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What is This?
Contested identities: Identity constructions in a youth recreational drug culture

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Abstract
This article examines young recreational drug users’ identity constructions. Combining a poststructuralist theoretical framework with focus group method, the article investigates how the participants in a focus group interview position themselves and others, thereby negotiating an identity as responsible drug users. The article studies this recreational drug culture and its internal distinctions, conceptions and norms as they are expressed discursively. The analysis identifies six dimensions of the identity as a responsible, recreational drug user: drug practice, general drug knowledge, context-specific drug knowledge, practices for checking drugs, acknowledging one’s position in the surrounding drug scene and age. The analysis shows how being able to perform a coherent identity in line with these dimensions is necessary for being acknowledged as a responsible, recreational drug user.

Keywords
Drug use, identity, positioning theory, poststructuralism, youth

Introduction
This article focuses on identity constructions among young, recreational drug users. By combining a poststructuralist theoretical approach with focus group method, the article turns the attention to the use of language and views talk as a way of acting and performing identities (Butler, 1990, 1993). In this light, focus group discussions offer the...
possibility for studying processes of identity constructions and negotiations as they unfold during the course of an interview (Allen, 2005).

The aim of the article is to examine young recreational drug users’ identity constructions by focusing on an empirical case from a study on drug use among young Danish clubbers. The article studies this recreational drug culture and its internal distinctions, conceptions and norms as they are expressed discursively. To some young people, recreational drug use is part of a ‘work hard, play hard’ youth culture in which clubbing and partying is a way of celebrating the end of a hard working week and maintaining one’s group of friends (Parker and Williams, 2003; Winlow and Hall, 2009). In the Danish context, drug use in mainstream nightclubs is generally not an accepted enterprise; however, this does not mean that drugs are not part of mainstream clubbing (Ravn, 2010; forthcoming). Quite the contrary: 40 percent of the clubbers in the quantitative part of the present study had tried an illegal drug other than cannabis at least once, suggesting that the new ‘culture of intoxication’ (Measham and Brain, 2005) is not only reserved to a small subpopulation, but can be found among large groups of young people.

The empirical case in the article consists of a focus group interview with five young clubbers. During the interview, a conflict arose between two of the participants over different drug and party preferences. However, instead of analysing this conflict as merely an argument over different preferences, I approach it as being grounded in negotiations about drug user identities and examine the interactions in the focus group as part of an identity construction process. Previous research has shown how the construction and balancing of an acceptable drug user identity is not a straightforward project, neither among recreational nor regular drug users (see e.g. Boeri, 2004; McCoy et al., 2005; Rødner, 2005; Soller and Lee, 2010). In the present case, the interviewees are concerned with distancing themselves from irresponsible use. Thus, the main questions in the analysis are how the participants in the focus group interview position themselves and the other participants during the course of the interview, and what this positioning reveals about identity as a responsible, recreational drug user.

**Theoretical framework**

Poststructuralism covers a range of positions that share a focus on language as a way of acting and performing. Poststructuralism breaks with Saussurean structuralism by viewing the language structure as an open structure with continuous slippages. Momentary closures do happen, but not persistent stability (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985). Identities are conceptualized as subject positions that are the available points of identification that one can take up or be assigned within the discourses at play. Like the language structure, subject positions are never stable.

Central in forming the analytical approach in the present article is Judith Butler’s theory of identity as performative (Butler, 1990, 1993). In Butler’s view, identity is ‘not a noun’ but ‘always a doing’ (1990: 34), which must be performed in accordance with ‘recognizable standards’ (1990: 22) to be socially and culturally intelligible. Butler’s primary focus is the construction of gendered identities. She considers gender to be an effect of ‘repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (1990: 45). This means
that identities – here, the gendered identity – appear as objective and not as the discursive constructs they are. In addition, Butler points out how a coherent presentation of self is required. One must perform an identity that is in agreement with social norms. Thus, in terms of gender identities, sex, gender, sexual practice and desire must form a coherent unity for one to be acknowledged as a culturally intelligible person. Finally, and in accordance with poststructuralist theory, Butler sees the binary division of gender as reinforced through the construction of a gender identity in contrast with what it is not: ‘One is one’s gender to the extent that one is not the other gender’ (1990: 30, emphasis added). This oppositional view will be central to the present analysis as well.

Despite the focus on gender in Butler’s own work, her theory has been proved highly applicable for analysing the construction of, for example, intelligible age identities (Demant and Järvinen, 2006), racial and ethnic identities (Rich, 2004) and television identities (Cover, 2004). Thus, in the present article, Butler’s conceptualization of identity formation informs my view on identity and identity constructions. I focus on how the participants in the focus group are struggling to put forward a recognizable identity as responsible, recreational drug users. Theoretically, I conceptualize this identity in accordance with Butler’s view on identity: like the binary division of the heterosexual gender identity, the drug user identity is considered to consist of two categories: responsible and irresponsible. These are not essentialist categories with predefined contents, but are arbitrary and normatively constructed categories defined in opposition to each other – one is irresponsible by not being responsible. Nevertheless, they are imagined as given and objective. The identity categories are performed through actions and expressions, regulated by cultural norms. Through the analysis I will show the six dimensions that become part of the identity as a responsible drug user, as constructed by the participants.

While gender is always present according to Butler, this does not mean that analyses of identity constructions should be restricted to gender. I do acknowledge that gender can be regarded as part of the process that I am analysing in this article, but in order to deal with the formation of responsible drug user identities in depth, gender is not in focus of the present analysis.

For analytic purposes, I combine the framework outlined above with concepts derived from positioning theory (Davies and Harré, 1990; Harré and van Langenhove, 1999). Positioning theory shares the discourse analytical foundation, but does to a greater extent than Butler provide a number of analytical concepts. Positioning theory focuses on how subject positions are created through discursive practices (Davies and Harré, 1999). Positioning is a conceptualization of the identification process, aimed at drawing attention to the dynamic processes around identity formation (Davies and Harré, 1990). Discursive practices are seen as producing a ‘diversity of selves’ (1990: 47), meaning that the subject can identify with more than one identity at the same time. However, the subject is expected to present a more or less coherent and unified self: positioning ‘is the discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines’ (1990: 48). By choosing a specific identity, other possible points of identification are temporarily left out.

Positioning is only possible in relation to the subject positions available within the discourses at play in a given situation. However, the subject is not just ‘interpellated’ (Althusser, 1971) to take up the subject position available within a specific discursive
practice, but can actively choose between the various subject positions at hand, or engage in the discursive practice by challenging the attributions of specific subject positions, thereby negotiating new positions (Davies and Harré, 1990). Furthermore, one can refuse the subject positions put forward by other participants. Thus, for a specific presentation of self or others to be successful, the other participants in the situation have to accept this presentation or positioning. With the questioning of the attempt to position someone, the conversation changes from first-order positioning to second-order positioning, which shifts the focus from the content to the form of the conversation (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). However, the positioning of oneself and others is not always a deliberate action, but can happen unintentionally (Davies and Harré, 1999). Positioning theory offers a range of analytical concepts, of which I present the most relevant along the way.

Method

Data collection and participants

The article draws upon data from a Danish club study on youth drug use, conducted from August 2008 to February 2009. A club study can be characterized as a study on ‘youth alcohol and illicit drug use within the specific social setting of the night club’ (Demant et al., 2010). By turning the club settings into a site for recruiting interviewees, it becomes possible to reach this otherwise hidden population (Watters and Biernacki, 1989) of recreational drug users in their natural habitat.

Five different nightclubs, situated in Copenhagen as well as in provincial towns in other parts of Denmark (with 30,000–40,000 inhabitants) were included in the study. The clubs were visited during Friday or Saturday nights over a five-month period. On specific nights, a random sample of clubbers (approximately half of the guests) was asked to answer a short questionnaire with seven questions about alcohol consumption and drug experience. In addition, the guests were asked about employment and age and their gender was noted. A total of 1632 clubbers answered the seven questions, whereas 222 declined. The mean age of the clubbers in the sample was 21 years, and 90 percent of the clubbers were 25 years old or younger. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of the clubbers were men; 50 percent were currently employed, whereas 42 percent were enrolled in education at various levels. The remaining respondents were either unemployed or doing military service. Nearly two-thirds of the clubbers (63%) stated that at some point during their lifetime they had tried an illegal drug. Cannabis proved to be the most common drug, tried by 58 percent of the sample; 23 percent had never tried drugs other than cannabis, whereas 40 percent had tried other drugs.

The questionnaire also served as a screening tool. Thus, clubbers who reported experience with drugs within the previous year were asked to voluntarily give their phone number with the intention of participating in a later interview. Those who agreed were called a few days later and asked if they were willing to take part in a focus group interview about their drug experiences, either with a group of friends or with other drug-experienced clubbers. If they were uncomfortable with participating, or unwilling to participate in a focus group for other reasons, they were invited to participate in an interview either alone or together with a friend. Altogether, nine focus group interviews,
six double interviews and seven individual interviews were conducted. A total of 53 individuals were interviewed (35 men and 18 women, median age = 21 years). The focus groups were videotaped, the double and individual interviews were audio-recorded and all the recordings were fully transcribed afterwards.

As mentioned previously, here I focus on a focus group interview during which the ambience grew very tense and the discussion took on a confrontational character, which was not seen in other interviews in the study. Selecting a single interview from a range of 22 interviews can be problematic in the sense that one risks extrapolating issues which are not supported by the remaining part of the data. However, by careful case selection, an ‘extreme’ case (Flyvbjerg, 2006) can be used for highlighting issues that are less outspoken elsewhere. In this study, more peaceful negotiations of identities can be found in most interviews in the study, although less outspoken, and thereby the case at hand is fruitful for illustrating some central dynamics. In the focus group under study, two of the participants in particular – a young woman and a young man – were disagreeing. The situation was uncomfortable and puzzling, and from an ethical viewpoint it was problematic and required careful debriefing. However, looking back from a sociological viewpoint, the fierce discussions formed a case that needed further investigation, since these struggles also indicated that something important was at stake. As mentioned previously, I argue that the conflict was grounded in negotiations about identity construction. In this way, I direct attention to both the ‘what’ and the ‘how’ of the interview (Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), emphasizing that a central part of data is found on the level of social interaction that runs parallel to the thematic discussion in a focus group (Farnsworth and Boon, 2010; Halkier, 2010). In the analysis, the focus group interview is supplemented by two double interviews in which the central persons from the focus group participated subsequently.

Results: Six dimensions of the responsible, recreational drug user identity

The focus group interview

The focus group interview takes place in a meeting room in a public library in a medium-sized provincial city. Eight persons are recruited for the focus group, but only five show up. Two are young women, Belinda (aged 16) and her friend Mille (aged 17), and three are young men, Laus (aged 20), Jeppe (aged 19), and Jeppe’s friend Søren (aged 16). It appears that Laus and Jeppe have met before. In the following, focus is on Belinda and Laus. Belinda is a student at a production school, and Laus is working as a tourist guide in the season. However, it is unclear whether he is employed at the time of the interview.

The focus group is moderated by the author and a co-interviewer. The quote below follows a lengthy description by Laus regarding his drug preferences. Laus has just recounted how he has tried a range of drugs, primarily stimulants, and how he prefers to take drugs in clubs and other public party settings (concerts etc). During his monologue, the other participants have been quiet, and the two girls seemed slightly bored. In the quote, the moderator tries to bring Belinda and Mille back into the discussion by asking about their experiences:
Moderator: [turning to Belinda and Mille] What do you think [about combining clubbing and drugs]?

Belinda: I mean, it’s not that I do a whole lot of drugs and such things, but I would never take any drugs when going out, going to a nightclub. It would be at private house parties, or things like that.

Laus: [addressing Belinda] Why?

Belinda: Well, I don’t know, it’s just something I … I don’t want to walk around the city being totally blown away.

Here, Belinda is openly distancing herself from Laus’ way of partying and taking drugs. In her view, taking drugs means that you are ‘blown away’ and lose track of what is going on around you, and this loss of control is incompatible with walking around town or going clubbing. Instead, drugs should be taken in private settings such as house parties. However, these preferences are turned into a matter of responsibility: Articulated in immediate continuation of Laus’ description of taking drugs in clubs (prior to the quote), Belinda’s comment can be seen as implying that being ‘blown away’ in public places such as clubs is not only inappropriate, but irresponsible. This judgement is based on her own experiences: in comparison to only drinking alcohol, she describes the intoxication from drugs as more ‘foolish’, indicating that one is prone to act less sensibly when affected by drugs. According to her, one should aim for a ‘controlled loss of control’ (Measham, 2002) when going clubbing, which means that she ‘can be drunk when going out but not affected by any drugs’, as she says elsewhere in the interview. Therefore, the right setting is central for Belinda’s experience of being able to control the drug experience (Zinberg, 1984). Thus, a first dimension of the identity as a responsible drug user is drug practice, which here relates to choosing the right setting for taking drugs, being able to control their effect and combining the two. Through emphasizing this combination of drug and setting, Belinda deliberately positions herself as more careful and responsible than Laus, who is simultaneously being interactively positioned (Davies and Harré, 1999) as irresponsible. Belinda is aware that her limited drug experience might be used against her as a way of questioning her position, but she tries to avoid this by ‘admitting’ to this initially. Nevertheless, Laus replies to her statement:

Laus: You are not blown away! Again, we are talking about different kinds of drugs. I would never touch ecstasy and stuff like that. I like something that gives you an adrenaline kick, something that makes your heart beat, so that you really want to hit the dancefloor. I would never take drugs and then just sit at home and stare into the wall. That would be way too boring!

The successful positioning of others is, as mentioned, dependent on their ‘collaboration’, and Laus does not accept Belinda’s attempt to interactively position him as less responsible. Although the conversation is still proceeding as first-order positioning – the content or the object of the conversation (which drugs are appropriate for which settings) being in focus – the negotiation of subject positions is taking place simultaneously. Instead of admitting to Belinda’s viewpoint and his inherent positioning, Laus advances the discussion by introducing a distinction between different kinds of drugs. In doing this, first he opposes Belinda’s statement by deliberately positioning himself as being
precisely responsible by only taking stimulants, not ecstasy. In this, he introduces a dimension of general drug knowledge to the identity as a responsible drug user: that is, being able to distinguish between ‘acceptable’ and ‘unacceptable’ drugs, and between the various effects of different drugs. Furthermore, this implicitly makes Belinda appear less drug-wise by not making this distinction, thereby questioning the validity of her viewpoint. In addition, by describing house parties as occasions where you just ‘stare into the wall’ because there is nothing else to do, Laus distances himself from Belinda’s preferred way of partying. House parties may be fun for people at Belinda’s age, but not for a slightly older and more mature guy such as himself. This leads Belinda to reply: ‘At the house parties we are attending, you don’t just sit and stare into the wall. You don’t. They are really intense.’

Belinda’s defence of her own party practice and her network of friends is simultaneously an attack on Laus’ circle of friends and a ‘collective’ positioning of the entire group as dull and incapable of throwing a proper party. As the previous quotes show, the discussions about different ways of partying and taking drugs are not only discussions between two people with different preferences in terms of drugs and drug use settings, but also a process in which identities are constructed, tried out and contested by positioning oneself and the other vis-à-vis each other in more or less attractive positions. Thus, the different preferences are turned into a means for simultaneously positioning each other. When assigned an unattractive or undesirable position, one tries to avoid or resist it.

However, as Butler notes, being positioned in an unattractive position or a position ‘that pain[s] us’ (1997: 26) might be better than not inhabiting a position at all, because the subject position is what provides ‘social and discursive existence’ (1997: 26) – it is how we are being acknowledged as subjects. This view makes Belinda’s former, reflexive positioning as an inexperienced drug user intelligible, if her alternative is considered to be not having any position and thereby not ‘existing’ in the discussion. On the one hand, one does not want to accept just any painful or problematic positioning, whereas on the other hand, an unattractive position may allow one still to ‘exist’ and thereby to speak and be heard, although from an inferior position. This seems to describe exactly what is at stake for Belinda. In the next passage, the discussion continues with a focus on drugs, while the atmosphere grows fiercer:

Moderator: [addressing Belinda] What kind of drug would you take then, at a private house party?
Belinda: It would be amphetamine or… I don’t touch ecstasy and stuff like that.
Moderator: OK. So amphetamine or cocaine or?
Belinda: I have never tried coke. It’s just, it’s more… mostly it’s amphetamine, and then I have tried meth. That’s it, but it happens very rarely.
Moderator: But what does it do to the house party then?
Belinda: It means that you wake up.
Jeppe: [giggles and whispers something indistinctly to Laus]
Laus: [whispering back] Let’s not talk about that.

My attempt to shift the focus from party practices to drugs and give Belinda room to talk is also a forced self-positioning (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999), in that it forces Belinda to position herself in relation to drugs. This demand may not be preferable for
Belinda, who previously tried to position herself as a ‘casual’ drug user, who does not know too much about drugs and only takes them once in a while. In this light, being forced to have an opinion may feel uncomfortable, and consequently Belinda answers briefly and without elaborating too much, again underlining her own insignificant experiences.

While Belinda is trying to focus on answering the moderator’s questions, she is obviously distracted and annoyed by Laus and Jeppe, who demonstrate their disinterest by whispering to each other and giggling while she is talking, thereby undermining her statements. With Butler’s concept of the abject, this can be seen as them ignoring or even denying her existence, trying to silence her because of her lack of experience and, in their view, irresponsible drug practice. This means that she cannot be assigned any subject position in the present discussion and becomes a ‘shadowy contentless figure’ (Meijer and Prins, 1998; see also Butler, 1993). This continues here, where the moderator tries to bring Laus and Jeppe back into the discussion to stop their parallel conversation:

**Moderator:** [addressing Laus and Jeppe] So that [Belinda’s description of the effect of the drug] is basically the same as you were talking about, this adrenaline kick or the feeling of being pepped up?

**Laus:** I beg your pardon? Yes. [Addressing Belinda] Can I just ask, what is meth?

**Belinda:** I have no idea. It’s just called meth.

**Moderator:** Methamphetamine, I assume?

**Belinda:** I don’t know about those things [giggles].

Laus’ reaction to the moderator’s question (‘I beg your pardon?’) clearly and deliberately shows that he has not been paying attention to Belinda’s description of her drug experiences, emphasizing that he found this trivial and irrelevant. He emphasizes his superior approach by explicitly taking over the position as the one who poses the questions and addresses Belinda directly to test her knowledge of the drug that she is talking about (and has tried). This reveals a third dimension of the responsible drug user identity: that is, specific or contextual drug knowledge – a dimension which Belinda tries to downplay by openly admitting her lack of knowledge and, by giggling, tries to show that this is of less importance to her. This is underlined later on, when Belinda actually differs between different drugs, in that she states that she would not touch ‘ecstasy and stuff like that’. However, this distinction is not based on specific knowledge about the drug and associated risks, but on ‘being scared of it’, because her friend once had an overdose. Belinda’s attempt at regaining a position for speaking, although a less attractive position, is accepted by the moderator and the co-interviewer, who try to focus on Belinda’s drug experience instead of drug knowledge, thereby acknowledging her perspective as relevant:

**Co-interviewer:** [addressing Belinda] But how would you describe the difference between taking speed [amphetamine] and then meth?

**Laus:** I don’t think she actually knows what she is talking about – at all [giggles].

**Moderator:** [addressing Belinda] But you have tried it, right?
Belinda: [addressing Laus] Would you stop interrupting me when I’m talking!

Mille: Easy now! [holds her hand up in front of Laus]

Moderator: Would you say that it’s like two different experiences or what do you think?

Belinda: Yes, I mean, I think that meth is really, really, what’s it called…

Moderator: Do you mean it’s more intense or?

Belinda: I mean, you get totally energetic, you are in a spin [Laus and Jeppe are whispering and giggling] … the last time I tried it, my hand was shaking like this [shows with her hand] and then the effect eased off after half an hour or so.

[Laus and Jeppe continue whispering]

Belinda: [addressing Laus, yelling] Then speak out, champ!

In this quote the discussion clearly takes another direction than intended. Laus does not allow Belinda to answer the moderator’s question, but interrupts her and explicitly questions her knowledge about drugs. He clearly positions himself as the drug-wise person and Belinda as not drug-wise. When answering, Belinda is inhibited by the interruption, the questioning of her statements and her entire subject position and the whispering and giggling, which eventually leads her to reply to Laus, yelling and, ironically, calling him ‘champ’ as a remark to Laus’ positioning of himself as drug-wise, knowledgeable and responsible.

The confrontation leads Laus to take on the task of explaining about the drug in question, which is not methamphetamine (meth) but mephedrone (meph).\(^1\) It appears that Laus is distributing this drug on a smaller scale and therefore is highly knowledgeable about it. To outsiders – including the moderator and co-interviewer at the time of the interview – the difference may seem trivial, but to the insiders in this recreational drug culture, the distinction is important and indicative. Whereas mephedrone was legal at the time and hence considered a somewhat harmless drug, methamphetamine – at least in a Danish context – carries connotations of a strong and dangerous drug, only for ‘advanced drug abusers’, as Jeppe describes it later on in the interview. When Belinda mixes up the names of the drugs, she is not only demonstrating that she does not know what she was taking, but also showing that she is unfamiliar with these distinctions and symbolic markers.

After this, the discussion continues but in a less confrontational way. Ten minutes later the two girls have to leave to catch a bus (arranged beforehand), and the remaining part of the interview is carried out with only the three young men.

Follow-up interviews

Laus and Belinda each participated in a double interview with a friend a few days later as part of the debriefing process and to follow up on their personal drug careers. The conversations about the focus group interview taking place here can be termed third-order positioning, because they are going on outside the original conversation. They are ‘rhetorical redescriptions’ of the original conversation, in that the versions told are not...
necessarily the full story but a specific part of it (van Langenhove and Harré, 1999). The quote below is from the interview with Belinda and her friend Tina (aged 16). The interview proceeded in a relaxed atmosphere. The two young women’s experiences differed greatly, but these differences did not cause conflict, indicating that the conflict is not reducible to a matter of drug experience. However, by mentioning the situation from the focus group, Belinda suddenly raises her voice:

Interviewer: [addressing Belinda] Last time, when we had this interview, there was this guy sitting on the opposite side of you and the two of you did not seem to get along very well?

Belinda: [yells] No, he was a maniac! It was totally crazy! Like everything I said was wrong, but the way I have experienced it, I mean, it’s not only the way he experiences things [that counts]!

Interviewer: That is why I wanted you to come today, so you could tell your story without being interrupted all the time.

Belinda: Yes, it was really like, he was totally being a snob and everything he said was just right, and everything the rest of us said was just wrong … He rolled his eyes whenever I said something, and I was about to go crazy! I cannot stand that!

Bringing up the situation infuriates Belinda, supporting the view that more was at stake than mere disagreements over party preferences. Here she can vent her frustrations regarding Laus’ self-acclaimed superiority and patronizing behaviour as a ‘drug snob’, indicating how she does not acknowledge Laus’ focus on drug knowledge and on being drug-wise as an entitlement to talk about drug experiences. In her view, drug experiences are subjective and therefore of relevance, regardless of the drug user’s specific knowledge – a perspective which was emphasized by the interviewer as well. Thus, although it is clear that she agrees in considering drug practices a dimension of identity as a responsible drug user – despite disagreeing with Laus in terms of which practices that should be judged responsible – it is less clear whether she considers drug knowledge to be part of this. At minimum she questions Laus’ view that lack of drug knowledge should disqualify her drug experiences as less ‘true’ or ‘authentic’.

The last quote is from the follow-up interview with Laus and his friend Kristoffer (aged 21). Again, the situation in the focus group is mentioned by the interviewer:

Interviewer: In the previous interview down here, there was this young woman who had bought or obtained this meth or meph?

Laus: Yes, she did not know a thing and that really pissed me off [giggles].

Kristoffer: Who was it?

Laus: It was some girl, who had tried this meph, or ‘meth’ as she called it.

Kristoffer: Like she was talking about meth [methamphetamine]?

Laus: Yes [giggles] so I had to explain about that.

Interviewer: But what…

Laus: I find it irritating with people like her … it’s because they take it [the drug] together with inexperienced people. I have always done it
together with people who were experienced. I have always asked where it comes from. Unless, of course, your friend has vouched for it, then you count on it being good.

In contrast to Belinda, Laus does not get upset when asked to reflect on the focus group interview. Obviously, the situation was less unpleasant for him. When telling Kristoffer about the situation, Laus positions Belinda retrospectively as not drug-wise and irresponsible, and simultaneously positions himself in relation to Kristoffer. While being drug-wise compared with Belinda, this is not the case in comparison with Kristoffer, and Laus is repeatedly corrected by Kristoffer in this interview. By emphasizing his success in the previous interview, Laus is trying to make up for being positioned as less drug-wise in the current interview.

In addition to contextual knowledge about drugs, two new dimensions of the responsible drug user identity are introduced in the above quote: first, checking the contents and the quality of what one is given or sold; and second, living up to the expectations of the different players on the drug scene (by taking drugs together with ‘experienced people’ when inexperienced) are both important dimensions of the identity as a responsible drug user. Again, Belinda fails to live up to both while Laus emphasizes his own, more responsible practice.

Later on in the interview, Laus deliberately positions himself as a salesperson, stating that it is ‘foul’ when people sell drugs to minors. Here he is positioning himself as a more ethical drug dealer who has a moral responsibility towards his (potential) customers. However, although this is explicitly directed at other drug dealers, discrediting their morals, it simultaneously positions Belinda as underaged and immature, as less competent than people at Laus’ age and someone who needs special consideration. Again, Laus ends up reaffirming his superiority, both morally and in terms of maturity and responsibility.

**Discussion**

Whereas Butler’s theory focuses on the structural level, positioning theory provides a more dynamic and interactional set of concepts. Roughly speaking, Butler’s theory focuses on the interpellation by discourses, while positioning theory focuses on the interpellation by the other. The combination of these two approaches and a specific focus group methodology has been fruitful for analysing the identity constructions and negotiations as they unfolded in the interviews. As the analysis has shown, being a responsible, recreational drug user is not a pre-discursive or ontological given but an accomplishment; an identity that is constructed and negotiated during the course of the interview. In order to appear as a responsible drug user, one has to live up to a number of standards. More specifically, six different dimensions are included in this identity.

The first dimension regards drug practice, which covers the ability to choose the right setting for taking drugs, and being able to control their effect without becoming too intoxicated. Furthermore, one should be able to know which drugs are appropriate for which settings. The second dimension regards general drug knowledge: that is, being
able to differentiate between different drugs and their effects. The third dimension concerns contextual drug knowledge: that is, knowledge related to one’s own drug use (i.e. what one is taking) and drug experiences. The fourth dimension regards checking the content and quality of the drugs that one consumes as a necessary precaution to avoid dangerous additives or being fooled by sellers. The fifth dimension involves the surrounding drug scene by acknowledging one’s own position in this hierarchy. Newcomers to the drug scene should be taking drugs with more experienced users who, on the other hand, should offer their guidance to inexperienced users. The sixth and final dimension is age. According to Laus, it is generally irresponsible for minors to take drugs.

Each dimension describes a central aspect of the responsible drug user identity. While the six dimensions may be given different emphasis in different contexts, the analysis has shown how the notion of responsibility is not reducible to drug experience. In addition, it has shown how users do not necessarily agree in all dimensions. However, agreement is not necessary for the dimensions to become effective. To elaborate on this, I will include a little more context.

Laus identifies fully with the drug user identity. He takes drugs frequently and likes to combine ‘four or five things’ together with a group of friends. As mentioned previously, he is an actor on the drug scene, in that he is distributing mephedrone. Furthermore, he does ‘not think it’s embarrassing to take drugs because it is … an exciting topic’. This also means that he seeks information about different drugs and their (side)-effects.

Compared with Laus, Belinda is a more casual drug user. She only uses drugs when offered, more by coincidence than by consideration, and she wants to know ‘how long it lasts and how much [she] should take’ before ingesting any drug. She thinks it is ‘a waste of money’ to pay for drugs, and she finds it ‘sick’ that someone would want to pay DKR1,100 (€150) for high-quality cocaine. In this sense, price seems to be a more important parameter than quality for her when obtaining drugs. Belinda does not do any ‘research’ on drugs herself, but relies on various boyfriends and their provision of and information about drugs. She is quite concerned with the extent of her use because she is ‘scared that [she] might not be able to control it’. Moreover, she keeps her drug use a secret to her mother and to most of her friends because they ‘are so much against it’. Thus, her investment in the identity as a recreational drug user is clearly different than Laus’, and drugs are a less central part of her life.

Belinda’s perception of responsible drug use seems to focus on other aspects of using drugs: that is, the extent and frequency of use. However, these aspects are not turned into dimensions of identity as a responsible drug user, which is negotiated in the focus group. This otherwise would have been dimensions in which Belinda could reassert her drug practice. However, the analysis also shows that the recreational drug culture is a distinct culture with its own internal distinctions (e.g. between drugs), hierarchies (e.g. between newcomers and experienced users) and practices (e.g. which drugs to take in which settings). The responsible drug user identity is defined by those on the inside of this recreational drug culture. One has to learn the distinctions, hierarchies and practices and become familiar with this culture (Becker, 1963) in order to appear responsible: Laus is, while Belinda is not. In this sense, Belinda is in unknown territory, participating
in a ballgame that is not hers. Paradoxically, she does not even seem interested in participating to the extent that Laus is. Thus, we see how different investments in the drug user identity become important as well. However, Belinda’s concerns about not taking drugs too often, not taking too much and not getting too far into the culture are exactly what inhibit her from asserting herself in this field. Her position on the margins leaves her in a weak position to negotiate the terms for being responsible. Thus the resulting definition of responsible drug use, which roughly corresponds to Laus’ perceptions, contrasts with how she perceives her own practice, and this is what upsets her. In Butler’s words, ‘to be injured by speech is to suffer a loss of context’ (Butler, 1997: 4) and thereby a loss of control, which is what happens to Belinda when Laus questions her practices, experiences and knowledge. In this, he is questioning her identity and self-image as a responsible drug user, meaning that Belinda loses control of the situation, and that her self-image and relation to her own drug use is destabilized. Perhaps she is not as responsible and as much in control as imagined when arriving for the interview? How can she be, in Butler’s words, culturally intelligible and recognizable in the negotiated context: how can she inhabit a subject position in the discursive practice unfolding in the discussion (Butler, 1997)? The answer on the basis of the identity construct put forward in the interview is that she needs to take up the position of an irresponsible drug user. There is no position in between these two categories, as the poststructuralist framework underlines.

Conclusion

This article set out to analyse what the positioning in a focus group interview reveals about the identity as a responsible, recreational drug user. As mentioned previously, the analysis has shown how the notion of responsibility is not reducible to drug experience, but depends on one’s performance in a number of dimensions. While the exact notion of responsibility is locally negotiated and therefore would not necessarily be exactly the same in another interview, this does not mean that the resulting notion of a responsible drug user identity is arbitrary and completely dependent on the context. On the contrary, as the theoretical framework underlines, positioning is only possible in relation to available subject positions. These are provided by prevailing societal discourses about drugs and drug use, individualization, responsibility and health, appropriate behaviour in a public space and so forth, not least wider societal values and perceptions about drug use as a highly questionable activity. Thus, even though the recreational drug use culture is a distinct culture with its own set of norms, hierarchies and so forth, it does not exist in a vacuum and it cannot abandon or ignore the prevailing discourses and normative values of the surrounding society. While not questioning the activity of drug use itself, the ways in which this activity is carried out are still judged against dominant norms and discourses. In this way, the analysis also shows that being recognized as a responsible drug user is a challenge, even among other drug users. However, despite the difficulties involved in combining an illegal practice with notions of responsibility, this combination is necessary and mandatory for being able to present a coherent self.
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Notes
1. When pronounced with their short names, the two drugs sound almost similar (‘meth’ and ‘meph’). Mephedrone is a stimulant drug (Winstock et al., 2010). Denmark was the first country in the European Union to make it illegal in December 2008, shortly after the time of the interview, but it was a legal drug at the time.
2. This is expressed, for example, through the national ‘Fight Against Drugs’ and the passing of a second, governmental action plan against drugs and drug abuse (Regeringen, 2010).

References

Biographical note
Signe Ravn has just been awarded a PhD on youth recreational drug use at the Centre for Alcohol and Drug Research, University of Aarhus. She has been a visiting student researcher at the Institute for Scientific Analysis, Alameda, CA and the University of California at Berkeley, and has published on drug use careers, drug using cultures and drug risk perception, among others.