

## **Imagining futures, imagining selves: a narrative approach to ‘risk’ in young men’s lives.**

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*This is a post-print version of the article, i.e., final version before layout and typesetting.*

*The article is published in Current Sociology, vol. 67(7), pp. 1039-1055.*

[doi.org/10.1177/0011392119857453](https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392119857453)

### **Abstract**

This paper proposes a narrative approach to studying ‘risk’. A narrative approach moves away from common attempts to identify individuals ‘at risk’ of social problems on the basis of static characteristics – risks – that are assumed to have uniform ‘effects’ on individuals. Instead, a narrative approach to analysing ‘risk’ entails a focus on how people make consequential links between events in their lives. By focusing on three cases from a qualitative study in Denmark the paper analyses how young people who have extensive experience with ‘risky’ practices – mainly drug use – make sense of these experiences. A particular focus on imagined futures produces two types of insights. First, by analysing how past and present experiences are seen by young people themselves as pointing towards their imagined futures, the paper demonstrates how seemingly similar events (risk-taking experiences) can be inscribed in very different future narratives. Second, analysing the process of imagining futures illuminates how the participants see themselves in the world, to

what extent they see themselves as agents in their own lives and if their futures are seen as within or beyond their control.

**Keywords:**

Imagined futures, Risk, Narrative, Qualitative longitudinal research (QLR), Youth

## Introduction

Research on social problems involving youth, such as drug use, crime, educational disengagement etc., often seeks to identify which individuals are more ‘at risk’ of experiencing these social problems than others and in that sense potentially in need of social support. However, constructs such as the ‘at risk’ label are not unproblematic. Categorising individuals or groups as ‘at risk’ of developing drug use problems, engaging in criminal activities or leaving school ‘early’ serves to legitimise interventions or sanctions while placing the responsibility for these ‘deviant behaviours’ at the individual level (see for instance Bessant 2001; Kelly 2001; te Riele 2006). Such categorisations also ignore how young people make sense of their own lives. And finally, they rely on assumed ‘effects’ of specific variables such as for instance low SES or early drug use, or, to put it differently, low SES or early drug use are seen as predictors of future actions. This type of ‘prediction science’ or actuarial approach is gaining ground, also in relation to managing social problems in modern welfare states (Bengtsson et al 2015).

In this paper I problematise such approaches through a critique of the underlying assumption of linear and homogenous ‘effects’ of variables such as drug use or school drop-out. I do this by drawing inspiration from Andrew Abbott’s distinction between a ‘variable approach’ and a ‘narrative approach’ (Abbott 2001). Bringing a narrative approach to young people’s drug and school experiences, my analysis offers an explicit temporal focus on how past and present experiences are seen by young people themselves as pointing towards their imagined futures. The paper contributes to the literature by focusing on *how* ‘variables’ are given meaning, how these meanings change over time, and how the *process* of narrating and imagining futures in itself provides central analytical insights into a person’s sense of self; as more or less agentic and in control of one’s own life. In particular, I refine the ideal type

model of orientations to the future developed by Brannen & Nilsen (2002) by suggesting that future deferment is not always wilful but may come from a lack of capacity to imagine such futures; an apathetic-fatalistic mode of deferment.

Empirically, the paper focuses on three cases drawn from a larger qualitative study conducted in Denmark, investigating young people's engagement in 'risk-taking' practices. The three men in focus shared a number of characteristics: besides their age and gender they were 'risk-takers' in that they all had extensive experience with drug use, mainly cannabis. In the literature, drug use is found to have a negative impact on educational transitions such as poorer educational outcomes (Jeynes 2002; Stiby et al. 2015), drop-outs (Bray et al. 2000), completing fewer years of schooling (Chatterji 2006) or problems navigating the educational system (Järvinen & Ravn 2018). Despite their cannabis use, the participants were enrolled in education at the time of the first interview and were in that sense 'on track' from an educational perspective, trying to navigate their education-to-work transitions. This formal status – as 'on track' but 'at risk' – was why they were included in the study in the first place as our knowledge of this particular group is limited.

From a variable-focused (Abbott 2001) point of view, conclusions would likely be drawn from how the three young men's different social backgrounds and resources have positioned them very differently in the educational system, not only regarding school performance, but also in 'mediating' the impact of their cannabis use. We might also perceive the participant with the most resources (economic and cultural capital) to have the best and 'safest' future prospects. However, instead of assuming uniform effects of social resources, drug use and negative school experiences on young people's aspirations and transitional pathways, this paper shifts focus and looks at the meanings the participants themselves ascribe to these

‘variables’, and how they make “consequential links” (Riessman 2008) between events in their lives. The point here is not to disregard existing research on the structural and contextual factors that shape transitions, aspirations and imagined futures. A significant body of work has contributed crucial knowledge on the impact of social background and resources on not only actual transitional choices but also young people’s aspirations for the future. This work emphasises the subtle and embodied ways in which resources (capitals) work when navigating transitions in and beyond the educational system (see e.g., Archer et al 2010; Baker 2016; Bathmaker et al 2013; Roberts and Evans 2013; Stokes 2012), the ways in which aspirations and imagined futures are shaped in a complex interaction between the individual’s social location and resources (France and Haddon 2014) as well as broader discourses and cultural understandings (Mendick et al. 2015) and the reflexivity employed in these processes (Threadgold and Nilan 2009; Laughland-Booÿ et al 2015). Rather, a narrative approach helps us consider how young people themselves ascribe meaning to these processes and, centrally, the agency they display through this. Through the analysis I illustrate how seemingly similar events (here mainly drug use) can be inscribed and activated in very different narratives that point towards very different imagined futures. This demonstrates how static categories such as ‘on track’ and ‘at risk’ are not helpful for understanding the dynamic and processual nature of such narratives and indeed young lives.

Before I turn to the analysis I introduce the conceptual framework that guides the paper.

### **Narrating the future: Plans, hopes, dreams and narrative imagination**

I approach the interviewees’ stories of their risk-taking experiences, school experiences and imagined futures from a narrative perspective to illuminate the consequential links that the interviewees draw between events; how they see one thing as connected with or leading to

another (cf. Andrews 2014, Riessman 2008). In particular, I focus on narratives that indicate how the participants imagine their futures. I use the term ‘imagined futures’ to emphasise my focus on the broader futures that the interviewees are aiming for, not only the education and job-related ambitions usually referred to by the term ‘aspirations’ (Archer et al. 2010; Kintrea et al 2015), but also to emphasise the role of the imaginary. Imagining futures also involves imagining futures selves. Molly Andrews argues that linking narrative and imagination is central as “it is imagination that lifts narrative in to another dimension and which offers it both the possibility of a history and of a tomorrow” (Andrews 2014: 3). Hence, Andrews argues that we need to see imagination as a central part of everyday life and a means for us to envision a future: “if something can be imagined, it is not ‘absolutely impossible’”, meaning that imagination creates a bridge that crosses “between what is known, and what can be known, between the present and possible futures” (Andrews 2014: 5).

A number of scholars have studied young people’s future orientations (see e.g., Bryant & Ellard 2015; Franceschelli and Keating 2018; Hardgrove et al. 2015; Cook 2018 for recent examples). Here I want to draw attention to the conceptual work of Nilsen (1999) and Brannen and Nilsen (2002). Nilsen (1999) provides a conceptualisation of ‘the future’ as consisting of three levels, ranging from the most concrete to the most abstract, i.e. plans, hopes and dreams. Hence, while plans are the most tangible and often have a fairly short time horizon, hopes are referring to a less concrete time horizon, and dreams only have a very vague time horizon, if any (Nilsen 1999: 179). Importantly, these three dimensions are associated with different levels of control on the part of the individual: plans relate to aspects that are generally seen as within the realm of control; hopes involve dimensions that are to some extent beyond one’s control and dreams are fully beyond control (Nilsen 1999). In the

analysis I use these three dimensions to unpack what part of ‘the future’ the interviewees are discussing and how they relate to this future.

Focusing on the practice of *imagining* futures means shifting the analytical approach from viewing aspirations and imagined futures as something ‘we have’ to (also) something ‘we do’. This includes a focus on the sense of self and agency that is involved and displayed in this. Hence, speaking about ‘the imaginative’ emphasises the work that goes into envisioning such futures and moves the main analytical focus away from simply ‘noting’ particular aspirations to focusing as much on how such aspirations are formulated and narrated. In this sense, analysing imagined futures is not only about unpacking the actual ‘plans, hopes and dreams’ (Nilsen 1999) that young people describe in the interviews, but also interrogating how subjectivities are produced in this task (Baker 2016). In other words, this analysis can show the sense of self and agency involved in imagining a future or the extent to which such futures are even imagined at all (Carabelli and Lyon 2016). To this end, I draw on Brannen & Nilsen’s (2002) ideal type model of future orientation, comprising deferment, adaptability and predictability. Brannen & Nilsen emphasise how these modes of orientation vary by gender, social background, ethnicity and other structural factors and resources. As will become clear in the last part of the analysis, comparing these modes of orientation to the cases at hand highlights the need for a refinement of Brannen & Nilsen’s model. The three participants have very different ways of relating to the future and different understandings of their own role in – and capacity to – shaping it. I suggest a distinction between *wilful* future deferment and an *apathetic-fatalistic* mode of deferment to take into account differences in terms of sense of control and agency. Before I engage these concepts in the analysis I introduce the study that forms the empirical basis of the paper.

## **Methods and data**

The analysis focuses on three cases drawn from a qualitative study on youth and risk-taking practices conducted in Denmark in 2013-14 (see Bengtsson & Ravn 2019; Ravn 2018).

Participants were recruited through a brief questionnaire handed out in high schools and vocational schools in three different regions. Through this I established contact with students who had experiences with regular cannabis or other drug use, steroid use, being involved in moped/car accidents or being involved in violence. Participants were invited to gather a group of friends for a focus group interview, resulting in 13 focus groups. If not interested in a focus group, they were invited to participate in an individual interview, which one person chose. The sample consisted of 52 participants (36 men, 16 women) aged 17-25. While most interviewees were enrolled in high school (31) or vocational training (14), three had finished education and moved into regular jobs and four were on the margins of the educational system. All interviews were videotaped and transcribed verbatim. The study is conducted in accordance with common ethical guidelines such as seeking informed, ongoing consent and extensive anonymization of names and other identifying characteristics (cf. Thomson 2007).

While the focus groups produced data on risk perceptions and negotiations of group norms, they offered less opportunity to go into individual experiences. This became apparent in a few instances where participants indicated extensive cannabis use experiences. To follow up, I invited those to participate in an individual interview after the focus group. Two participants agreed to this. These interviews were semi-structured and focused on drug experiences and drug use careers, and on the relation between drug use and educational engagement. The same interview guide was used for the person who requested an individual interview. As a routine, I asked all three individuals for permission to contact them later, which they agreed to. After initial analysis of these three interviews, the similarities and differences between

them stood out: not only did all three young men have extensive cannabis use experiences, they also had very different social backgrounds and spoke differently about their cannabis use and school. This was intriguing, and I decided to contact the three participants again. While this longitudinal dimension was not part of the original design, it offered a serendipitous possibility for a sociological analysis of the relation between ‘risk-taking’ and educational engagement, or ‘at risk’ and ‘on track’ categories, as this unfolded over time.

As Rachel Thomson writes, there are multiple ways of approaching a longitudinal data set (Thomson 2007), either ‘wave by wave’ or following individual cases over time. For this paper I drew inspiration from her analytical approach by first moving from case stories to case *histories* (ibid., p. 573), and then contrasting or juxtaposing these case histories to gain deeper analytical insights (ibid., p. 577). Case histories are an analytical condensation of the multiple layers of details across all interviews for each person, constructed by following specific ‘through lines’ (Saldana 2003 in Thomson 2007), i.e. lines of inquiry that cut across the single waves of interviews. These are in turn informed by analytical interest and theoretical framework. In this paper the ‘through lines’ were ‘risk-taking’ (cannabis use), school and work experiences and imagined futures. The analysis below is structured accordingly and overlaps with a temporal, chronological progression from past to present to future. This enables me to consider how meanings change over time and to analyse imagined futures in the context of the individual’s past and present (cf. Järvinen & Ravn 2015). Within each section, I analyse how the participants make links between events as they narrate their experiences. I draw out the contrasts between the three cases along the way and then expand the cross-sectional interpretation, focusing on imagined futures.

### **The three cases**

Felix first participated in a focus group and soon after in an individual interview (F1). He was 19 years old and in his last year of high school. Nine months later he participated in an individual follow-up interview (F2), and one year later in yet another follow-up interview (F3). He lived in greater Copenhagen, where he grew up with his parents and two older sisters in a middle-class area and he indicated a background with certain levels of economic and cultural capital. The parents divorced when Felix was in lower secondary school and since then he lived with both of them in turn. Thomas was first interviewed in an individual interview (T1) when he was 24 years old. He was invited to participate in a follow-up interview nine months later (T2) and yet another follow-up interview one year after this (T3). He was enrolled in vocational training, studying to become a chef, and he lived on his own in the centre of the provincial town where he was born and raised. He grew up in a family of five with working class parents. Thomas' mother had a serious mental health problem and his relation to his family was troubled. While not being an affluent family, Thomas emphasized how he and his older brothers "always had what they needed" and his parents were occasionally still helping him out if he was struggling to make ends meet. And finally, Peter first took part in an interview with one other friend (P1) and in an individual interview around one and a half months later (P2). He was 19 years old and enrolled in the introductory module for a vocational programme when I first interviewed him. He had just moved to a studio apartment close to his school in a regional centre. When trying to arrange a follow-up interview with Peter around nine months later, I could not get in touch with him despite several phone calls and texts. Peter's dad passed away years back and his mother was on early retirement benefits, a heavy drinker and regular cannabis user, according to Peter to manage her rheumatism. She had had many different partners over the years but "she chose the wrong men", who beat up her and her kids, and the family was often on the move. From

he was 10 to 15 years old, Peter was placed in residential care and then moved to a foster care family, where he stayed until he turned 18.

## **Analysis**

### ***Making sense of ‘risk-taking’ pasts***

First I focus on how the three young men narrate their experiences with cannabis as a ‘risky’ practice and I analyse how they each associate different meanings with the drug.

Felix first tried cannabis in 9<sup>th</sup> grade (aged 15). He described how he listened to rap music as a kid and how the positive depictions of cannabis in the lyrics made him “plan to try it one day”. He had a keen interest in electronic dance music, clubbing and experimenting with various drugs, and he produced music on his laptop, often when smoking joints because cannabis made him feel more creative. From the second year of high school Felix smoked cannabis on a daily basis in school breaks, after school and in the evening. He described his smoking as mostly social and often taking place at Christiania in Copenhagen; historically a community based on subcultural values and lifestyles. Smoking cannabis was part of his social group’s alternative lifestyle and way of “bonding” and created “relational depth”. He was confident that cannabis is less harmful than alcohol and supported decriminalisation. In the first and second interviews he saw himself as in control of his cannabis use and mentioned that “I know why I smoke every time I smoke”. In sum, his cannabis use was a central part of his identity as an alternative, creative and critical thinker. At the time of the third interview, however, Felix’s relation to cannabis was more ambivalent as cannabis was no longer unequivocally unproblematic but also made him feel less productive when making music. He had cut down his cannabis use substantially and only smoked occasionally. Hence,

cannabis had come to have more complex meanings as he still felt it enhanced his creativity but also made it hard for him to focus.

Thomas also tied his drug use to a group of friends, but in contrast to Felix, Thomas problematised this group of friends, with whom he started hanging out in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He described them as “troublemakers who tried a bit of everything”; robberies, drug dealing and violence. While some were imprisoned, Thomas was always on the periphery of the group and never faced legal sanctions. Looking back, he viewed this as a way of forgetting everyday worries: “16-18 years old, that’s when all expenses start coming and warn you about adult life [...] so many things that weigh on your mind [...] then you make [a joint] and forget all of this and feel good”. In the interviews he described harder drugs as part of a youth phase that he had “matured out of”. At the time of the first and second interviews he smoked cannabis occasionally, mostly to wind down with friends after work or at home to relax. In all three interviews he told about shorter periods of daily use; a pattern of use that he found problematic. At the time of the third interview Thomas had stopped using cannabis. His final exams were coming up and to do well, he needed “to have [his] brain back”.

The meanings that Thomas associated with cannabis and its role in his life not only differed significantly from Felix, but also changed substantially over time. He depicted his early cannabis use as being about seeking thrills and being “one of the guys” as part of a specific “youth phase”. Over time, cannabis changed into a drug used to relax after a hard day’s work, and in that way part of distinguishing between work and leisure and bonding with friends. More recently, though, cannabis was increasingly seen as problematic and Thomas associated a number of negative side-effects with smoking cannabis, for instance living “in a fog” and hindering learning, and for this reason he quit smoking as the exams approached.

Finally, Peter, like Felix and Thomas, was an experienced cannabis user. However, his way of making sense of his cannabis use differed markedly from the two cases above. Peter was introduced to cannabis by his older brother at age 12 and started smoking on a daily basis while living in residential care. After moving to a foster care family, he continued to smoke in the morning before school (8<sup>th</sup> -10<sup>th</sup> grade). Asked about what cannabis meant for him, he told that “cannabis could remove all my problems in no time. It gave me loads of energy. To live on and get a better life”. At the time of the first interview, Peter still smoked cannabis every now and then, closely related to his psychological well-being, and he described this as a way of coping with feelings of loneliness and bad moods. He claimed he was “used to leaning on someone else” and “when I don’t have that I fall apart” and turn to smoking cannabis.

Like Thomas, Peter also spoke of having been through a “youth phase” with intense partying, alcohol and drug use. And like Thomas, Peter had also been part of a group involved in a range of criminal activities, though he was only involved in burglaries, not violent crimes. In contrast to Thomas, though, Peter explained this with his loneliness and his search for “idols” and how he longed for “that kind of community. I have never had that, so I was looking for that at the time. And unfortunately that’s [amongst his drug dealers] where I found it”, thereby linking his search for belonging to his highly mobile childhood and early teenage years.

In contrast to Felix and Thomas, Peter’s current cannabis use was neither depicted as a social ‘bonding’ activity nor as facilitating creativity or winding down after a hard day. For him it was something that could solve or at least make him forget emotional problems and, in that

sense, served a form of self-medication in line with his mother's motivations for use. Unlike Felix and Thomas, Peter did not make any effort to normalise his cannabis use, argue in favour of legalisation or in other ways account for his use; the meanings he ascribed it were mainly functional.

### *Educational experiences and pathways to the present*

Next I analyse how the participants see their cannabis use impacting their school trajectories and how they make sense of their general experiences with the educational system.

Felix's attitude to formal education was in line with the emphasis on alternative lifestyles that he displayed in relation to cannabis. He enrolled in high school to "please his mother", who said this would be a safe choice. Looking back, he never engaged much in school and at the time of the first interview felt that those three years were a waste of time. Despite smoking daily, he did not feel that his cannabis use affected his school outcomes much and he strategically estimated the effort necessary to get top grades in a number of subjects. He added how he did not "look like someone who smokes and takes drugs" to explain why his teachers never intervened. In general, he "liked coming there [in school]" but also stated that "basically I think school is just bullshit. You just facilitate specific forms of intellectual abilities". Felix was confident that he "could manage uni", but also convinced this was not for him because he wanted to be creative and make money, again performing an identity as alternative and in opposition to mainstream values.

At the time of the second interview, Felix had recently graduated and felt somewhat disillusioned. He described how he "was told to complete high school and then it would be easier to get a job". As this did not happen, his critical stance towards normative pathways

was confirmed. His first plan was to find a job in graphic design but this proved hard without formal credentials. At the time of the third interview, one year later, he had an unskilled job in a call centre and made music in the evenings. The job was “OK fun” but “not what I want for the rest of my life”. He now lived with his girlfriend in her mum’s house and occasionally got help with paying rent from his father. He told how, even though both of his parents had been artists when younger and were supportive of his creative aspirations, they were also “very happy” when he got a paid job.

In contrast to Felix, Thomas clearly linked his lack of interest in secondary school to his escalating cannabis use at the time and he described the years after lower secondary school as “a time of experimentation” involving various drugs. Thomas did not start his current education until he was 23 years old; something he explained with his extensive cannabis use: “After lower secondary school I smoked loads of cannabis. And because of that I only finished the basic mechanics training course. And after that only finished the basic training course at the business college [...] too much truancy”. Instead of attending school he worked. Thomas presented himself as having a strong work ethic and he emphasised how he, despite his drug use, had “always” had a job and never been on social benefits, and he indicated that these were values he had from his father. For seven years he switched back and forth between different unskilled jobs such as bartending and stock work before finally deciding to study to become a chef. Aged 23, he felt that “now this education thing needs to be settled”. In all three interviews, he identified strongly with his trainee workplace; he liked working in the service economy and wanted to be part of it professionally. However, between interviews 1 and 2 he had slipped a disc which compromised his plans. This was part of the reason why at the time of the third interview, six months away from graduating, Thomas had applied to a two-year programme to gain more managerial skills. Hence, unlike Felix, Thomas presented

himself as someone who has ‘come round’ to realise the value of formal credentials and had a strong faith in these as the ticket to the future he imagined for himself.

Peter’s experiences with school were mixed. Because he had moved a lot and changed schools often, and then lived in residential care, he had lots to catch up with when returning to a public school in 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He felt the teachers liked him and he passed the 9<sup>th</sup> grade exams, in his view *because* of smoking cannabis every morning and in that way maintaining focus and energy in school. But in 10<sup>th</sup> grade he increased his cannabis use because he was heartbroken over a girl. Peter made a direct link between this and his low academic results. Though formally enrolled in education at the time of the first interview his actual attendance varied. Before moving into his current apartment, he commuted an hour each way every day, but the entire week before the first interview he did not attend school because he “did not have the energy” and stayed at home smoking cannabis. Peter found it difficult to fit in and felt the other students were judgmental. His descriptions of his encounters with the school system were often filled with frustration and feelings of not being understood or treated respectfully. For instance, recalling a meeting with a coordinator of an educational programme which he hoped to apply for later, Peter told how “she was just deflating me. I was *nothing*. Just because I was a slacker in 10<sup>th</sup> grade”.

Summing up, Peter, like Thomas, believed in the value of formal education, but did not seem to know how to navigate the system. Aside from a few helpful teachers, his educational experiences were generally negative and he depicted himself wanting to do well in a system that did not want him. This differs significantly from how Thomas and Felix narrated their educational experiences.

### *Imagined futures – plans, hopes and dreams*

Finally, I investigate what participants imagine for their future and how they orient themselves toward this future, drawing on Nilsen's (1999) tripartite conceptualisation of future thinking (plans, hopes and dreams).

Felix described himself as an artist and was intent on making a living from his music. At the time of the third interview he had still not had any breakthrough with his music, had been rejected by a number of music labels and was waiting to hear back from yet another label. He put much effort into looking up events at which he hoped to play in the future and made a presence for himself on a range of social media platforms. When asked about the future, he stated that “in ten years I am being paid to travel the world, I am a DJ and I have my own record label”. He was determined that this could happen, and he spoke about it as “*when* I’m successful with my music”, not “*if*”. When asked about the risks involved in the dream, he was surprised:

Felix: Risks?

Interviewer: Just that it’s an ambitious plan, I don’t know, perhaps because I really don’t know that world, it just sounds difficult?

Felix: It is. Partly. Like...it’s not something that just happens overnight. You don’t wake up having it all. You have to fight for it [...] You can waste your talent by not doing anything, and perhaps that’s what I did earlier on, when I smoked too much, I think. Whereas now I feel I am much more invested in it. I’m almost getting a contract because I’m not smoking [cannabis]. And that’s why I don’t want to smoke again.

However, co-existing with this dream Felix described himself as “living in the moment” and not having concrete plans for either his job or intimate life. Only when asked about whether he sees himself as having kids or not was this brought up and he stated that “I do. I do like it to happen with her [his girlfriend]. I mean, I can easily envision myself with her for the rest of my life”. But the future he imagined centred around his career in the music industry.

Like Felix, Thomas had a clear dream for the future, but he related differently to this. Thomas dreamt of having his own business and not be “a wage slave” forever as he wanted “to see results”. While in the second interview he saw his own future as “having a restaurant, café or a bed & breakfast place”, in the third interview this had turned into the very long-term plan while his more immediate plan was to develop a small tour company for tourists interested in Danish wine-production; a plan in line with the training programme he had applied for.

Thomas was aware of the task ahead but this did not put him off: “I don’t think it’s a difficult path to take, I think I will get there, taking one step at a time and also planning ahead”.

Thomas viewed himself as “an entrepreneur” and talked about his motivation:

“I am conscious that I want to do something with my life. I don’t want to end up on the street or on social benefits. I want to make a difference to...other people, but mainly to myself. I have this drive, like...damn, I want to make it! I want to prove something”

It was clear to Thomas that cannabis could not be part of this future. While most of his narrative about future plans was optimistic and confident, he did express some uncertainty about the time after graduation: “Will I fall back into my old rhythm? After graduation I don’t have, I mean, I have three job offers, but will I be like ‘now this [education] is done and

I don't have to worry' [and start smoking again]?". Hence, he was aware of the specific meanings cannabis had for him and how it was tied to specific situations.

Central in Thomas's narrative was his longing for the next 'phase' of his life. He wanted to "settle down somewhere": "Perhaps I have just grown up, but I need some security. A position, from which I can say 'this is your home, this is your job, sorted'". He spoke in detail about this future and was explicit about wanting a family of his own, whether in five or 10 years, "and then I'm there"; as if reaching an endpoint. Establishing a family of his own would also mean less investment in the difficult relation with his parents. Thomas wanted to feel independent and moving back in with his parents the previous year for financial reasons was something he talked about with disappointment. At the time of the third interview, he was about to move with his girlfriend to another part of the country.

Peter was also asked about his plans and dreams for the future. Since childhood he had wanted to join the military, but he was unsure whether he could pass the physical and health tests. Alternatively, he wanted to be a teacher because he liked being with kids, but also because he wanted to "accomplish something". In fact, this was his motivation for leaving the criminal peer group and starting school: "I want to help people instead of ruining things". However, because of poor results in 10<sup>th</sup> grade he could not get into the teacher training programme at the university college and had to continue in vocational training, something he was not enthusiastic about. The uncertainty regarding his further educational pathway was reflected at a more general level, being unsure what direction his life would take:

"I don't know what will happen with me in five years from now. My everyday life varies. I don't do the same things two weeks in a row, I can't, I have too

much energy and need to try something new all the time [...]. You just never know if I start doing this, this or this [points at the pictures on the table of drugs, fights and speeding in a car]. Like, get into fights, or get married! I don't know [...] I take one day at the time because, well, I have these mood swings...like a girl (laughs).”

Like Felix, Peter did not make plans. However, in contrast to Felix, Peter did not appear to put much hope into his future and his future dreams – teacher or soldier – both seemed barred. He rarely mentioned active choice-making but rather depicted his actions as reactions to external circumstances.

### **Narrating futures in and beyond control**

As Nilsen's distinction between plans, hopes and dreams helped untangle, the futures that the three young men imagined not only looked very different, they also related to these futures in different ways. Both Felix and Thomas had fairly ambitious dreams for their futures, but while Thomas was concrete in his way of taking action to realise his dream, Felix appeared to leave more to hope; hoping that a record label would eventually be interested in his work. These differences resonate with Brannen & Nilsen's (2002) ideal typical model that I introduced earlier: Felix may illustrate the adaptability model as he relies on his resources (parental support) while being confident about his ability to make his future dream come true. Thomas can be seen as representing the search for future stability and security in the model of predictability. Peter may be reminiscent of the model of deferment, i.e. focusing on the present and postponing the future, but not for the 'living in the present' reasons that the participants in Brannen & Nilsen's study mentioned. Rather than trying to postpone adult responsibilities, Peter seems to defer the future because he does not know how to relate to

this, let alone how to navigate the present. Following Nilsen, the differences in these modes of orientation to the future is not just about whether one is a ‘dreamer’ or a ‘planner’, but ultimately reflects people’s sense of control over their lives and their feelings of being agentic or not. Nilsen writes that “where the feeling of control ends and uncertainty begins, hoping takes over for planning” (Nilsen 1999: 180). Felix’s less elaborate plans can be an indicator of him feeling less in control of his own future. He was nevertheless capable of conveying how the future he dreams of looks – it centres around the music industry and involves himself in a creative role. This is very different from Peter, who, in contrast, appeared to be having difficulties even imagining a future and had no sense of how it would look. While at one level this shows his difficulties in navigating the educational system, it also indicates his limited sense of agency and ability to enact change in his life more generally. Rather, change has been imposed on him from an early age, for instance by his mother. This limited sense of agency is backed up by his experiences of being rejected by the system and reduced to a category of ‘off track’ students, when trying to take action on his education. Instead of approaching the future with plans, hopes or dreams, Peter seems to have a more fatalistic approach – will he get into the education programme he desires, will he ‘settle down’ (“get married”) or will he fall back into more extensive drug use? In his narrative, all options are equally possible and what he chooses to do will not change the outcome or direction of his life. This means that he may as well not act, or plan, but just “take one day at the time” as he put it. This is not accommodated in the models of Nilsen or Brannen and Nilsen, arguably as their research participants are more resourceful. In their work on ‘disenfranchised youth’, Bryant and Ellard (2015) argue that for young people on the margins of society whose present is insecure, even imagining a future can be a laborious task. They go on to demonstrate how for some of their participants, future planning and choice-making is replaced by simply hoping for “something better” (Bryant and Ellard 2015, p. 494), while for

others even this is more than they can engage in. Combining these insights with Brannen and Nilsen’s work we might refine their ‘deferment’ model by splitting this into what I will call *wilful deferment* and a more *apathetic-fatalistic deferment*. While the former involves a wish to extend and enjoy the present, as in Brannen and Nilsen’s study, the latter involves a chaotic present that does not allow for more agentic approaches to the future, as in Peter’s case. The table below sums up the preceding analysis.

	<b>Meanings of cannabis</b>	<b>Future orientation</b>	<b>Sense of control</b>	<b>Biographical plot</b>
Felix	Resource <i>and</i> barrier	Hope; adaptability	Medium	Alternative, artistic
Thomas	‘Youth’ thing, barrier for future	Planning, predictability	High	Mature and determined
Peter	Resource (comfort, self-medication)	Apathetic-fatalistic deferment	Low	Victim of circumstances

Returning to the narrative perspective that guides the paper, the findings spelled out above can be summed up through the narratological concept of the plot, added to the table in the right-hand column. Ricoeur (1980, p. 167) defined a plot as “the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in any story”. The concept has a broader scope than concepts such as presentation of self or subjectivity, with the plot being the ‘driver’ of how experiences are narrated in time and over time (Ricoeur 1980). The differences in how the three young men presented themselves in the interviews can be condensed into three different biographical plots. These plots encompass the meanings they ascribe to cannabis, their way

of orienting themselves to the future and their sense of control over how their life unfolds. For Felix, the alternative and artistic plot ties together diverse events in and beyond school and ‘allows’ him to be in opposition to conventional norms and expectations, also when looking towards the future. For Thomas, being mature and determined guides how he today relates to his ‘risk-taking’ past as well as how he strives for a settled future. Finally, for Peter, the plot centres on his lacking sense of agency and presents events in his life as something that happened ‘to’ him because of other people’s actions rather than his own action. The plots are analytical constructs that tie together not only past, present and future, but also the *orientations* to these futures.

While there are significant gendered aspects to the preceding analysis, a full exploration of this dimensions is beyond the scope of this paper. A proper gender analysis would include both cannabis use (cf. for instance Dahl & Sandberg 2015) and imagined futures, which are profoundly heteronormative and also at least to some extent bear on traditional male breadwinner ideals (Brannen & Nilsen 2002). As Thomson and Holland noted (2002), such imagined futures may be challenged by ‘female individualisation’, i.e. the changed gender relations and women’s (at least formally) increased opportunities to pursue a career of their own. This would be worth exploring in more detail in future research.

## **Conclusion**

In the Introduction I hinted at what a ‘variable’-focused analysis might conclude based on the three cases. With the narrative approach, I shift my focus to look at the links the participants themselves made between cannabis use and educational engagement and how these narratives evolved over time, enabled by the longitudinal design. This enabled me to avoid homogenising the ‘effects’ of cannabis use on individuals. Instead, the analysis illustrated

how the meanings of cannabis changed over time, as the young men's present situation and the 'pull' from their (imagined) futures changed. Cannabis was used for very different reasons and ascribed very different meanings and only Thomas saw this as impacting his educational engagement, when he was younger. Instead, other dimensions of their past and present situations were activated in their narratives as posing 'risks' to their imagined futures.

The analysis underscores how concepts such as 'at risk' and 'off track' are problematic due to their static nature which only provides a 'snapshot' picture of a person's life. The combination of a longitudinal and narrative approach highlighted the processual and dynamic ways in which young people's pathways unfold and are understood. Aspirations and imagined futures change over time, as do cannabis use, educational engagement and one's sense of agency and feeling of being in control. Relying on static categories ignores such processes and may result in misleading conclusions.

In the analysis I devoted particular focus to how the participants imagined their futures. This allowed two types of insights. First, studying imagined futures gave insight into how different aspects of participants' pasts became activated in their narratives about the future, and seemingly similar events came to be given very different meanings in different future narratives. Second, studying imagined futures means moving away from 'predicting' how certain variables – categorised as risks – in the past or present 'destine' people to certain futures. Instead it illuminates how people see themselves in the world. In sum then, analysing the process of how interviewees imagine their futures opens a window into to what extent they see themselves as agents in their own lives. Such insights are important across a range of fields, for instance educational research, drug research and criminology, where variable-

based ‘risk assessments’ flourish, but also for social policies broadly speaking in order to understand the dynamic and processual nature of (young) lives.

### **Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank Rachel Thomson and Ditte Andersen for helpful feedback on an earlier version of this article and to extend a special thank you to Ashley Barnwell for giving input on several versions of the article. I would also like to thank the two anonymous reviewers whose comments significantly improved the article.

### **Funding information**

This work was supported by the Independent Research Fund Denmark (Social Sciences) under grant number 12-132265/ 0602-02591B, as well as the Australian Research Council, under grant number DECRA DE170100613.

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