

Talking About Drug Use: Positioning and Reflexivity in Drug Research Interviews and Beyond

Per Kristian Hilden

Key words: drug use; young adult; dialogue; cultural representations; interview research; dialogic interview; conversational dynamics; stance-taking

Abstract: The recognition of the role of discourse in the production of self-understandings and subjectivity has undergone considerable theoretical development over the past decades. Yet, attention to possible ramifications for the status of conversation-based research has been limited and parochial.

This article examines the research interview, as a methodological technique and as a social and cultural event, in relation to representations of drug use, agency and responsibility, arguing that research conversations about drugs cannot be understood in separation from the cultural repertoire of speaking positions evoked by the particular topic of inquiry. In the context of drug research, such positions are embedded in circulating narratives of drug use and drug users, as well as in generalized images of responsibility, self-sufficiency, and the personal management of information and risk. Drawing on material from an ethnographic study of recreational substance use among young adults in Norway, it is suggested that such conversations are unique occasions for the deployment of and reflection on subject positions, giving rise to functions of the research interview beyond the generation of sociological data.

Table of Contents

- [1. Introduction](#)
- [2. Talk and Subjects in Drug Research](#)
 - [2.1 Overall study methodology](#)
 - [2.2 Research talk](#)
 - [2.3 Contextualizing recreational drug use talk](#)
- [3. Drug Talk: Positions and Reflections](#)
 - [3.1 Morten & Marit](#)
 - [3.2 Noah](#)
 - [3.3 Paul](#)
 - [3.4 Self-observation as a transformative potential](#)
- [4. Concluding Remarks](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

Whether the interviewer be a talk show host inviting confidences from a celebrity, an Oprah Winfrey soliciting personal testimony that can be shared with the audience, or a researcher interrogating an informant, the responses are always likely to be couched in an idiom that reflects prior narration. (ATKINSON & SILVERMAN, 1997. p.314)

Almost all topics that sociologists study, at least those that have some relation to the real world around us, are seen by society as morality plays and we shall find ourselves, willy-nilly, taking part in those plays on one side or the other. (BECKER, 1967, p.245)

1. Introduction

"I think all this talking to you-, I don't know, I have suddenly started to think about these things in new ways."

This article discusses the use and effects of repeated research conversations in the context of illicit drug research. It makes use of three cases drawn from a study of recreational drug use among young adults in Norway. The first tells of Morten and Marit¹, an Oslo couple in their mid-twenties, and my concern that, as our fieldwork relationship progressed, our conversations provided an arena within which their drug use could be justified, thereby contributing to or sustaining it in part. In the second case, I present the story of Noah, a 28 year-old man with a self-described addiction to cannabis, cocaine and amphetamine, and the reflections he offered on his experience of research participation and, in particular, his fantasy about staging a cannabis session with me, the researcher, upon fieldwork completion. The third case deals with Paul, a temporary worker in his early twenties and the speaker behind the opening quote above. He made this comment while describing the possible reasons behind a self-identified radical change in thinking about illicit drug use and decision to reduce his own. [1]

The three cases suggest that research conversations do more than meet the research objective of generating representations of the lives of those who participate in them and thus cannot be understood as purely documentary practices. Rather, by focusing on the ethnographic listener as a particular kind of interlocutor in the context of research on morally and legally sanctioned practices, and by scrutinizing the aspects of fieldwork practice that contribute, I suggest that these conversations provide a space for articulating motives, rationales and justifications, thereby allowing reflection in both senses of the word—thinking

¹ All personal names of participating individuals that appear in this article have been replaced by pseudonyms.

over and mirroring. Furthermore, they promote a process of thinking in the presence of another and, moreover, an "other," thus mobilizing a complex process of mirroring the self in the other and as an other to oneself. In this process, understandings of the self and the other are dynamically negotiated, under the structuring influence of the research conversation's subject matter and its culturally afforded meanings, as well as the responses of the other. [2]

In order to make this argument, the article is divided into two parts. In the first part, I present the focus and methodology of the recreational drug use study, which is the primary basis for the propositions made. In doing so, I aim to elucidate the normative positions on drug use at play, both in how I made the study operational and in the self-narrations it gave rise to as fieldwork progressed. To do so, I situate these narrations and the research methodologies that served to produce them in relation to, firstly, the meanings of drugs in contemporary Norwegian public discourse and, secondly, the descriptions of the interview society as a modality of post-traditional, reflexive society (ATKINSON & SILVERMAN, 1997; BAUMAN, 2001; DENZIN, 2001; GIDDENS, 1994; GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2001). In the second part, I attend specifically to what research conversations may involve in a research context here described through the investigation of the three cases. [3]

I conclude by relating the interpretation of what went on in the research relationships reflected in these cases to MIDDELTHON's (2005) discussion of the unanticipated effects that resulted from a set of harm reduction projects in Norway in the late 1980s. [4]

Finally, although I argue that the morally and legally sanctioned characteristics of drug use critically shape the phenomena presented by my cases, the argument may also be of relevance to the practice of ethnographic research interviewing in other thematic fields, and it addresses dimensions of interview effects relevant throughout conversation-based research in general (cf. e.g. ATKINSON & SILVERMAN, 1997; DECORTE, 2000; FONTANA, 2001; GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2003; MIDDELTHON, 2001; MISHLER, 1996 [1986]). [5]

2. Talk and Subjects in Drug Research

In 2004, I embarked on a study of illicit substance use among young adults in Norway. The study was developed in response to statistical evidence that illicit drug use had increased steadily throughout the 1990s, among both teenagers and young adults (SIRUS, 2002). Although Norwegian research on the phenomenon was scarce, international research had identified a clear association between increases in drug use and the rise of new subcultural identity formations related to techno and rave culture (ASHTON, 1996; GRIMSHEI, 2000; HÅKERUD, 2001; KOHN, 1992; MOSHUUS, ROSSOW & VESTEL, 2002; PEDERSEN & SKRONDAL, 1999; REYNOLDS, 1999; SHINER & NEWBURN, 1997). At the same time, the broad mainstreaming and commercialization of these youth cultural phenomena was, alongside an already marked normalization of cannabis, seen to normalize additional illicit drugs—ecstasy, in particular, but

also amphetamine—beyond the cultural elites of new sub cultures and into the mainstream cultures of "normal, resourceful youth" without "drug user" identities (HÅKERUD, 2001; HUSEBYE, 2002; MOSHUUS et al., 2002). The available evidence seemed to confirm reports from other countries that the trend involved people living otherwise normal lives, for whom drug use was pharmacologically informed, restricted to specific purposes and settings, and persistent beyond teenage experimentation (DUFF, 2004; McDERMOTT & MATTHEWS, 1997; MUGFORD, 1991). Several commentators noted an apparent ethics of responsibility that imbued the individual with the prerogative to decide for him- or herself rather than simply adopting the official distinction between legitimate and illegitimate drug pursuits, as long as he or she was in control of his or her drug use (ASHTON, 1996; HUSEBYE, 2002; KOHN, 1992; MOSHUUS et al., 2002; REYNOLDS, 1999; SHINER & NEWBURN, 1997). [6]

2.1 Overall study methodology

The study aimed at exploring recreational drug users' perspectives on their own practices.² Fieldwork started by snowballing prior research contacts in Oslo and posting research participation invitations on three Norwegian Internet forums dedicated to the use of psychoactive substances. The Internet forums constituted field locales in their own right, as sites for verbal interaction about drugs and drug use. Furthermore, because they partly overlapped with social networks that met face to face, they enabled, once my presence as a researcher was accepted among core forum members, a broad variety of interactions with forum members who responded to my research participation invitation. [7]

With the descriptions of normalization above as my point of departure, and yet with a recognition that my research explored criminalized practices, I expected to be met with distrust and markedly strategic self-representations. For this reason, and because I also wished to understand how patterns of thinking about and practices of drug use might vary and change over time, I prioritized close, on-going contact with a limited group of participants. As fieldwork progressed, the primary activities came to focus on closely following two extended groups of friends over a 12-14 month period. This involved numerous interviews and encounters, both face-to-face and electronically, pursued with the intention of maximizing variation in the limited sample. One network consisted of "veterans" from the initial underground rave scene; the other did not identify with a particular subculture. Several different drugs were used in both networks, including, in addition to cannabis, ecstasy, cocaine and amphetamine, as well as, though in one of the networks more prominently than in the other, natural and synthetic hallucinogens (LSD, mushrooms, herbs and other plants and extracts), referred to by Norwegian users as *psychedelia*. Some members had experimented with and used a number of different drugs, some with frequent use patterns. Others had used only one or two substances and on rare occasions only. Both networks, however, included individuals with little illegal substance experience and who did not use at all during the fieldwork period. None of the study participants had

2 Fieldwork was conducted between August 2004 and January 2006 and funded by the Research Council of Norway (Project 154517).

injected any substances. Indeed, injecting drug use is, in the Norwegian setting, associated with dysfunctional and impairing heroin addiction, destitution, homelessness and crime—a drug culture regarded in popular discourse, throughout research, and among this study's participants as starkly contrasting the recreational drug use pursued by this study's participants. [8]

The two networks involved 13 core participants. In addition to the repeated formal and informal meetings and conversations with the core participants, fieldwork involved single in-depth interviews with 33 individual participants (from 19 to 45 years of age and only six of whom were women), recruited from web forums or real-life public arenas such as pubs and in-door and outdoor parties and events. I furthermore also interviewed individuals who were not themselves recreational drug users or involved in the social networks, but in other positions of strategic relevance to the research topic (a police officer, a defense lawyer, a gym owner, a former DJ and record label owner, two teachers, a journalist, a drug prevention worker and volunteer), who enabled an exploration of diverse and varied perspectives on recreational drug. Fieldwork consisted also of scrutinizing textual and audio-visual materials of many sorts, including music, films, magazines and TV shows, and systematic monitoring of selected news and pop cultural media pursued to facilitate the contextualization of participant practices and accounts in on-going public and media discourses. This strategy also included participation in meetings and conferences of rehabilitation workers, drug-related NGO meetings, and other public and semi-public events. [9]

I never hid or attempted to hide my presence as a researcher in these networks. Contrary to my expectations, I met little hesitation over my fieldwork activity. Instead, the presentation of the study as an exploratory one aimed at the interpretation of recreational drug users' own views (posted in the forums where it was also discussed), was welcomed by individuals in these settings as what they saw as a rare case of unbiased research interest in a neglected dimension of drug use in general. Moreover, I was always present upon invitation from one or more of the network members, who hence vouched for me. This was generally also the case in the chains of recruitment that ensued. The acceptance granted by one participant seemed often to be simply adopted by the next, and the trust needed to develop rapport often seemed to be an extension of the trust granted by the first individual in the chain of referrals. [10]

It was made clear that my research activities would not include drug taking, and being a researcher served, in most cases, as a sufficient cause for this. On one of the Internet forums, the forum members discussed this particular issue and several voiced the opinion that a true understanding of psychedelic drug use would require firsthand experience with the psychotropic effects of these substances. "We have to admit," wrote one participant in the debate, "the study would lose credibility in the eyes of many people if [name of researcher] were to come out with personal experience."³ He continued:

3 All quotes from study participants' statements I translated from the original Norwegian into English.

"Everybody knows that a person who has tried drugs and describes the experience positively has been brainwashed by the drug. It'll be the drug speaking. In other words, you can't be objective if you know what you are talking about [...]. It's unfortunate, but objectivity is often interpreted to mean you have to distance yourself from what you study and look at it from the outside. In sociological studies such as the one we are discussing here, this is often a handicap and a known problem (the danger of ethnocentrism). He would probably never be given license to legally try psychedelics in Norway, which I think is a pity since his study will examine user motivations without fully understanding them. But then, where should the line be drawn, really? Would he have to try heroin to understand heroin addicts?" (Quoted from a discussion thread in an Internet discussion group) [11]

This line of argument seemed sufficient to end the debate, and the issue was not discussed again. Thus, by such a negotiated agreement, I came to inhabit a role of simultaneous acceptance and outsider status, insider by assumption and outsider with license. My perspective was taken to be sympathetic. At the same time, the nature and basis of that sympathy was somewhat taboo, since it might have meant exposing any personal drug experience that I might have had that served as a basis for that sympathy. I shall discuss below the unfolding expectations about my role and practice as a researcher that followed from this diffuse adoption by research participants. [12]

2.2 Research talk

Fieldwork produced empirical material based on participant observation in various electronically mediated and face-to-face settings, including parties and other events and involving individual contact with an extensive number of recreational drug users. Nonetheless, conversations initiated by me, or by the participant with the explicit objective of serving the purpose of research, constitute the bulk and cornerstone of the material. At the center of these conversations were the repeated interviews conducted with the thirteen members of the two networks over the full 15-month fieldwork period. [13]

Conversations, situated talk between positioned interlocutors, are central to qualitative research, from interview research to ethnographic studies in fieldwork settings over long periods of time. Whatever methodological approach, all qualitative researchers engage in conversation (FONTANA, 2001; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1995 [1983]; HARVEY, 1987; MILLER & DINGWALL, 1997; MOERMAN, 1988; SILVERMAN, 1997). Yet, there is little agreement as to what research conversations are considered as epistemological (knowledge-producing) practices. Are research conversations simply documentary practices in which, if conducted well, respondents represent to the researcher a reality that is in some sense external to the research conversation, for the researcher to record as faithfully and "thickly" as possible (McCRACKEN, 1988)? Are they opportunities for self-disclosure, enabled by a methodologically cultivated "intimacy of feeling" (JOHNSON, 2001), nurtured by the application of the "relational rules" of close kin and friends? Do they elicit the performance of favored selves (GOFFMAN, 1959), staged by respondents within the available

cultural scripts (cf. DAVIES, 1997)? With regard to the latter, the criminalized status of the topic under scrutiny would seem to further complicate the picture, since the wider normative framework can be expected to accentuate research participants' desire to stage particular versions of self and focus on particular dimensions of experience amid opposed and morally charged, circulating narratives of drug use and drug users (DAVIES, 1997; MARTIN & STENNER, 2004; MONAGHAN, 2002; WEINSTEIN, 1980). [14]

It is a persistent assumption in much qualitative research that research participants' understandings remain and should remain unaffected by the research participation:

"While most researchers acknowledge the interactional character of the interview, the technical literature on interviewing stresses the need to keep that interaction strictly in check. Guides to interviewing [...] are primarily concerned with maximizing the flow of valid, reliable information while minimizing distortions of what the respondent knows" (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1997, p.67). [15]

Such a "realist" methodological position has been said to characterize much qualitative drug research (MARTIN & STENNER, 2004; for similar assertions cf. also BOURGOIS, 1999; RHODES & MOORE, 2001). It can be and has been challenged from several angles. As pointed out by DENZIN, to conduct research is to act in a social world (1989 [1970]). To ethnographers, the point may seem redundant; the participatory approach of traditional anthropology explicitly aims at learning by immersion in social life, through the assumption of locally acceptable (and methodologically suitable) social roles (BERNARD, 1994; GOFFMAN, 1989; HAMMERSLEY & ATKINSON, 1995 [1983]). Nevertheless, ethnographers of drug use have paid scant attention to the ways in which conducting research *conversations* can be seen as involving similar action in social worlds. [16]

In my discussion here, I side with the view that the meanings articulated in research conversations are not straightforward, oral reports of actions, norms, or representations. They are special instances of social interaction—instances in which meanings take shape in dialogue between parties that mutually contribute to the sense being made (HOLSTEIN & GUBRIUM, 1997; MISHLER, 1996 [1986]). As HOLSTEIN and GUBRIUM argue, then, it is misguided to meet the inevitably interactional character of research conversations with a strategy of "keeping that interaction strictly in check" (1997, p.67). Rather, the interaction should be acknowledged and scrutinized. In repeated research interviews, one aspect of this scrutiny involves examining the shifts that unfold in discourse (DENZIN, 1989 [1970]; SILVERMAN, 1973). Among them are shifts that relate to the positions taken by participants in conversation. [17]

Discourse may involve the play of (numerous) positions for subjects to identify themselves and others with, distance themselves and others from, and so on. Although any conversation requires the identification of subject positions from which to talk, listen, pose questions and respond, these positions may not be clear from the beginning and their presence and identification are matters of

negotiation between the parties. Moreover, although these subject positions are relative to the specific dialogue, they are circumscribed by the cultural repertoire of available positions. That repertoire is, in any specific dialogue, likely to be limited to inclusion of but a select set of positions, structured by the topic of conversation and the social statuses conjured up by that topic. Thus, for instance, the positions available to the drug researcher will be partially determined by the circulating cultural representations of the nature and characteristics of drug research and those who conduct such research. *Vice versa*, the circulating images of a drug user will limit the positions available to the participant. ⁴ [18]

The view adopted here is that conversational positions are neither given nor singular nor necessarily stable, but negotiated through the practice of talking (COLAPIETRO, 1999; DAVIES & HARRÉ, 1990).⁵ The main proposition in this article is that the effects of conversations described here arise in the confrontation between the *specific, non-judgmental characteristic of ethnographic practice* on the one hand and the *(criminalized) nature of illicit drugs as a social and cultural terrain* on the other. In and through this confrontation, an arena is created for the deployment and play of drug-related subject positions; that is, it makes for a display involving cultural repertoires pertaining to drug use and the positions available to persons as users, non-users, and researchers. The possibility that changes may occur in research participants is contingent, I shall argue, upon the dynamic play of such positions in the reflective space created by research practice. The peculiar qualities that characterize this space arise precisely out of their *extra-ordinary* nature; they involve occasions for reflection that *differ* from those afforded in the normal everyday. [19]

2.3 Contextualizing recreational drug use talk

In my approach to the study of recreational drug use, the available descriptions of the phenomenon at hand served to position it tensely between legal and moral sanctions, medicalizing tendencies, and a general political ethics of individual independence and freedom to choose. Two broad contextualizations were suggested by these descriptions. First, the pharmacological rationality involved seemed to defy established boundaries between illicit drugs and prescription psychotropic medicine. This tendency was accentuated by indications of an increased general acceptance of modifying of one's own condition, experience, capacity or performance through biochemical means (GRAY, 2001), evidenced by the continuous introduction and increasing prescription of new medications for hitherto unmedicated behavioral and emotional disturbances (HEALY, 1997; NORSK MEDISINALDEPOT, 2001; PETRYNA, LAKOFF & KLEINMAN, 2006;

4 It is important, however, that the number and composition of such positions or representations are structured by the topic of conversation. I therefore side with the view that the topic of conversation is not external to the relationship of the conversation but must rather be seen as "a third" in discourse, structuring the relation between interlocutors (MIDDELTHON, 2001, 2006).

5 "Positioning," state DAVIES and HARRÉ, "is largely a conversational phenomenon" (1990, p.45). Their argument is part of a social psychology of selfhood that recognizes "the force of 'discursive practices', the ways in which people are positioned through those practices and the way in which the individual's 'subjectivity' is generated through learning and use of certain discursive practices" (p.43) These practices, however, take place in a specific cultural and historical environment.

WHO, 2001), with contingent "pharmaceutical leakage" into the illicit drug scene (LOVELL, 2006)⁶. The reported increase in the use of performance enhancement in physical as well as intellectual pursuits adds to this tendency (OLSEN, 2004; VATNE, 2005), as does the general representation of food and everyday dietary practices in terms of their pharmacological and biochemical properties (MIDDELTHON, 2006).⁷ [20]

Secondly, there were indications that substances lumped together in Norwegian officialdom as "narcotics" were being read by young drug users through a pharmacological lens as biomedical or (in the case of non-synthetic substances) naturally afforded resources, placed at the disposal of users who reserved for themselves the right to evaluate their worth and safety (HUSEBYE, 2002). Furthermore, in a report on party drugs and youth culture, MOSHUUS and colleagues stated that,

"different forms of liberalization, resistance to limitations on the individual's freedom, the pursuit of pleasure, the personal 'kick' and the increasing requirement that individuals create their own identity must be seen as significant components of the socio-psychological climate in which the use of new drugs take place" (2002, p.11). [21]

Descriptions such as this evoked an ethics of taking one's own chances that seemed to resonate well with descriptions of risk management as the predominant paradigm of selfhood, as well as citizenship, in the age of preventive medicine (ERICSON & DOYLE, 2003; PETERSEN & LUPTON, 1996). One dimension of this imagery is the injunction against uncritically adopting a stance taken and advocated by others. Rather, one should "face one's limits," put them to the test, and, through such practices, find excitement and exhilaration (FURLONG & CARTMEL, 2006; MUGFORD, 1991). This invitation to challenge one's limits has its correlate in a preoccupation with one's body as a site for the application of medical knowledge and technology (including pharmacological technologies), in order to make adjustments and optimizations (CHRYSANTHOU, 2002; DUMIT, 2002). [22]

In sum, these factors seem to frame recreational drug use *in conjunction with*, rather than opposition to, broader societal and cultural developments, as a site where the ideas and practices of autonomy and (self-) control are negotiated. This evokes a contrast to research on illicit drug use practiced in contexts of marginalization. The question also arises as to what kind of a "space for talking"

6 F.e., Ritalin prescribed to persons diagnosed with ADHD, Methadone used by patients enrolled in replacement therapy for heroin addiction, and common tranquilizers like Rohypnol and other benzodiazepines are among the medications most frequently leaked from the legitimate realm of prescribed use into the illegal sale and trade of drugs in Norway.

7 With regard to "old," street-based illicit drug use, the Norwegian public discourse has been dominated, since 2000, by the full-scale introduction of substitution therapy as a general, nationwide program for heroin users, a mode of drug rehabilitation that was, until recently, offered on a very limited scale in Norway. It has heralded the general medicalization of injecting drug use and was paralleled by an outpour of newfound public sentiments in defense of street-based injecting drug users, catalyzed, perhaps, by the entry of Nini STOLTENBERG, a rehabilitated, former heroin addict whose father and brother are both prominent politicians, on the public scene as a vocal and articulate critic of drug policy.

was thereby created by my research among young adult, illicit drug users. Which positions did that space invite and allow for, for the participants and for the researcher? [23]

3. Drug Talk: Positions and Reflections

One particularly vexing context in which to consider conversational research practices is provided by the contemporary sociological description of late-modern societies as reflexive "interview societies" (ATKINSON & SILVERMAN, 1997; GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2001). In the absence of traditional identifying vectors of belonging and identity, such as place, work and kinship, identity and subjectivity involve the active pursuit of (self-) interrogation and self-reflection (GIDDENS, 1991). Self-reflexive conversations, in late modernity, are self-constitutive practices and the interview, in ATKINSON and SILVERMAN's words, is a "prime technique for the affirmation of selves" (1997, p.315) or, to paraphrase FONTANA, the very "stuff of life" (2001, p.161) through which individuals come to understand themselves as individuals (cf. DENZIN, 2001; GUBRIUM & HOLSTEIN, 2001). [24]

In the context of research on illicit drug use, these descriptions have unsettling implications. While doing fieldwork among young adult drug users, I had avoided the term "interview" because I wanted to emphasize the exploratory nature of my project and reduce the connotations of reporting and fact-finding. Instead, all of the core study participants and I had referred to the encounters occasioned by my research interest as "conversations." Yet, in practice, many such conversations were conducted as what are conventionally referred to as in-depth research interviews, as indeed was expected by participants based on their pre-understanding of what research participation would entail (especially the repeated encounters with those I refer to above as the core informants, recruited from two social networks and followed over the full fieldwork period). This exploration focused on a wide array of topics. My ambition was, in an ethnographic fashion, to engage in exploratory, dialogic exchange in pursuit of loops and connections that made sense from the participants' perspectives. Yet, participants knew that, ultimately, "this was about drugs." The unavoidable presence of this topic suggested a cultural terrain for narrations—a repertoire of culturally available "economies of plot development" (COLAPIETRO, 1993, pp.5-6), by means of which one may discern acceptable and unacceptable roles and distinguish between stories that will be considered sound and acceptable in the cultural context and those that are likely to be rejected or condemned. [25]

In pursuit of insider perspectives, ethnographers routinely deploy conversational techniques that aim to free research participants of constraints related to the fear of being judged. These are practices that affirm, ask for the purpose of clarification, and explore with genuine interest, but avoid normative evaluation (although the researcher may hold such a judgment). In the context of research on recreational drug use, these practices combine to make the researcher a slippery interlocutor, since they signal a position towards illicit drug use for which there is no readily available and normatively acceptable cultural category: the

position of not taking a stand. As my fieldwork unfolded, I began to ponder the possibility that the research encounter, too, could be, function as, or become a site for the shaping and enabling of particular, political subjectivities, and in unknown ways. I turn now to the cases involving Morten and Marit, Noah, and Paul to explore the possibility of such a constitutive function in the research conversations. Albeit in different ways and at various points in our research relationships, these were the three cases that alerted me to the possibility that my research practice was implicated in and potentially contributing to changes in their understandings of and engagements with the very subject matter of the research, and in ways I did not anticipate or initially understand. [26]

3.1 Morten & Marit

Morten was twenty-four when we first met. My acquaintance with him had begun when he responded to my web forum invitation. In his first e-mail, he presented himself as a confident but modest user of a variety of illegal drugs, in a social milieu in which drug use ranged, he said, from abstinence to the limited recreational use that he felt characterized his own practice. But, there had also been a few cases in which people he knew had progressed into heavier drug use and eventually grave personal problems. Following an introductory encounter in a café in Oslo, we were in touch regularly over the next twelve months, meeting to talk at public places such as cafés, or in the flat where he lived with his girlfriend, Marit. Sometimes, Morten and I met alone and, on other occasions, Marit took part. Over the course of several encounters, an image of Morten as the epitome of a recreational, young adult drug user emerged. Considered, knowledgeable, measured, risk-averse and disdainful of reckless experimentation, he seemed bent on critically exploring the range of psychotropic drugs, trusting in his capacity to do so without harm, or at least without harm that he could not accommodate. [27]

This image emerged gradually from a combination of characterizations, recollections, biographical accounts, and other means—in essence, the "stuff" of qualitative, open-ended, in-depth, and exploratory interview conversations. In terms of conventional methodological understandings, it was one provided by Morten in response to my queries, reflecting a more or less true state of affairs. While any researcher will have to interpret such accounts with a view to credibility, accuracy, etc. I could not help but feel, as time passed, that such a preoccupation with assessing truth claims missed something important, and something disturbing as well. Morten expressed, in several ways, that he enjoyed these conversations. He voiced fascination with the entire topic of psychotropic drugs and altered consciousness, and also enthusiasm about being "asked to talk about it by an open-minded researcher," which, it seemed, he took as an extension of his general, reflexive project organized around psychoactive substances. [28]

According to Morten and Marit, we did not discuss topics that were not already frequent topics of discussion among them and their friends. However, they said they were rarely as focused as during our conversations and, also, that there was

a new element by virtue of my presence. Following a particularly engaged conversation one evening in the park, for which Morten and Marit had showed up touting a blanket and bottle of wine, I started to wonder about the status of our conversations. If they had become special occasions to reflect upon their illicit drug use, what role did these conversations play in Morten and Marit's engagement with drugs? Could it be that the image of control and considered recreation was, to some extent, also a product of these encounters, or that the conversations had come to play a role in somehow sustaining such an image? With ZINBERG (1984) and his partial attribution of the very capacity of control to the social meanings that frame drug use in mind, I even wondered if conversations such as these could be part of the apparatus that sustained, not only their image, but also their practice (cf. MUGFORD, 1991). Did they not involve an authoritative ear—regardless of personal qualifications and skills, as a university researcher funded by the research council, I did represent officialdom—lending itself to and thereby sanctioning, in some way, Morten and Marit's narrations? [29]

In the Internet forum debate referred to previously, the fact that the study was presented without normative judgment on drug use was interpreted as suggesting the possibility that I was secretly or implicitly accommodating of the practice. I came to regard this as an unspoken possibility in my relationships with many participants and to believe that an ambiguity surrounding the two different interpretations of my (research) behavior was, in some sense, inherent in the project as such. The one interpretation (the one I held), saw my role as one of facilitating articulation through interest, listening without prejudice, and reinforcing Morten, Marit and other participants' talking with signs that indicated my understanding of what they were saying. The other interpretation, the one that loomed before me and, I feared, others too (including the research participants), interpreted the same set of gestures and communicational signs of positioning as expressions of endorsing and condoning the actions described. [30]

The two interpretations may not be easily disentangled. The problem is akin to the criticism leveled at harm reduction policies as "surrender to wrongdoing" (SAUNDERS, 1995, p.ii; cf. SKRETTING, 2006), and the similar political nervousness about "signal effects" of harm reduction interventions, such as public injection rooms (cf. KLEINIG, 2008). That is, the concern that I discovered in myself had its root in the general, cultural assumption that to not pass judgment could function as positively sanctioning the issue at hand. But, a crude opposition between the two interpretations does not adequately represent what transpired as fieldwork relations developed. I turn to the case of Noah to demonstrate this. [31]

3.2 Noah

Noah was an acquaintance of a research participant and was referred into the study on account of his formerly extensive use of a range of illegal drugs. Over a period of 15 months, we met repeatedly, mostly in his flat. When we first met, he was twenty-seven years old and had recently started university studies, which he

presented as a decision, at long last, to break away from a destructive pattern of drug abuse. His understanding of this abuse placed it at the end of a gradual progression from an early introduction to glue sniffing and cannabis at the age of thirteen to the deeply unsettling experiences as a teenager that turned him into an "angry, frustrated and dead scared" 16-year-old, seeking out environments and practices that would make him feel "tough and unconquerable" and give off an impression of the same. At the time he decided to quit, cannabis, amphetamines and cocaine had come to fill his life, taking him from one high to the next and remedying the afterlife of one drug with the pleasure of another. He explained that he was starting to feel a bodily and emotional wear and knew that he "had to do something about it" because "it was just a matter of time." [32]

Noah was simultaneously an ethnographer's dream and a proper challenge. Rhetorically gifted and blessed with an immense memory for details, our conversations alternated between biographical accounts, pointed, captivating and often humorous anecdotes, and solemn, even sermonic, reflections on what he considered to be the nature (and power) of addiction, the self-delusion of ravers and other self-made masters of new and old drugs, and the futile hypocrisy of "the drug free society" as the persistent objective of Norwegian drug policy. His fervent rejection of recreational drug use was fueled by his engagement in a deep re-examination of his own experiences. In our conversations, he drew on the 12-step philosophy of dependence and transformation originating in the Alcoholics/Narcotics Anonymous movement, as well as a general interest and familiarity with the psychology of drug use and addiction, but against the irrefutable background of his personal experience. [33]

Following a long session in which we had primarily talked about research methods, at Noah's request in preparation for his pending exam, Noah sent an e-mail in which he "confessed" that he had entertained a fantasy for some time that involved me. In the fantasy, he envisaged himself staging a cannabis session for the two of us once my study had formally ended. It was an idea that had matured in him, he said, in which he would be my guide to the true nature of what we had been talking about:

"I justified this to myself by visualizing that once the project and distance and objectivity and all of that was over, you needed a break. The danger of loosing your own standpoint would then be over, right? It's not okay for an anthropologist to stick a bone through his nose to study the Hottentots, but it can't hurt to go back once the grading is done, and participate in a sacrificial ritual or something, can it? I have had a vague idea about what my motives were for envisaging all this. And after yesterday I finally realized it. I was dancing with the Cannabis witch! I had found a way to give *myself* a break, with the best justification possible, that I returned to the joint for the sake of somebody else!" [34]

After fieldwork had stopped, we kept a sporadic correspondence, and, while preparing this article, I contacted Noah again to discuss the fantasy with him. I explained that, in our conversations, I had sometimes felt as though my mode of asking, listening, and talking had produced a kind of ambiguity, as if there were

ghosts in the room, ghosts that were expected to condemn or condone. In a series of e-mails that followed, Noah told me he had been hesitant to reread the letter he had written containing the cannabis scenario. When he finally did, he wrote:

"I realize that I smile a little with embarrassment over what I wrote. [The letter] has an aggressive and desperate tone [...] It was a difficult period. You talk now of ghosts that were present in the room during interviews, and about expectations that are not being met. I recall how I intuitively saw through your pretension of ignorance. What's more, I had learned from the qualitative methods curriculum that the researcher always has a little hidden agenda for what he's really looking for. -That there is always something that the project proposal doesn't make fully explicit, and that was never spoken out loud during the interview period. *That was one of the ghosts.*" [35]

In another passage, commenting on my reference to the ethnographic practice of non-judgmental listening and suspension of disbelief, Noah states:

"It's exciting to read about this in your own words, that you as a researcher consciously adopted an assumed ignorance and refrained from appearing judgmental to bring out the informants' own thoughts about their abuse." [36]

At first I was taken aback by the description. I never consciously pretended to be ignorant; indeed, I felt that *I was*. Neither did I present a different research agenda to Noah or to other participants than I did to colleagues, funders or, indeed, to myself. When I indicated as much in our correspondence, Noah was a little annoyed with my crude reading. His point was not to suggest that I was hiding a true self, but to point to our very different roles in the research encounter, which means, among other things, that the researcher's personal experiences have a wholly different status in conversation from those of the participant. He responded: "Perhaps I have not been precise enough—and 'hidden agenda' was a poor choice of words—but I think there are obvious and necessary reasons for not knowing exactly where the researcher stands." [37]

However, if this ambiguity was unnerving, he suggested that I might be more worried by it than he was:

"When I think back about the time when we did those interviews, I remember that I enjoyed very much having an audience. An appreciative listener who accepted what I said. I was attending the 12-step group at the time and, a little later, was seeing a therapist, and I remember I liked to say that 'I now have an entire staff working on my case' [...] But we talked about power too, as we went along. About how the power relationship changed during the work that we did. I remember that I felt that it was reassuring, if not comforting, to go through these conversations. I was in the middle of a hard time with a lot to work through and a feeling of powerlessness. It was good to have that, it was like I had a kind of forum, a forum where I could play a little rough. [...] Again, the criticism that failed to appear, it led to a situation where, instead, I was confronted with myself. That I had thought about smoking again, especially with you to legitimize it, may have been an attempt to find a way to resolve that

powerlessness. In addition, I could continue my plan to play rough with you. After all, I was the one with the experience." [38]

The exchange led me to reflect on how little I understood the potential effects of my ethnographic practice and the naivety of thinking that the practices of listening and believing could be neutral ones. In drug use, no such position is readily available. My point is not to argue against naive assumptions of fieldwork neutrality, a notion few ethnographers would of course entertain, but to scrutinize *how* ethnographic practices may nonetheless signify positional *ambiguity* and *examine particular consequences thereof*, in the unique context of recreational drug use research. For this purpose, this last passage points to the question of how the refusal to be positioned works over time. [39]

In Noah's case, his fantasy seemed to represent a safe way to resolve what was otherwise a form of stalemate, indicated by his experience of being confronted by himself in a position of intermediacy—at a threshold, which is also the metaphor of the Norwegian phrase he uses, which literally means "to meet myself in the doorway" (cf. his reference to the fantasy as an imaginary aid in the resolution of powerlessness). It was a fantasy, not a plan—an important distinction that I did not fully recognize and appreciate, but which he politely pointed out when he spoke of his "motives for *envisaging* all this" (as opposed to his "motives for *planning* all this"). In the imagined scenario, the researcher assumes the position of an other against which other positions may be (imaginarily) played out. In Paul's case, quoted in the opening of this article and to which I now turn, a similar process of positional stalemate, or suspension/void, seems to have been involved when he, somewhat surprised, attributed a change in both outlook and drug taking practice as an effect partially generated by research conversations. [40]

3.3 Paul

"I think all this talking to you-, I don't know, I have suddenly started to think about these things in new ways." At the time he made this remark, about seven weeks had passed since he had abruptly decided to drastically reduce his use of illicit drugs. During this time, he still smoked cannabis but was no longer interested in experimenting with other drugs. Before this shift, drugs had, for some time, been a significant preoccupation for Paul. He had spent much of his leisure time studying psychedelic drug literature, had read and participated in web discussions on the use of psychotropic substances, and had experimented with several such drugs, including amphetamine, cocaine, ecstasy and, on a few occasions, psychedelic mushrooms. When I first got to know him, he was involved with a few friends in a carefully organized use of MDMA⁸ for the specific purpose of emotional exploration and personal development. At the time of his decision to abandon his drug use, Paul expressed disappointment with how this group application of MDMA had evolved. Two months later, however, he had come to

8 MDMA is the chemical name of the substance commonly referred to as ecstasy when used as a recreational drug. The substance was initially created as a therapeutic drug, considered useful in psychotherapy by inducing distinctive emotional and social effects, including positive basic mood, empathy, and reduced fear. When Paul talked about the particular modality of use described here, he used the term MDMA rather than ecstasy,

believe that what had occurred represented a more pervasive change in his general outlook and that this development was linked, in some sense, to our repeated research conversations. [41]

As with Morten and Marit, Paul had presented himself and his drug use, with considerable elaboration, as nuanced, controlled, and carefully planned.⁹ Following his decision to stop, however, he lumped it all together as an escapist fancy and self-obsession. As mentioned above, he initially attributed these developments to immediate factors pertaining to how his drug use had evolved. Among other things, he felt that the therapeutic effect of the MDMA practice had worn off, that drugs had come to consume too much of his time and resources, and that he needed to get on with other, more important, and, as he put it, "less self-centered things." With time, however, his reflections changed to include the possibility that research participation had something to do with it. To my question of how that may be, he responded:

"I don't really know why. Well, there is nothing new, really, but it is like my way of thinking has switched track, in a way. I don't know. Just to be talking about it in this different way from how I ordinarily speak about it." [42]

Paul was not the only participant who expressed that his research participation had given rise to reflections that were new or unexpected, although he was the only one to attribute a decision to drastically reduce his drug use to such effects. To discuss the possible dynamics that may be involved in accounting for it, I will make use of one of the exceptions to this lacuna. [43]

3.4 Self-observation as a transformative potential

Whereas action research traditions, and those of participatory action research in particular, have integral intervention effects among their defining characteristics (SELENER, 1997; cf. also COUPLAND et al., 2005), the possibility of unintended intervention effects in ordinary qualitative research conversations, as indicated by the cases I discuss here, has not been widely discussed in research on social problems.¹⁰ A consequence of the argument I make in this article is indeed to question the usefulness of entertaining a sharp distinction in this respect between action research and research not so defined. In order to complete the argument, I turn, in this final section, to a discussion of what I take to be a plausible account of how such effects arise. [44]

9 A comprehensive consideration of Paul's biography and drug using career is presented elsewhere (HILDEN, 2009).

10 For exceptions to this lacuna see for instance J. Bryan PAGE and colleagues' work on HIV prevention among drug users in Miami, where the issue of unintended interventional effects of interviewing about risky practices is noted by SINGER and BAER (2007, p. 58); see also STOPKA and colleagues' description of intervention effects of diary writing (STOPKA, SPRINGER, KHOSHNOOD, SHAW & SINGER, 2004, also discussed in SINGER & BAER, 2007). Another interesting exception (MIDDELTHON (2005) is discussed below. Cf. also the literature on motivational interviewing, which makes similar claims albeit within the framework of clinical psychology and based on theoretical perspectives that differ from the pragmatic semiotic and social behaviorist underpinnings that underpin the argument made here (MILLER, 1996). For this latter parallel, I gratefully acknowledge the suggestion by J. Bryan PAGE (pers. comm.).

In an article published in 2005, Anne-Lise MIDDELTHON describes the unintended outcomes of a set of HIV prevention projects in Norway in which sex workers and drug users were recruited to carry out harm reduction activities among their peers, in their locales. The projects provided initial training to drug users whose task was to then, regularly but at their own discretion, raise HIV-related issues in conversations with other drug users. Additionally, project participants produced information materials, organized seminars, and distributed condoms or injection equipment, based on their own assessments of local priorities and needs¹¹. In addition to wanting to alter situations of transmission risk, the explicit aim of the program was to "initiate and keep alive a discourse on HIV/AIDS among drug users" (p.424). [45]

MIDDELTHON's article focuses on a remarkable finding made by a life situation assessment conducted towards the end of the program. Participation in the projects did not require cessation of drug use, and reduction or cessation of drug use was not a project objective. Nevertheless, the life situation assessment found that a sizeable proportion of the drug users who had taken part reported that they had either entered a process of seeking treatment for the first time, were currently enrolled in such programs, had reduced their use of drugs, had assumed formal positions as students or employees, or, indeed, had stopped using drugs altogether. MIDDELTHON argues that, although no data are available to assess the long-term persistence of these changes, there is, nonetheless, a need to consider seriously these short-term effects and what may have given rise to them. [46]

At the center of MIDDELTHON's argument is the claim that the projects may have provided peculiar opportunities for role suspension and self-observation, and that the experience of this role alteration held transformative potential. Drug users ordinarily hold stigmatized and total identities, in GOFFMAN's sense (1963)—that is, one discrediting attribute overrides any other identifying traits of the individual so as to become his or her exhaustive characterization. In the prevention projects, however, being a drug user was the primary qualification (experiences as drug users here "constituted resources needed and wanted by society") (MIDDELTHON, 2005, p.431). Moreover, rather than being the (contemptible) *objects* possessed by the forces of drugs or subjected to correctional intervention, drug users were agents in harm reduction interaction and, hence, *subjects* in their own right and capacity. [47]

Yet, no available role existed in which one could perform as a drug using project worker, and the task thus seemed to require the combination of roles that were incompatible. Hence,

"[when] the drug users [...] entered their everyday scene with new tasks, a new room or space was created or established. In this room, their positions became ambiguous and twofold. They were both participants on the drug [...] scene and representatives of the health authorities: [...] drug users as well as HIV prevention workers" (p.429). [48]

¹¹ Projects were localized in several Norwegian towns and cities, with local variations in the details of the project, albeit not in the overall structure relevant to the argument here.

Thus, they came to simultaneously hold positions towards drug use that were hitherto incommensurable. But, rather than seeing this ambiguity as a negative confusion of roles, MIDDELTHON holds that it was the ambiguity occasioned by this "mutual suspension of established roles" (p.419) that provided the conditions for new self-observations. [49]

The argument is complex and cannot be adequately reproduced in this context, but three factors are especially important for the parallel I would like to draw to the recreational drug study. [50]

First, many drug rehabilitation programs are predicated on the premise that clients renounce their former lives. The fact that no such requirement was involved in the HIV prevention projects meant that self-observation could also be safely pursued. The argument builds on MEAD's view of the relationship of the self to the "social attitudes" of the group to which he or she belongs (the "generalized other"). In MEAD's terms, the attitudes and evaluations of society as a whole

"are brought within the individual's field of direct experience, and are included as elements in the structure and constitution of his self, in the same way that the attitudes of particular other individuals are; and the individual arrives at them, or succeeds in taking them, by means of further organizing, and then generalizing, the attitudes of particular other individuals" (1962 [1934], p.158). [51]

When the attitudes of the generalized other are positioned in moral contradistinction to the self, as with regard to stigmatized identities, then assuming the perspective of the generalized other presents itself as an option that requires self-renouncement. "If one's identity is total," MIDDELTHON points out, "such a condemnation [of drug use] is hard to undertake without negating or repudiating oneself" (2005, p.432). It is worth emphasizing that the generalized other, in MEAD's conception, is abstracted from concrete encounters with specific individuals and not a normative entity mythically held by society as a whole. Hence the expectation is that generalized social attitudes will indeed manifest themselves in particular encounters. In the HIV projects, MIDDELTHON argues, participants directed such an expectation towards "the projects" as such. Hence, participants emphasized how the unusual treatment that the projects subjected them to gave rise to "profound changes" in their outlooks and behaviors. [52]

Second, in the HIV prevention projects, lifestyle transformation occurred although the projects pursued no such objective. The harm reduction objectives of the projects constituted the primary objective pursued. It was a goal that was thus held in common, as a joint objective, for all participating in the projects, although drug users and social workers approached the problem from different positions from the outset and were hence not identical. It was nonetheless a goal that both parties could (and did) hold, and it served to fix their common attention away from the topic of drug users' status as drug using individuals. [53]

Third, the HIV projects meant that drug users entered their everyday arenas in the dual capacity of participants on the drug scene and health authority

representatives. This created a new room or space in which "their positions became ambiguous and twofold" (p.429). The space opened by this double positioning, in MIDDELTHON's account, is a reflexive space—a space in which participants could regard themselves as objects of consideration in new ways. The argument refers to the unfolding of a metaphorical mental and conceptual space, but arenas for playing out the double positioning in talk were, in MIDDELTHON's assessment, important for mediating the ambiguity: It was a pivotal practice in the project that drug users reported back to the project group, in which at least one social worker was a permanent member. Through these meetings, MIDDELTHON points out, drug users were engaged "as *participants, observers, and discussants* in relation to their own arena" (p.429). [54]

The story of Paul was unique in the recreational drug use study. The changes that occurred over his yearlong participation in conversations about his drug use persisted in the year that followed. It was not the case that he stopped taking drugs altogether, but the situation in which, in his own terms, drugs had become his most prominent interest, was altered. He took up other interests, among them political activism, and took drugs much less frequently and mostly at the initiative of others rather than his own, and for leisure—"no big deal." On the other hand, it was not unusual for participants to express that the repeated conversations about their drug use altered the way they reflected upon that practice. The changes involved, in most cases, a widened and more nuanced specter of available positions and a move towards a less assertive one. In several cases, participants were surprised to be quoted from our first conversations, and frequently with embarrassed amusement over what they now take as a "cock sure attitude." [55]

It should be made clear, nonetheless, that my objective is not to make a claim for personal transformation in this research project, but, rather, to point to possible parallels with the processes described by MIDDELTHON. The parallels relate to the expectations of the other in research relationships, the research practices that frustrate those expectations, and the subsequent effects on the scope of reflection in research conversations. At issue here, then, is not the presence of lasting shifts in self-identifying positions, but, rather, that the research encounter provides a possibility for thinking positions through and assuming them situationally, in specific conversations, since the barriers that normally prevent one from doing so are suspended. [56]

Among the specific factors that may have produced such an opportunity in the recreational drug study, the first relates to my obliqueness as an interlocutor. As I have described, the simultaneous presence of behavioral signs that seemed to contradict an expected disapproval seemed to frustrate an expectation of opposition. This expectation may have resulted, in part, from my status as a representative of society and, in part, from the general view of drug research, voiced by the discussant previously quoted, as generally biased. On the other hand, most participants also knew that proper research should not be biased; some were even in a position to make (formally) qualified arguments about the issue. This made for a situation in which, as a researcher, I was both positioned and non-positioned. An entirely clear and unambiguous researcher role did not

exist. In contrast to the *in situ* ideals of traditional ethnographic research, such an argument assumes that the space provided by the research interviews was neither a natural setting nor an entirely artificial context, but, rather, located productively "betwixt and between." Moreover, it proposes that it was this quality of being suspended in the intermediate state, or location, that provided opportunities for new modes of reflection. [57]

On the other hand, in this intermediate space, a new objective arose—namely, that of contributing to the scientific record. In my research participation invitations, I had emphasized the exploratory nature of the project on account of the fact that very little research had been done on recreational or controlled drug use in the Norwegian setting. Once I had been granted access and trust by one or two persons in a network of acquaintances, efforts were soon and frequently made to accommodate me and the study, and doing so was sometimes even presented as a civic duty and act of solidarity. People should enroll in the study, wrote one participant in an admonition posted in a web forum, "not to paint a rosy picture, but to straighten the record." Such a reference to the higher purpose of science, and a call to respect the consequences thereof for what could be expected of me as a researcher, was also evident in a discussion that arose as to the nature and limits of my participatory approaches (cf. the previous quote). This "project" of telling untold stories, I propose, performed a role similar to the risk reduction of the HIV projects. It served as an object upon which we could jointly fix our attention. Hence the heat was off "the drug user," who, thus cooled (i.e. left to not assume a position where self and drug use/drug problem conflated), could afford to go beyond the presentation of justifications. [58]

The main opportunity afforded was one of reflection: it involved an opportunity to think about (reflect) and mirror oneself (reflect) in the absence of a clearly (op-) positioned counterpart who would keep the justified drug user fixed. This made for a different sort of engagement also with that counterpart—one in which the anticipated threat never really appeared. The point may be illustrated with a study finding that puzzled me a little. Why did so many list movies such as "Requiem for a Dream" (ARONOFSKY, 2000), "Human Traffic" (KERRIGAN, 1999), and "Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas" (GILLIAM, 1998) as their favorite films? Were these not films, I thought, that reproduce traditional narratives of drug use as a steady and inevitable (albeit sometimes heroic) progression to personal destruction—a narrative that contrasted that of the controlled, recreational drug use they were embracing as the narrative of their own practice? [59]

With the Meadian argument adopted from MIDDELTHON here, an interpretation could be related to the possibility of assuming generalized moral positions. Discursive self-positioning involves complex combinations of hypothetical and real positions, and positions of self as well as others.¹² In a fashion similar to my methodologically motivated attempt to be non-judgmental, these movies may have provided opportunities for contemplating the general condemnation of their own practice but—since they were fictions—without realizing the self-condemning

¹² Referring also to MEAD, MONAGHAN makes a similar argument in his study of steroid users, when he points out that "social audiences [...] are both external and internal" (2002, p.696).

consequence or assuming threats to themselves. Given their involvement in a generally, morally sanctioned practice, they are fixed in a polarizing discourse. As such, the view attributed to the generalized other cannot be contemplated directly, as a view of themselves, without risking self-abasement. [60]

4. Concluding Remarks

Although most contemporary qualitative researchers are perhaps willing to accept that qualitative research unavoidably entails intervening in social worlds, we may not necessarily be sufficiently observant of the ways in which this is the case even in the specific practice of conducting repeated, ethnographic interviews and conversations. Moreover, these ways likely vary, not only with the research topic, but also with the historical and cultural contexts in which research is carried out. [61]

As qualitative researchers, we aim for a research position that will permit and enable the research participant to report experiences, demonstrate knowledge, express opinions, articulate doubts, and so forth. We also wish to develop a practice that will prevent us, as researchers, from inheriting from participants that which goes without saying—the blind spots of taken-for-granted assumptions upon which any social existence rests through processes of socialization and habituation. Our primary tools in pursuing these objectives may be said to be constituted by cultivating ignorance, methodologically suspending disbelief, and managing a balance between closeness and distance to "the field," which, in most cases, involves also a research etiquette that aims to balance cordial professionalism and personal involvement in our research relationships. Thus, the interventional aspects of research practice are not adequately dealt with (only) under the methodological rubrics of bias and distortion. Rather, they are the empirical fabric of ethnographic practice. This does not detract from the moral necessity to evaluate the nature of how our research practices act, but should lead us instead to monitor the process carefully. [62]

Acknowledgments

In working out the argument presented in this article I have benefited greatly from numerous discussions with colleague, friend and mentor, Anne-Lise MIDDELTHON, to whom I hereby declare my gratitude and extend my thanks. I wish to thank also Christina Marie Brux MBURU for her thoughtful and thorough language revisions in the final stage of completing the manuscript. Finally, valuable comments from the editors and anonymous reviewers of *FQS* are gratefully acknowledged.

References

- Aronofsky, Darren (Dir.) (2000). *Requiem for a dream*. Artisan Entertainment. [Movie]
- Ashton, Michael (1996). *Annual report on the state of the drug problems in the European Union*. Lisboa: European Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction.
- Atkinson, Paul & Silverman, David (1997). Kundera's immortality: The interview society and the invention of the self. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 3(3), 304-325.

- Bauman, Zygmunt (2001). *The individualized society*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Becker, Harold S. (1967). Whose side are we on? *Social Problems*, 14, 239-247.
- Bernard, H. Russel (1994). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Bourgois, Philippe (1999). Theory, method and power in drug and HIV-prevention research: A participant-observer's critique. *Substance Use and Misuse*, 34(14), 2155-2172.
- Chrysanthou, Marc (2002). Transparency and selfhood—utopia and the informed body. *Social Science & Medicine*, 54(3), 469-479.
- Colapietro, Vincent (1993). *Glossary of semiotics*. New York: Paragon House.
- Colapietro, Vincent (1999). Subject positions and positional subjectivity: A pragmatic approach. *Semiotische Berichte*, 1-4, 13-28.
- Coupland, Heidi; Maher, Lisa; Enriquez, Jarliene; Le, Khanh; Pacheco, Vanessa; Pham, Anh; Carroll, Clive; Cheguelman, Greg; Freeman, David; Robinson, Darren & Smith, Kerri (2005). Clients or colleagues? Reflections on the process of participatory action research with young injecting drug users. *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 16(3), 191-198.
- Davies, Bronwyn & Harré, Rom (1990). Positioning: The discursive production of selves. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, 20(1), 43-63.
- Davies, John B. (1997). *Drugspeak: The analysis of drug discourse*. Amsterdam: Harwood.
- Decorte, Tom (2000). A qualitative study of cocaine and crack use in Antwerp, Belgium: Some ethical issues. In Jane Fountain (Ed.), *Understanding and responding to drug use: The role of qualitative research. EMCDDA Scientific Monographs Series*, 4 (pp.285-290). Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities.
- [Denzin, Norman K.](#) (1989 [1970]). *The research act: A theoretical introduction to sociological methods* (3rd ed.). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Denzin, Norman K. (2001). The cinematic society and the reflexive interview. In Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research. Context and method* (pp.832-848). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Duff, Cameron (2004). Drug use as a "practice of the self": Is there any place for an "ethics of moderation" in contemporary drug policy? *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 15(5-6), 385-393.
- Dumit, Joseph (2002). Drugs for life. *Molecular Interventions*, 2(3), 124-127.
- Ericson, Richard V. & Doyle, Aaron (Eds.) (2003). *Risk and morality*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Fontana, Andrea (2001). Postmodern trends in interviewing. In Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research. Context and method* (pp.161-175). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Furlong, Andy & Cartmel, Fred (2006). *Young people and social change: Individualization and risk in late modernity*. Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Giddens, Anthony (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern age*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Giddens, Anthony (1994). Living in a post-traditional society. In Ulrich Beck, Anthony Giddens & Scott Lash (Eds.), *Reflexive modernization* (pp.56-109). Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Gilliam, Terry (Dir.) (1998). *Fear and loathing in Las Vegas*. Fear and Loathing LLC, Rhino Films, Shark Productions, Summit Entertainment & Universal Pictures. [Movie]
- Goffman, Erving (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin Books.
- Goffman, Erving (1963). *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Goffman, Erving (1989). On fieldwork. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 18, 123-132.
- Gray, Chris H. (2001). *Cyborg citizen: Politics in the posthuman age*. New York: Routledge.
- Grimshei, Christian (2000). Elektronisk ekstase [Electronic ecstasy]. *Uteseksjonens skriftserie [Report]*, 2(2). Oslo: Oslo kommune Rusmiddeletaten.
- Gubrium, Jaber F. & Holstein, James A. (1997). *The new language of qualitative method*. New York: Oxford University Press.

- Gubrium, Jaber F. & Holstein, James A. (2001). From the individual interview to the interview society. In Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research. Context and method* (pp.3-32). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Gubrium, Jaber F. & Holstein, James A. (Eds.) (2003). *Postmodern interviewing*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Håkerud, Ellinor (2001). *Ungdom og nye misbrukstrender* [Youth and new abuse trends]. Oslo: Oslo Kommune, Rusmiddelstaten.
- Hammersley, Michael & Atkinson, Paul (1995 [1983]). *Ethnography: Principles in practice* (2nd ed.). London: Routledge.
- Harvey, Lee (1987). *Myths of the Chicago School of Sociology*. Aldershot: Avebury.
- Healy, David (1997). *The antidepressant era*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hilden, Per K. (2009). MDMA use among a group of friends in Oslo, Norway, between self-development and social participation: Dilemmas of a pharmaceutical normalcy? *Contemporary Drug Problems*, 36(1-2), 137-174.
- Holstein, James A. & Gubrium, Jaber F. (1997). Active interviewing. In David Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice* (pp.113-129). London: Sage.
- Husebye, Tommy (2002). Fra margin til mainstream [From margin to mainstream]. *Rus og avhengighet*, 1, 20-22.
- Johnson, John M. (2001). In-depth interviewing. In Jaber F. Gubrium & James A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research. Context and method* (pp.103-119). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Kerrigan, Justin (Dir.) (1999). *Human traffic*. Irish Screen & Fruit Salad Films. [Movie]
- Kleinig, John (2008). The ethics of harm reduction. *Substance Use & Misuse*, 43(1), 1-16.
- Kohn, Marek (1992). *Dope girls: The birth of the British drug underground*. London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Lovell, Ann (2006). Addiction markets: The case of high-dose buprenorphine in France. In Arthur Kleinman, Andrew Lakoff & Adriana Petryna (Eds.), *Global pharmaceuticals: Ethics, markets, practices* (pp.136-170). Durham: Duke University Press.
- Martin, Anthea & Stenner, Paul (2004). Talking about drug use: What are we (and our participants) doing in qualitative research? *International Journal of Drug Policy*, 15(5-6), 395-405.
- McCracken, Grant D. (1988). *The long interview*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.
- McDermott, Paul & Matthews, Andrew (1997). *Ecstasy in the UK: Recreational drug use and cultural change*, <http://hyperreal.com/drugs/mdma/ecstasy.uk> [Date of access: May 21, 2008].
- Mead, George H. (1962 [1934]). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Middelthon, Anne-Lise O. (2001). Being young and gay in the context of HIV: A qualitative study among young Norwegian gay men. *Dr. Phil. thesis, University of Oslo*.
- Middelthon, Anne-Lise O. (2005). A room for reflection: Self-observation and transformation in participatory HIV prevention work. *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*, 19(4), 419-436.
- Middelthon, Anne-Lise O. (2006). Farmakologisering av mat [The pharmacologization of food]. *Nytt Norsk Tidsskrift* [Journal of the Norwegian Medical Association], 3, 261-267.
- Miller, Gale & Dingwall, Robert (Eds.) (1997). *Context and method in qualitative research*. London: Sage.
- Miller, William R. (1996). Motivational interviewing: Research, practice, and puzzles. *Addictive Behaviors*, 21(6), 835-842.
- Mishler, Eliot G. (1996 [1986]). *Research interviewing: Context and narrative*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Moerman, Michael (1988). *Talking culture: Ethnography and conversation analysis*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Monaghan, Lee F. (2002). Vocabularies of motive for illicit steroid use among bodybuilders. *Social Science & Medicine*, 55(5), 695-708.
- Moshuus, Geir; Rossow, Ingeborg & Vestel, Viggo (2002). *Partydop og ungdomskultur* [Party drugs and youth culture]. Oslo: Sosial- og helsedirektoratet.

- Mugford, Stephen K. (1991). Controlled drug use among recreational users: Sociological perspectives. In Nick Heather, Janet Greeley & William R. Miller (Eds.), *Self-control and the addictive behaviours* (pp. 243-261). New York: Maxwell Macmillan.
- Norsk Medisinaldepot (2001). Nøkkeltall og utviklingstrekk ved legemiddelomsættningen i 2000 [Key figures and development trends in medication sales in 2000]. *Press Release, Norsk Medisinaldepot*, <http://legemiddelverket.no/Nyheter/Sider/default.aspx> [Date of access: February 1, 2002].
- Olsen, Kjetil (2004). Dopingbeslagene firedoblet [Customs seizures of doping substances quadrupled]. *Aftenposten* [Newspaper], October 8, 2004, 4
- Pedersen, Willy & Skrondal, Anders (1999). Ecstasy and new patterns of drug use: A normal population study. *Addiction*, 94, 1695-1706.
- Petersen, Alan & Lupton, Deborah (1996). *The new public health: Health and self in the age of risk*. London: Sage.
- Petryna, Adriana; Lakoff, Andrew & Kleinman, Arthur (Eds.) (2006). *Global pharmaceuticals: Ethics, markets, practices*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Reynolds, Simon (1999). *Generation ecstasy: Into the world of techno and rave culture*. New York: Routledge.
- Rhodes, Tim & Moore, David (2001). Editorial review. On the qualitative in drugs research: Part one. *Addiction Research & Theory*, 9(4), 279-297.
- Saunders, Bill (1995). Illicit drugs and harm reduction education. Editorial. *Addiction Research*, 2(4), i-iii.
- Selener, Daniel (1997). *Participatory action research and social change*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University.
- Shiner, Michael & Newburn, Tim (1997). Definitely, maybe not? The normalisation of recreational drug use amongst young people. *Sociology*, 31(3), 511-529.
- Silverman, David (1973). Interview talk: Bringing off a research instrument. *Sociology*, 7(1), 31-48.
- Silverman, David (Ed.) (1997). *Qualitative research: Theory, method and practice*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Singer, Merrill & Baer, Hans A. (2007). *Introducing medical anthropology: A discipline in action*. Lanham, MD: AltaMira.
- SIRUS (Statens Institutt for rusmiddelforskning) (2002). *Narkotikasituasjonen i Norge 2001. Årsrapport til det europeiske overvåkingssenter for narkotika og narkotikamisbruk—EMCDDA* [The narcotics situation in Norway: Annual report to the Europe and Monitoring Centre for Drugs and Drug Addiction]. Oslo: Statens Institutt for rusmiddelforskning (SIRUS).
- Skretting, Astrid (2006). The Nordic countries and public drug-injection facilities. *Drugs: Education, Prevention and Policy*, 13(1), 5-16.
- Stopka, Thomas J.; Springer, Kristen W.; Khoshnood, Kaveh; Shaw, Susan & Singer, Merrill (2004). Writing about risk: Use of daily diaries in understanding drug-user risk behaviors. *AIDS and Behavior*, 8(1), 73-85.
- Vatne, Lindy (2005). Tar amfetamin for å klare eksamen [Taking amphetamines to manage exams]. *Dagens Medisin* [Newspaper], April 28, 2005, 7.
- Weinstein, Raymond M. (1980). Vocabularies of motive for illicit drug use: An application of the accounts framework. *The Sociological Quarterly*, 21(4), 577-593.
- WHO (2001). *World Health Report 2001: Mental health: New understandings, new hope*. Geneva: World Health Organisation, http://www.who.int/entity/whr/2001/en/whr01_en.pdf?ua=1 [Date of access: May 7, 2007].
- Zinberg, Norman E. (1984). *Drug, set, and setting: The basis for controlled intoxicant use*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

Author

Per Kristian HILDEN, PhD, is an advisor at the Research & Development Unit at Oslo Church City Mission, a large NGO in the capital of Norway, where he works on facilitating evaluation and research processes, including the development of research projects and collaborations between the various social services run by the organization and universities and university colleges of applied sciences. He is also affiliated as a lecturer and supervisor with the Institute of Health and Society at University of Oslo Faculty of Medicine.

Contact:

Per Kristian Hilden

Oslo Church City Mission, Tollbugate 3
NO-0152 Oslo, Norway

Tel.: +47 22 36 55 06

E-mail: p.k.hilden@medisin.uio.no

Citation

Hilden, Per Kristian (2014). Talking About Drug Use: Positioning and Reflexivity in Drug Research Interviews and Beyond [62 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 15(3), Art. 2, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs140323>.