Juvenile and drugs: Fascination of contesting identities
Eero Suoninen and Elina Virokannas
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Abstract
The article focuses on the self-conceptions of a juvenile who uses drugs. Different dimensions of categories and connotations are analyzed in an interview given by a young girl who has used hard drugs for several years. The analysis aims at making clear the spectrum of culturally given resources that are available for a young person with a drug history when she attempts to make her life understandable. By concentrating on one young person’s story, the analysis illustrates that a variation of self-conceptions is not about differences between individuals, but is more about the general cultural alternatives of different categories. The variation of self-conceptions is abstracted into four alternative identity types that associate with very different attributes and activity types. The analysis demonstrates how a young person with a drug history both applies the attributes of generally known categories and takes distance from these depending on the identity type. Based on the analysis of these four identities, some conclusions are drawn about the possibilities of parents or other adults to support the identity constructions of a juvenile with a drug history.

Keywords
addiction, drugs, Finland, identity, interview, social constructionism, young people
Juveniles who use drugs, especially hard drugs, are often seen in commonplace conversations simply as junkies. Although recent drug research has widely produced sensitive knowledge about different ways to use illegal drugs and their connections to various youth cultures (for example, Lalander and Salasuo, 2005; Seppälä, 2003), the general Finnish attitudes are quite black and white (see Partanen, 2002). Besides several Finnish prevention programmes, which are mostly directed at young people, the picture of juveniles using drugs is outstandingly narrow and negative (Lähteenmaa and Virokannas, 2006). These kinds of classifications simplify the image of these juveniles and construct them as deviant and asocial. What is more, strong prejudices affect how young people are confronted by other people. At school, a youngster with junkie-stigma might be seen as a hopeless case, who is not worth the teachers’ efforts. Authorities might treat him or her as a pathological liar, while in the health service system, he or she might be seen as a potential forger of prescriptions slips. Nevertheless, if young persons with a drug history are listened to more carefully, other kinds of self-images can be found in their speech that differentiate them markedly from the junkie category. This kind of ‘talking back’ (Juhila, 2004) can be essential when building alternatives to the strongly stigmatized ways of allocating youngsters to available categories.

In this article, our aim is to analyze self-conceptions of one juvenile who uses drugs from her own perspective. After the analysis we draw some conclusions about the possibilities for adults to support the identity constructions of a juvenile with a drug history. Different classifications and dimensions of categories are analyzed in an interview given by one young girl on her life. We describe what kind of identities and self-images the girl is able to create for herself in her culturally tensional situation. We also explicate which kind of ‘talking back’ dimensions are present in the interview; in other words, how a juvenile with a drug history avoids the very negative culturally given connotations often bound to the category of a junkie. The interviewed girl, Tina, is 17 years old and she has used hard drugs for several years. Tina’s interview has been chosen from a larger body of material gathered in one drug treatment unit for children and young adults, because of her especially open and multidimensional way of describing her life in an interview situation. The larger body of material is used for comparison purposes and, when necessary, to place Tina’s accounts in a broader context.

DEGREES OF FREEDOM AND LIMITATIONS IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Traditionally, identity has been understood as a relatively constant and intact conception of one’s personality or an attribute of the self that develops with ageing (Erikson, 1980) or according to a person’s membership of groups (e.g., Tajfel, 1982). We use the concept of identity in a different sense. In our study, identity
is seen from a social constructionist view as a self-construction created in situ¬
atations of interaction and routines of everyday life (Antaki and Widdicombe,
1998; Gergen, 2001; Jokinen, 1995). Methodologically we lean on the discourse
analytical tradition that focuses on the processes of identity building (see Potter
and Wetherell, 1987: 101-4; Suoninen, 1997) and not just on the readymade
content of identity. Therefore, we analyze the variations of self-images within
Tina’s speech instead of searching for one true identity. Our aim is to make clear
the resources a young person with a drug history has, when she attempts to make
her self-conceptions and life events understandable in the process of an interview
discussion. This kind of approach contains both constructionist and realistic
possibilities of interpretation. Even though we draw on the constructionist ap¬
proach, we think the variation in identities constructed in Tina's interview also
describes in a realistic way, the spectrum of cultural resources available to a
person in Tina's position.

A young person in Tina’s situation is not necessarily as free to define herself
and her life in the same way as another young person, who, for instance, might be
interviewed in the context of their membership of a hobby group. Particularly in
a country like Finland, where the current public and societal circumstances are
very much against any kind of drug use (Hakkarainen and Metso, 2004; Partanen,
2002) and juveniles in general are under strong public scrutiny (Lähteenmaa,
2005), talking about a life strongly associated with drugs brings out specific ten¬
sions. Drug users, even those who use only cannabis, are still a small minority
in Finland (Hakkarainen and Metso, 2003). Besides this, Finnish drug policy has
been one of the most strict in Europe. Not until recently the drug issue has been
concerned with something more than security or law and order issues (Partanen,
2002). For instance, during the time of Tina’s interview, the needle exchange
programme (which aims at harm reduction instead of punishment) has already
started in some parts of Finland. However, the breakthrough of harm reduction
ideas took place afterwards (for more, see Tammi, 2005) and did not play a sig¬
nificant role in Tina’s story.

Young people themselves often define other juveniles who use hard drugs as
deviant. While it might be acceptable to use, for instance, cannabis occasionally
in a controlled way, drug use which leads on to problems is not seen as acceptable
(Salasuo and Rantala, 2002). With reference to Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein
(2001: 13), access to the fields of identity building is limited for those juveniles
whose starting point is, in part, marginal due to drug use. In this context, the
resources a young person with a drug history uses when linking his or her life and
actions to approved cultural ideals are especially interesting. When considering
the possibilities of adults to support juveniles with a drug history, the analysis
of the dilemmatic nature of identity construction is especially important in a
‘peer group oriented culture’ (Hoikkala and Suurpää, 2005: Suoninen, 2001) like
Finland. From the point of view of preventive drug work, it also is important to
get more information about the sense-making of the juveniles themselves, who
are the target of helping work (for example, Lähteenmaa, 2006; Sulkunen et al.,
2003).
We chose Tina's case from the larger material as it contains an exceptionally wide and rich selection of identity variation and reflection between different identities within one interview. There are similarities between Tina's story and other juveniles' stories too. Therefore, when analyzing this case we can also gain insight into the situations of other juveniles. The versatility within Tina's story provides an opportunity to consider the breadth or narrowness of possibilities a young person has when reviewing his or her situation.

By concentrating on only one young person's story, we will illustrate that a variation of identities is not only about differences between individuals, but is also — and perhaps even more — about the general cultural alternatives of different categories. In other words, one person might have several alternative identity positions, which might change as the context changes. In our data, it is the interactional context created and recreated through questions and answers that may change the identity positions. Thus, our perspective differs from the kind of research that explores the explanations of drug use by categorizing different user groups, for instance, a 'marginal juvenile from a poorer family with problems' or a 'young recreational drug user from an ordinary family' (Ministry of Social Affairs and Health, 2000). Our conception of the nature and the meanings of drug use are defined based on culturally given alternatives in identity positions for a drug user.

**ALTERNATIVE IDENTITIES IN TINA'S STORY**

There are some points that are important to know about Tina's personal situation in order to better follow our analysis. She had been treated at a drug treatment unit for six months at the time of the interview and she regarded the aim of becoming drug-free in a positive way. In the larger body of interview material (number of interviews = 17), Tina's drug history was one of the most serious. She had used heroin regularly as well as other drugs and her method of taking drugs was through intravenous injections. Nevertheless, we want to avoid using the personal life history as an explanation of how the interviewed person makes her life understandable, so we will not write any more about Tina's background. We believe the material of her interview is sufficiently revealing, with many interesting standpoints and details. In addition, the interaction between the interviewer and the interviewed is a significant part of the nature of the interview situation (see Holstein and Gubrium, 1995), and for this reason we include the interviewer's questions and comments in the conversation extracts.

Our analysis proceeds according to different identity types. We begin with the most common and obvious identity related to drug abuse, which centres on the problematic dimensions of drugs, as already illustrated at the beginning of this article. In order to fully understand the nuances in Tina's answers, we need to remember that her speech is produced in an interview context and in a situation where the aim of her treatment period is to get rid of drugs.
Junkie

When we hear that someone has used illegal drugs, we easily regard that person as a drug user and other matters about him or her might be obscured. We might even refer to that person afterwards as a junkie. For instance, in Finland, some young politicians have definitively lost their reputation when their cannabis use has come out. In the first extract of Tina’s interview, she mostly identifies herself with drug users in accordance with common presumptions and explains her life from the viewpoint of a junkie.

We have marked the most essential parts of the extracts in italics. In addition, we have used some special marks to conserve the rhythm and style of the speech.

Extract 1: Just junking

Interviewer: What do you think about everything that has affected your life and how do you think that your life will now go on in future?

Tina: Ummm / well at least / for sure / or I mean // or that is like it has been my life // I mean like since I’ve been using since I was thirteen, now I’m seventeen so it has been // just // junking so now if, if // all that time that well // I can’t even I can’t imagine // if I had not been using like what could it even have been // that that was it // just that life // that now this is sort of the turning point // like now from here // I mean at this point it’s hard to say but of course I wish I can get out of that heroin // especially get out and yeah now for sure I will but well like // how will it go is like totally open since // the longest // period was just two weeks where for sure I was // without / drugs I mean // during these years.

When Tina describes her life from the age of 13 to 17, we see an image of a miserable young girl whose life has been just daily ‘junking’. Even if Tina situates the identity of being a drug addict in the past, the change to another kind of self-conception does not seem easy. Movement from the world of hard drugs to a normal, conventional way of living is still constructed as being difficult and unsure (‘how will it go is like totally open since // the longest / period was just two weeks where for sure I was / without / drugs I mean’). The identity of a drug user is still a significant part of the possible self-image variations. However, by situating the identity of junkie in the past, Tina avoids or ‘talks back’ the stigma of a pathological case without hope of change.

The extract is strong and convincing in its sense of despair that was also present in the atmosphere of the interview situation. In contrast to the other interviews, this kind of despair was quite unusual. Tina’s unsure and fragmentary way of speech does not make the presentation less effective. In fact, quite the opposite is true. The impression of sensitiveness, which is seen in her searching around the main core of her feelings with frequent breaks, makes the special weight of the presentation more obvious (see Suoninen, 1999). In addition, the
obvious hesitation constructs Tina as a person who understands well the cultural relevance of being an outsider and the deviance of the drug-user identity. Note that especially around the word 'junking', there are many delicacy markers: pauses and seemingly futile words. We shall continue by further focusing on the junkie identity. The next extract deals with one central characteristic of identity construction, the outlining of one's activity.

Extract 2: Muddling along

Interviewer: Yeah // so so how often did you begin to use that? /
Tina: Umm / well at first I th / I think I can't remember exactly, I think it was few times per week but it went quite fast into that / I mean every day so it was / I think it was was it in the spring // when was the fir first / I mean it began this / I remember it was in the summer / or / well if it would have been in the early spring sort of at the beginning of the summer at least I then in the summer holidays ( ) it was since then daily / so yeah I suppose it went quite fast then ...

Tina: ... especially at tenth-class yeah at tenth I was very every day I mean regularly it just was maybe only once in a month twice in a month that I wasn't / since it was / but even in the ninth / then maybe few times but the tenth-class it was sort of period it was like / and then it somehow worked / even if there were other stuff / in the [drug] use

In the beginning of the extract, the interviewer asks about the frequency of drug use in the early days of Tina's drug using career. The form of the question is 'how often did you begin to use'. The style of Tina's answer (see the lines in italics) differs markedly from the question. She fades out her own activity as a subject and illustrates her drug use as something that is just happening to her. Her actions are presented more as a kind of weak-willed drifting than as conscious and functional actions. This way of depicting one's actions also sidesteps the issue of the actor's responsibility. It seems that starting to use drugs, shifting to regular drug use, and adopting a drug abuser's identity is something that happens spontaneously. Thus, by this description of drifting, Tina 'talks back' the notion that she is a malicious girl.

In several other interviews of juveniles, the same kind of presentations about starting to use drugs more frequently were present. The significance of getting stuck on drugs might have been depicted in just the way Tina has, as an unnoticed drifting. Instead, the first experiments with drugs were usually defined initially as the result of intentional decision and second, as conforming consciously to the wider culture of peer relationships (see also Virokannas, 2003). There are also in Tina's story some friends who have some kind of role in the continuation of her drug use but the main emphasis is on drifting unconsciously.

From the point of view of activity, the situation in the next extract is the same as the above. The issue is now about the acceptable ways in which Tina spends her time. The loneliness is emphasized even more, but the lack of her
own activity is now seen in the content of the extract rather than in the way things are depicted.

**Extract 3: Alone and wiped away**

Interviewer: Are you sort of person who likes to be like more by yourself or with friends? //
Tina: Mm well it also depends actually, I mean it is quite difficult to say / I mean / when I / at first well / mmm mmm yeah I do like it a lot with friends I like I mean there are things going on but again if you talk about drugs quite a lot then / since then it in the end it was that you were / a lot of the time alone I mean / but / that’s also the sort of thing that ’cos of those drugs I took I mean / took in a way there weren’t anymore anything but / like / you weren’t interested you just left those friends outside but / yeah I was I mean truly / since or I’d rather be I mean / just / like to be with friends and do everything.

Interviewer: That is at least when you are like sober
Tina: [yeah]

Interviewer: Okay, so for you drug use was connected to that, that you are alone
Tina: Yeah / pretty much so. Well yeah I also liked then sometimes to go with but there weren’t anymore / didn’t have strength or you like couldn’t since it was enough that you had / stuff.

In this extract, the life of a drug user seems to be something where you drift step-by-step towards isolation. Although this was not that obvious in every other interview, the loneliness and lack of allies were common to other juveniles too. Nevertheless, in this extract, Tina depicts different things more as if she is a subject (‘I do like it a lot with friends’, ‘I was I mean truly / since or I’d rather... be with friends and do everything’). This accent on an active subject with likes and dislikes might also have something to do with the question of the interviewer — it is hard to avoid using a me-form after a personal question (‘are you a sort of person who likes...?’).

While depicting her identity during the time she used drugs as ‘being off/on drugs’ and lonely, Tina also defines that kind of situation as existing against her will. The reasons for the isolation from her friends were the drugs and a lack of energy. Ideally, she would have liked to spend time with her friends. Thus, Tina makes a clear distinction between the identity of a junkie and her ‘real’ self-image.

Based on previous extracts, ‘the junkie’ is in a very desolate position and drifts around passively. In addition, the junkie easily gets isolated. The emphasis on the passive drifting is logical in the context of culturally prevailing condemnation of drug use and, as mentioned previously, talks back the suspicion that Tina is a hopeless, pathological case or a malicious personality. Even if the identity of a junkie is very firmly constructed in Tina’s self-descriptions, it is only one dimension of her story. In the following extract, the identity of a junkie is left to the marginal position and a normal, intelligent and sympathetic young girl arrives firmly on the stage.
Ordinary young girl

In previous extracts, Tina has already constructed some alternative elements to the junkie identity, for example, her desire to get rid of drugs. The same kinds of stigma-free elements, which we call ordinary, are plentiful in other parts of her interview. Some of these relate to the way she depicts her personal characteristics and others to the relationships she has with other people. The next extract is about the former.

Extract 4: Cheerful, sensitive and purposeful character

Interviewer: How do you like / describe yourself I mean what kind of / person you are as a character and what are your sort of good and bad sides? //
Tina: Ummm / well mm what kind of person am I / well I do sort of // hh / I'm sort of basically cheerful I think at least how things have gone now here / I don't very often I haven't I think not even once got angry / I mean surely the gang here sometimes blow up so I haven't I've never had or / I've never had not even once or maybe it even isn't any good / thing I mean I should sometimes get angry but / but since I don't really much slam doors or things what others here do / like sort of / everything are just fine hh I mean sort of / sort of // quite then you listen just in here / plenty listen to people's stories I mean everyone says Tina is the psychiatrist // well / maybe those are perhaps sort of good sides since I // lots / feel up to listening to other people's troubles and I mean or stories generally and kind of quite open to everything at least I try to be so that since anyhow / lots ( ) otherwise people ( ) or sort of that // I mean / so kind of basically / quite kind of cheerful and understanding / I think // mm / bad sides // well / I think one is that I'm used to getting what I want maybe // since // especially with my dad I got always what I wanted like / it was sort of / he was also sort of extreme person I mean either / you get what you want or then I mean nothing at all // I mean / I mean / maybe used to and then maybe I am kind of bossy maybe sometimes.

Even if there are the same kinds of themes with social relationships here as in Extract 3, Tina’s constructed identity radically differs now from the picture of a junkie. Tina defines herself as cheerful, sensitive and a purposeful character. She also indicates mature and diversified skills of self-reflecting with considering pauses in her speech. Her relationship to the other juveniles in the treatment unit seems to be one of understanding and sympathy, which is confirmed by the nickname of ‘psychiatrist’ given to her by the other juveniles. On the other hand, she is conscious of the need to also let-off her own steam at times.

In addition to her positive characteristics, she is also conscious of her negative points, although these seem more like those of any ordinary teenage girl. While describing herself as a sometimes ‘bossy’ person, she also gives a possible explanation for this personal trait: she perhaps is used to that kind of behaviour when interacting with her father, who also is a bossy person. Through this explanation, Tina again talks back the stigma of a hopeless or unintelligible behaviour.
In other parts of the interview, Tina expresses the skill of taking another person's perspective even more widely as we can see in the next extract. Extract 5 is composed of two different portions of Tina's interview.

**Extract 5: Taking the perspectives of brother and mother**

Interviewer: Has your brother by the way visited here? / to see you
Tina: No / hasn't been here 'cos, 'cos he's in that age quite the boy and in that age / he doesn't really talk much about that issue I know of course he enormously / wants for me to come home and so on but he can't talk about it much he's in that age fourteen-year-boy sort of thing / he's / quite / I mean / guess he'd be frightened to come here 'cos he wouldn't know what kind of place / I mean couldn't even imagine at all like I couldn't either / I mean sort of / I didn't know at all when I came here but of course a bit more I mean / it would be nice if he'd come to visit at times so he'd see some I mean saw this ain't any jail or anything...

Interviewer: You said you had / a better relationship with your mother / but still you moved in at some point with your father I mean / so what was the kind of // why did that happen?
Tina: Mm they I guess it was since / my mother I mean had a big one-family house three-storey house // and small women so I guess she was terribly frightened to keep me there like when she got to know that well okay I mean there or there were gangs around a lot / came to pick up heroin and other stuff and there were awful many and then she just thought that okay those are friends who she had wondered why they never come when dad is home and I mean / rambling around but when she began to realise that picture then I guess she became afraid of it okay cause there is someone I mean / with some gun behind the door / or I mean she didn't knowhhh so she I guess kind of / wanted cause dad had a smaller flat he's a man she didn't want to keep me. /

Tina might have answered the first question about her brother's visit to the treatment unit with just 'No, he hasn't'. Instead she gives a spontaneously long explanation about why her brother has not visited her. In that explanation, Tina avoids being critical even if she says she would have liked to see her brother during her treatment. Everything Tina says about her brother is said warmly and with an understanding of the brother's situation and perspective. In quite the same way, her mother's wish that Tina should move to her father's place is explained from the mother's point of view and supporting the mother, even if one assumes it is extremely hard for a child to be sent away from her mother.

Thus, the relationships with the brother and mother are constructed in a very compassionate way. At the same time, Tina creates her self-image as a person who can consider things from other people's point of view. Through this construction she talks back the impression that she is a selfish person, who is only capable of thinking about her own needs and pleasures. In line with this impression, her respect for conventional family values is also seen outside the extracts presented in this article. For example, she talks of wanting at least one child of her own.
In Extracts 1-3 and 4-5, it is possible to see very different depictions of Tina, her actions and motives that guide her life. These extracts are also purposely selected to point out on the one hand, the drug-user dimensions within Tina’s account, and on the other, the features of a ‘normal’ young person. We will now attempt to tease out the finer nuances in Tina’s self-conceptions in a way that helps to outline more clearly the dilemmas that professionals, authorities or parents must face when attempting to support and understand a drug-using juvenile.

**Conscious player**

One essential point to be addressed in the drug use of young people is how parents or adults in general can help juveniles to stay away from drugs or to get off drugs. The kind of interaction practices between juveniles and adults that effectively prevents any attempt at help might even develop. Next we illustrate one especially difficult position for achieving fruitful interaction between juveniles using drugs and adults.

**Extract 6: Lying to one’s parents**

Tina: …we were in some forest smoking and then some people came and we were really scared and started to run / and then since we were so confused I mean mm it began to be a fantasy that now the police are coming and I just / sort of / like / we thought at once () don’t dwell on it and / then I went at home I thought well okay I’ll tell my parents now I mean if/ there will be some issue I mean there there hh won’t be sort of anything / though certainly not someone taking out their dog went so far away but somehow you began to imagine ‘cos you hadn’t / any like / knowledge about that matter so then I said [to parents] that I happened to smoke I’ll never do it again but I mean / no I didn’t it did continue just the same way since I noticed that no way any police or anything hh / came out I mean // so then not yet anything came I mean they thought well okay she’s told us and she says she regrets it / it must have been just a single experiment

Interviewer: So your parents weren’t frightened about that

Tina: No, not really // but then I think I don’t know at which point it did take some time / but then it began sort of / I guess step by step cause even at home / I smoked a lot I mean in my own room // and they didn’t [know]at first that ‘cos I burnt incenses and like they couldn’t at all sort of consider it so it went but yeah in time // again then I said again something like that yeah I will quit or something like that so it somehow / I don’t know how it took so / long / went on but somehow they always trusted [me] I mean so it went a long time

In this extract there is the kind of situation where a juvenile has told her parents about the drug use and the decision to quit, with the aim of avoiding a potential big problem. A game position between the juvenile and parents, which the parents are not necessarily aware of at all, is constructed. Note that the in-group
'we', which Tina repeats in the beginning of the extract, is a group of peers and not her family. In that kind of game position, parents exist as opponents, who can be bluffed when necessary by cheating, giving false promises about quitting and with the help of incense (to veil the smell of drugs). Further, a subtle strategy includes entering into how the parents might receive the present matter, for instance, by believing the trustworthiness of the juvenile ('they thought well okay she's told us and she says she regrets / it must have been just a single experiment').

Especially significant is the point at the end of the previous extract where Tina considers the continuation of the situation ('I don't know how it took so / long / went on but somehow they always trusted I mean so it went a long time'). From the parents' viewpoint this appraisal is contradictory. Children are supposed to need to be trusted, but in Tina's account, being trusted by her parents seems to be precisely the reason for the continuation of her problems. This kind of harmful interactional mechanism where a participant practises being on different sides (even if this happens without the parents' knowledge) seems to have effectively prevented them from facing the problem. Thus, it is possible that when examining drug abuse, the social mechanism whereby the family adjusts through a game of concealment has been underestimated.

The conscious players also might find themselves in opposition to other adults apart from their parents. The next extract deals with having a game with one's therapist.

**Extract 7: Going deeper into the lying manoeuvre**

Interviewer: And you handled your drug use in therapy and.
Tina: Yeah.
Interviewer: So you are used to talking about those things.
Tina: Yym
Interviewer: Hhh but that the drug use just continued despite that.
Tina: Yeah / it continued so it didn't I mean actually or hh it I guess then I kind of / somehow / mm began to think it was I guess then / thoughts quite mixed up and especially in the end when other drugs came I mean / somehow I felt that I should sort of be fairly like awfully that if she asks have you used today so I said no even if I had used just like she would have been kind of a policeman or someone like that / and then it became sort of I mean I began to lie about little things so that I can make things easier I mean yeah so I've been three days clear again or sort of like just felt just stupid but since / she said and then when / it began / hhh to be so that it was necessary to lie about other matters too because I mean

Interviewer: Quite
Tina: And then it didn't become / sort of really / proper well we hadn't though in everything some kind of issues I mean yeah sort of / I said a great deal of things and by that means but / at times there were that sort of like it was somehow difficult to say and then / somehow I felt that I should kind of / be like that since / just like she would have been there like now you stop that [drug use]
The same practice of cheating that was developed in relation to her own parents has also expanded to include the therapist. This happens in spite of the fact that Tina says elsewhere in her interview that she trusted the professional confidentiality of the therapist. In addition, the same kind of cheating can be seen in relation to her teacher at school. In some parts, Tina also wonders how the adults did not recognize the situation and intervene earlier (for instance: 'it's really peculiar that no teacher [knew] anything even if I was every day hhh I mean high'). At some points, she also presents evaluations on the logic of adults that explains their blindness. In this game situation, a juvenile places herself above the opponent and speculates as to why the opponent acts without realizing how things really are.

The identity of a conscious player differs considerably from the earlier identity of a junkie because the drug-using juvenile is in the driving seat and manoeuvres all the others by means of her own will. However, that kind of situation is eventually completely unsustainable (for example, 'it was necessary to lie about other matters too') and Tina hints that the adults should have recognized this earlier. Through this description, she makes the adults partly responsible for her continuing to use drugs. Thus, Tina talks back the impression of being the only one responsible for her drug use career. On the other hand, she manages to keep a distance from the impression that she is a pathological case, by situating her descriptions of drug use in the past. The distance keeping broadens in the next pages, in which Tina discusses her will towards a drug-free life.

**The drug-free individual**

The final identity to be handled — the drug-free individual — has already been partly present in the presentations of the other identities. Because of Tina's aim to get off drugs during her treatment period, the 'drug-free' identity has in fact worked all the time as a general frame. (This was not the case in every other interview because about half of the juveniles told they are going to continue drug use or they did not know what they want.) However, it is necessary to consider the identity in its own right through the extract where it can be seen in clear form. One situation where the aim of getting off drugs is directly connected is when seeking a way into treatment.

**Extract 8: Diversified motives to seek a way into treatment**

Interviewer: From whose suggestion, it [seeking treatment] happened?
Tina: Mm it happened because of my / from my own suggestion well since
I mean // hhh I was / in so bad condition then I had been taking
heroin / daily for quite a long time / and I mean // and how did it
again it began I went then well / my / hhh ( ) I mean mean so how
does it break quite my thoughts well I / I was in so bad condition like
then / well I mean or it sort of went so that like at the first time
I ( ) about than my heroin use since my therapist called / and in a way
that also affected since / she / mm called / and said to my mother / that / that your daughter or that Tina is in grave danger I mean she didn't say anything else

Interviewer: Right. / 
Tina: Then I remember I came home so / mother asked that in what kind of danger you are since you don't I mean / do you still smoke hashish something and then I said / that / I'm hooked on heroin I mean then I was in so bad condition that I had anyway thought that I must tell cause I had to get treatment I mean I can't / I can't walk I can't eat or so yeah I could still walk but I mean since mm it was I mean really bad to move no food stayed down and / well I mean // yeah and then for example about the first time and and I don't even remember what was the questionhhh.

Tina: .. .then I moved into my dad's for a while and then I truly tried to be without since I was awful there I was there a few weeks periods // without heroin but then it went again // then I used maybe again a week or couple then I tried again / really hard since I did have a strong motivation but it wasn't I mean / wasn't enough

Interviewer: Mmm. 
Tina: I had anyway the same figure / in the centre of [name of the city] // so / all the / acquaintances used so it didn't work out and / then I or well / parents in the first place began

Interviewer: Mmm. // 
Tina: This place kind of arranged it so yeah it could / since I terribly wanted to get into treatment but then it came sort of like no I don't know what it's going to happen here really / perhaps in the end I wouldn't have necessarily come here since then if / but I mean / really content however I am cause I came // well then I mean // then I came yeahh

The previous extract is especially versatile and has plenty of features in common with some of the earlier extracts. For instance, in the beginning of Tina's first answer she has the same kind of difficulty in finding an idea for her speech, rather like in the Extract 1. This might be due both to the sensitiveness (as in Extract 1) and also the ambiguities of the issue. First, there is a description of dangerous heroin use, which frequently triggers Tina to very emotional floods of description. Second, it is difficult to discern whose suggestion it was to seek treatment. The therapist, Tina's mother and father, as well as Tina herself seemed to have a role in the process. In fact, it seems to have been explicitly the mixture and outcome of different actors and circumstances.

At the beginning of Tina's speech she establishes herself as making the essential suggestion to seek treatment (‘it happened because of my/from my own suggestion’). Furthermore, her own actions are emphasized in the description and this time she does not suggest that her actions arise out of other people’s intentions. For instance, Tina describes her drug use without concealing her own activity (‘I had been taking heroin/daily for quite a long time’) and characterizes other actors familiarly as ‘my therapist’ and ‘my mother’. In addition, there is stronger emphasis compared to all previous extracts on phrases where she is the
subject, such as 'I said', 'I had thought', 'I moved', 'I used', 'I came'. The wording implies an active agency and talks back the impression of 'just the drifter' that was present in the case of a junkie's identity. This might indicate that it is especially important for a juvenile to be able to see herself as an active subject in a situation where they are supposed to change radically their way of life. This kind of intention appears also in the way Tina describes moving to her dad's, in her last but third statement. Previously, when Tina constructed the identity of ordinary young girl (in Extract 5), she connected the moving to her mother's will based on her difficulties in getting along in a one-family house with drug users hanging around. In the context of attempting to get off drugs, moving functions as a means to stop drug use. These kinds of differences between versions of the same event illustrate how the world opens up differently through dissimilar identities.

Extract 8 is especially interesting because it includes descriptions about tensions, even struggles, between 'hooked junkie' and the 'drug-free individual'. Explanations for her attempts to change are derived from having been extremely down, which forced her to seek treatment. Even in the stages of getting off drugs, Tina's choices are defined within a battlefield of diverse accounts, but the accounting for her own activities and aspirations and her cooperation with helpers are now the essential part of the story. Thus, she strongly talks back the identity of a pathologically deviant and asocial case.

**DIFFERENT IDENTITY FRAMES**

In this article, we have considered the contradictory identity-building of a juvenile with a drug history through one multiphase interview. Our aim now is to further discuss at a more general level the different possibilities for the construction of identities by a juvenile drug user. As a basis for this discussion, we have set out the identity types found within the research material in the form of Table 1.

**Table 1 The identities of a juvenile with a drug history**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity</th>
<th>Attributes</th>
<th>Activity Type</th>
<th>Responsibility</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Junkie</td>
<td>miserable, hopeless</td>
<td>drifter</td>
<td>taken along by external force</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ordinary young person</td>
<td>cheerful, sensitive, purposeful, self-reflective</td>
<td>social actor</td>
<td>own responsibility at given frames</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conscious-player</td>
<td>avoiding troubles, dishonest</td>
<td>consciously asocial actor</td>
<td>adult's partly responsible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drug-free individual</td>
<td>motivated, sincere</td>
<td>co-operator</td>
<td>own responsibility, others as allies</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It is important to see juveniles with a drug history through several identity alternatives. She/he is not just a junkie or simply 'drug-free'. The category of junkie is evidently risky since its crushing stigmatization effectively inhibits the discovery of other identity elements. In addition, the stereotypical stigma of being a 'junkie' fades out the essential distinction if one's actions are outlined as drifting or consciously asocial. That kind of discerning of junkie and conscious-player identities is essential when considering practices that maintain a young person's way of life. The idea of drifting associates to the powerless puppet as a member of a peer group or a subculture whose behaviour is probably explained by genes or chemicals. In spite of this, the idea of conscious-playing associates to a purposeful actor who is logical in the frame of a subculture. Then the problem is the loss of communication between youth and adult culture.

The drug-free individual identity illustrated in our analysis is in part competing with other identities. Even if the drug-free individual identity were the obvious and logical choice for a young person at some point in the conversation, it does not mean that some other identity could not be activated equally self-evidently even in some other part of the same conversation. On the other hand, it is possible to connect the ordinary young person's identity to the drug-free individual identity as well as to the conscious-player identity since the relationship between one's own responsibility and any given characteristics is always discretionary in the end. However, the attributes of an ordinary young person, especially the positive attributes, might be essential resources when trying to enhance the attractiveness of the drug-free identity.

Parents or other adults aiming to help should understand the spectrum of identities which are possible for youngsters and specifically for the unique individual concerned. Discovering the spectrum of identities is not necessarily easy even with the help of successful conversation since the attractiveness of revealing different identities might differ depending on, for instance, the people present in the conversation. However, discovering the spectrum would help to recognize from which identity frame at any one time a young person is making their considerations and descriptions. The credibility of an account might be relative only to one or more identity frames. Therefore, it is difficult for adults wishing to help to decide what kind of status they should give to the accounts of the youngster without understanding the spectrum of possible identities.

The adult's basic dilemma is caused by the ambiguous nature of parenting values. On the one hand, it is ideal to listen to a young person in a trusting manner. On the other hand, it may be impossible to know how far a young person's accounts and assurances are to be trusted. Snooping into a young person's life to find out their credibility might just make things worse and, furthermore, set the youngster and the adult up as opponents of each other. The identity of the 'conscious player' illustrates the sort of possibility for social and human manoeuvring that might be done without an adult's knowledge. The risk of the imperception of the drug problem might be due to a young person's skills in misleading adults as far as the situation takes the form of a game. Paradoxically,
one juvenile in our data seems to hope that adults will notice the problem and get involved with it even though she consciously tries to prevent this possibility. In spite of the conscious attempt to mislead, the young person might find the adult (partly) guilty for allowing the problem to continue.

It might remain a fruitful possibility to carefully approach the unavoidable problem-facing conversation, but it can only be realized positively at the point when both sides are ready for communicating. Therefore, the occasions between the adolescent and adults (parents, teachers or institutional helpers), in which the atmosphere is more confidential and jovial than it might usually be, offer irreplaceable opportunities to clear the mess of contesting identities. The firm setting of boundaries might sometimes be inevitable, but in the kind of life phase where one’s own activity becomes essential, a central sanctuary for one’s own activity should be found. Unless the adolescent’s talk often is unclear and incoherent, it may include surprisingly large amount of instances of talking back the stigmatizing aspects of relevant identities. These talking back passages may help in constructing bridges between a young person’s subjective view and an adult’s understanding concerning the problem of drug use in connection with the variety of the alternative identities that are significant in a young person’s everyday life.

Notes

1 The girl’s name, as well as names of other people or places that might reveal her identity, have been changed.

2 The complete material comprises 17 individual interviews of clients aged 14 to 18 years, with nine girls and eight boys. The interviews were gathered during spring 1999 and spring 2002 in one drug treatment unit for children and young adults in the metropolitan area in Finland. The interviewer and the interviewees did not know each other in advance and the intention with the interviews was only to produce material for a research work. The idea of the interviews was to discuss, in a quite informal way, themes like hobbies, friendships, family, drugs and other intoxicants, treatments and plans. Youngsters came mostly from the big cities of southern Finland but there were also participants from smaller places and from other parts of Finland. The unit is meant for juveniles who have a serious drug problem. Cannabis was the most common drug used by those young people interviewed, but they had all experienced some use of medicines, opiates or amphetamine or all. Some of them had occasionally used LSD. Most of those interviewed had also received psychiatric treatment and might be taking medication for some defined mental problems. The treatment period in the unit lasts from four to six months. Clients arrive at the treatment unit after a referral from a social worker or a doctor. Some of the clients had been compelled to attend and some said that they came voluntarily because they did not have any other options. By that they meant that the social worker had said you either go voluntarily for treatment or you will be served a youth custody order to go anyway. Some of those interviewed said they were intoxicated when they arrived and they had no idea what kind of treatment they were to receive or for how long they were to remain there. (See more in Virokannas, 2004: 11-4.)
In spoken Finnish, the categories of ‘huumeiden kayttaja’ (user of drugs) and ‘narkkari’ (junkie) are very common. Sometimes they are used as synonyms; sometimes the second is used as a slang word for an injecting heroin user. In everyday situations, they are usually used as taken-for-granted stigmas without explicating their exact meaning.

Slashes / refer to breaks in the speech. A very short break is shown as one slash / and two slashes // refer to longer, at least to one second break. Empty parentheses () refer to unclear speech. Square brackets [ ] between speakers show overlapping speech between the interviewer and interviewed, whilst within the text, it shows implied concepts that might be necessary to follow the direction of the speech.

References


**EERO SUONINEN**, PhD, works as an Assistant Professor and as a Docent in Social Psychology (University of Tampere). His main fields of interest are face-to-face interaction in social work and therapy, interaction between adults and children, social constructionism and discourse analysis. *Address:* Department of Sociology and Social Psychology, 33014 University of Tampere, Finland. [email: eero.suoninen@uta.fi]

**ELINA VIROKANNAS**, PhD, works as a Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Helsinki. Her research interests are related to the issues of drug use and marginalisation, youth research and social constructionism. *Address:* Department of Social Policy, Box 18, 00014 University of Helsinki, Finland. [email: elina.virokannas@helsinki.fi]