line with Knut above, Guri provides us with another important insight in the following excerpt:

**Guri:** (concerning some petty crime she has been involved in) *I don't care if people know, you see ...everybody has stolen...it isn't that bad (my emphasis)*

**Mod 1:** *Everybody in this neighbourhood?*

**Guri:** *Most of them, then...*

**Gunnar:** *Strangest thing I've ever heard... (...)*

**Arne:** *...there have been thefts in "x" neighbourhood as well...*

**Guri:** *Yeah...losers! (my emphasis)*

Here, we observe an inconsistency so apparent that it might appear hilarious to us. At the same time, however, Guri does not seem to realise the inconsistency. This is yet another indication that the manoeuvring could go on at a merely pre-reflective level. Whereas the rational part of her statement that stealing represents a breach of the general social contract, her avoidance of condemnation and categorisation as a criminal asserts itself at an embodied level. Thus, reflection does not seem to come easily. In the remaining part we are going to look at how in spite of this, reflexivity may force itself to rise to the surface sooner or later given the required circumstances.

### **Momentary rudiments of reflexivity**

As noted above, most positions under the overall label of “tentativeness” imply some level of reflection and intentionality, although they are mostly embodied, non-calculative and non-directional. “Pure” reflections of the kind that suggest a more persistent change of direction are relatively rare. In the following excerpt, Guri unexpectedly seems to contradict her former utterances during a group session or, at the very least, fails to offer a discernable precondition when sharing the following reflection on shoplifting - this being an activity that she had previously neutralised:

**Guri:** *(on shoplifting ) ...It was a good feeling to have something expensive and brand new.... but when I think about it now ...it just wasn't worth it (..)It's better to quit than to keep doing it, cuz I saw this woman, she might have been around 30, stealing sweets.....at the corner shop with her boyfriend ...I was like...oh my god, I was so embarrassed for everything you know, so many keep stealing till they are like....*

In the excerpt above, Guri seems to be able to connect past and future by means of her own reflection, having been stimulated by the group talk. She recognises that what has been is not *bound* to become, therefore demonstrating what reflexivity is really all about.

## **Discussion**

Of particular interest in the current study was to identify and discuss target group conceptualisations that seemed apt at informing a more reflexive practice in social work with adolescents between respectability and disrespect in regard to substance use and law abidance. The background for this was the assumption that prevailing prevention ideology and practice on substance and crime prevention is not timely enough and that it only scarcely accommodates reflexivity based on the manoeuvres and conceptualisations of the adolescents in question, despite contemporary society's heavy emphasis on reflexivity, individual responsibility and children's rights. The need was stated for a conceptual framework that acknowledges the importance of both target group and practitioner reflexivity, while still considering the subtle expressions of social constraint that persist in contemporary societies, both in spite of and because of increased individualisation. The manoeuvres employed by the participants in this study may be characterised as highly tentative, inconsistent, pre-reflective, and predominantly stagnant. Nonetheless, moments of more conscious reflection also occurred. Positioning identified in the current material was: *i) keeping attention away from oneself, ii) “both/and” positions, iii) inconsistency and iv) momentary rudiments of reflexivity.* Albeit that the positions being predominantly embodied they may be read as fundamentally intentional and relational. They may actually serve as examples of the refinement needed in the relatively constrained space of opportunity in late modernity that seems to exist for many adolescents, despite the accentuation on differentiation and individualisation.

In line with literature inspired by cultural criminology (see for example Sykes and Matza, 1957 and Ericsson, Lyngby and Rudberg, 1994), the data indicate that the wish to conform to the most legitimate notions of decency in society at large tended to be highly involved

in the current participants' exertion of agency. They identified with such notions while at the same time seeming to be aware, at least on an embodied level, of their activities as potentially symbolic burdens (Marthinsen, 2010): These activities might entail both social condemnation and exclusion. In essence, this awareness of the condemnability of their activities also implied a condemnation of the self, with shame and guilt feelings seeming to be close at hand. In order to protect the self, and in the absence of better alternatives for the time being, the participants predominantly aimed at upholding their social bonding to mainstream society by standing out as inconspicuous and irreproachable. In this light, we may also better understand the conclusions from epidemiological research that at this stage of life there is no inevitable risk that factors such as petty crime and experimentation with potentially harmful substances will continue and develop into further deviance and more sub-cultural identification. Nothing seemed really deadlocked in the participants' current situation, although we may point to certain examples of sidetracking and a tentative approximation to alternative social fields. The wish to conform and the fear of losing face in the larger social field is a strong force with the capacity to promote discontinuity from further deviance. Contrary to assumptions of deviant acts as representations of sub-cultural attraction, the participants seemed to be aware of the relational losses they might suffer through identification with alternative social fields. In fact, the risk of stigma may have a certain preventative effect *per se* (Room, 2005).

The apparent inconsistent way in which the manoeuvres were carried out may therefore represent hope for the future, even though its wrapping may sometimes seem provocative to adults.

However, to the same extent as the observed inconsistencies, both may protect against condemnation or take people by surprise in ways that may lead to fruitful reflections; to stay tentative is not helpful where the aim is more determined identity formation. To the contrary, a vacillating self is not compatible with the challenges in contemporary society.

Interestingly, focus group discussions tended to promote certain conscious moments of reflection around the significance of taking a more determined direction in life. As previously noted, Taylor (1995) has described such reflection, in which current practices are evaluated against a set of more paramount principles as strong evaluations. Contrary to much conventional thinking, however, strong evaluations are not opposed to the relatively superfluous evaluations we make on the basis of an immediate attraction to certain daily life phenomena or on the basis of immediate emotions. With this as a framework for understanding, it became clearer that everything during the focus group sessions that is conducive to immediately engaging the adolescents, such as the "othering" of other peer groups, issues related to sharp distinctions between fashion and lifestyle expressions and similar "hot" group themes, served as keys into issues that more directly concerned with conscious identity formation. The described inconsistency between statements which occurred relatively frequently also serves as an example of weak evaluations that were capable of triggering reflexivity within the groups. There seem to be myriads of possibilities implied in the type of language we use when we are really engaged in making slight changes and renegotiating certain relational constellations. Exactly *how* the shift from pre-reflective to reflective occurs is difficult to explain within a scheme of predictability. From a practice perspective, the most important thing in the long run is to have faith in the dynamic forces that are involved in these processes (Seikkula, 2000; Eliassen and Seikkula, 2006). As demonstrated by the current data, rationality and not least, reflexive awareness in the way it has been described in theory on late modern theory, is something that has to be laboriously acquired once having positioned oneself somewhat to the side of prevailing norm sets.

The more shame that is felt around an activity, the less likely there is to be an outcome of immediate overt reflection. In any event, as stated by Arendt (1971), once aware of being inserted between an infinite past and an infinite future, one will inevitably establish a path of one's own.

On the whole, the study material reveals that an engagement in issues that are fundamentally *relational* may become *rational*, but first as the result of a laborious process. Much prevention effort mistakenly starts with assuming that rationality is immediately accessible to the individuals concerned. The relational-economic concepts of Bourdieu fruitfully aided the analysis at this point. The manoeuvres implied often tend to assert themselves in ways that are exaggerated and wrapped in a strong and categorical language and, as such, are not always “*comme il faut*”. Provided that the dynamics of intentionality behind them is understood, it is exactly the strong and categorical expressions that can make social work in this area feasible. They serve as “handles” for collaborative identification and more conscious communication.

### **The concept of tentativeness**

I suggest “tentativeness” as the overall label for the positioning of the study’s participants. They **tentatively** tended to move between passive subjugation to a specific **tendency** on the one hand to a more explicit and determined **intention** on the other. Three characteristics implied in this wordplay may be attached to tentativeness on the basis of the current data: It is *non-directional*, but *intentional* and *non-calculative* in a way that is opposed to open reflexivity. Lexical information<sup>1</sup> on the etymology of “tentativeness” indicates that all of these aspects may be attached to the term. In particular, the “both/and” or “in-between” position implied in the non-directionality is worth noting, as such positions often escape attention.

### **Tentativeness in relation to other concepts**

Tentativeness has much in common with previous concepts such as the concept of neutralisation suggested by Sykes and Matza (1957). Assumptions that everybody (at least initially) can identify with notions of respectability underpin this concept. As long as respectability is at stake, the conformity to such standard notions as demonstrated in this paper probably expresses more than mere “lip service”. Neutralisation sheds light on the tentative manoeuvres. Even so, cultural criminology tends to remain within a merely interactionist framework in which a matter such as hierarchical and symbolic power is not profoundly addressed. The fact that there are distances between positions in the larger social field in which age plays a less marked role has generally been absent in much youth theory (Wyn and White, 1997).

Tentativeness also stands out as being different from developmental perspectives or perspectives of deficiency.

The expression “developmental perspectives” refers to the notion that youth is essentially a category of its own, characterised by “unfinishedness” to an extent that the capacity to exert reflexivity is not ascribed to young people. As noted by Sharland (2006), prevailing social work practice in this area seems to at least partially rely on such assumptions. Nonetheless, one has to acknowledge that to some extent an adolescent is a somewhat unfinished project. A Norwegian general population study shows that future images tend to be more personalised and directional in 17 to 18 year olds who have made decisions on career choices than in the age group represented in my study sample, which was primarily comprised of 16 year olds (Marthinsen, Røe and Hovland, 2006). This seems to be in line with Erikson’s (1980) theory on the life cycle and development of the healthy personality insofar as a normative identity formation also includes vacillation at a certain stage. Both physical and psychological maturation, as well as development as a citizen in the broader culture, seem to be aspects that are fundamentally interdependent (Vygotsky, 1987).

<sup>1</sup> The term derives from the Latin *tentativus* (“trying, testing”) and holds connotations of both experimentation and a will to get further, but it also hints at uncertainty and temporariness. See <http://www.ordsiden.no/ordbok.php?ordbok=tentativ> (06.12.2010), <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/tentative> (06.12.2010), <http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/tentative> (06.12.2010).

In this light, tentativeness is more than merely unfinishedness. Within a framework of understanding that is more oriented towards deficiency or pathology, the tentativeness might have been interpreted as inherent propensities such as a-sociality or instability in each adolescent. Traits may still be attached to each adolescent that correspond to criteria in systems for disorder classifications, though it seems important to stress that tentativeness does not lose its significance for that reason. Concepts of “disordered identities” in contemporary society are not merely limited to formal medical discourse, but are adopted by people in general and are thus constantly being reinterpreted (Reith, 2004 b).

Tentativeness basically represents an attempt at overcoming the structure-agency divide. Given that the above concerns are taken into consideration, tentativeness hopefully appears as a contribution to a theoretical framework of understanding for more critical and reflective social work with adolescents who experiment with intoxicants and commit acts of minor delinquency.

### **Recommendations for practice**

The current material shows that adolescents who primarily tend to support commonly shared notions of decency, while at the same time affiliating with more disrespected cultures, are not “beyond redemption” with regard to becoming more firmly integrated into normative society. In addition to the surrounding society, professionals may also still mistakenly apply predefined concepts when dealing with adolescents in this situation, whereas the adolescents themselves may also be trapped in predefined conceptualizations of their own situation. We live in a culture that elevates “either/or” thinking above thinking based on the concept of “both/and”. In order to achieve a greater extent of reflexivity and a more determined direction in life, the communication with adolescents must therefore accommodate inconsistency and furtiveness while relying on topics that appeal to them in their current situation. The more one allows for open-minded reflection, the better the chance that the adolescents themselves will become aware of possibilities that go beyond their current activities to help prevent a continuation towards more persistent expressions of norm deviance. Despite being primarily used for research purposes, the focus group method may be the tool that can help us achieve this. One precondition is that the groups are expertly composed and that one steers clear of private or very sensitive topics. Still, the effectiveness of this method relies significantly on the ability to additionally widen the window of opportunity for adolescents in very concrete ways, not least with the help of the tools available in the educational system and a more open approach to career advice provision.

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