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Persistence, Desistance and Rational Deviance

— a narrative analysis of Finnish youth selling drugs for financial profit



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ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines how young people in Finland make sense of profit-oriented drug selling and construct drug dealer identities. Drug use and related harms have increased globally in recent years. In Finland, an increase in minors selling drugs for financial profit has been noticed by the police and a non-governmental youth work organization Children of the Station. The aim of this thesis is to expand knowledge on young people's drug selling through a qualitative approach, and to address a research gap in a field that has predominantly relied on survey data in studies of youth drug dealing. A narrative analysis was conducted on semi-structured interviews with young people who have started selling drugs for financial profit while underage. The theoretical framework of this study draws on narrative criminology and narrative identity theory. These frameworks provide insight into how young drug sellers justify their involvement in illicit and potentially harmful activities through storytelling, and how they navigate the moral boundaries that shape their decisions regarding the continuation of their drug-selling careers. The findings show that while the initiation into drug selling was narrated as an outlet for personal empowerment that emphasized individual agency, the continuation of selling was not narrated as a similarly voluntary choice. Moral boundary work was negotiated by framing oneself as a "good" seller in opposition to unethical seller who, for example, sell to children and by describing drug selling as a business, thereby legitimizing illegal activity as a rational choice. These findings highlight how young drug dealers wish to be perceived as intelligent and responsible sellers, opposing the media's narrative of deviant youth who glorify crime.

Keywords: young people, drug selling, financial profit, narrative criminology, narrative identity theory, Finland

Popular science summary

Drug use has increased worldwide, raising concerns about its harmful consequences. In Finland, for example, the police have been concerned about young people's involvement in illegal drug selling. A non-governmental youth work organization, Children of the Station, has also recently encountered minors selling drugs for money in their work, which is a new phenomenon. There is still limited research on young people who sell drugs, especially in Finland. Previous researcher has mostly focused on statistics and surveys instead of asking young people directly about their experiences. To better understand why young people sell drugs, this thesis interviewed young people in Finland who started selling drugs for money while underage. The interviews showed that the participants started selling drugs to afford buying things they needed and wanted for themselves and their families. These included, for example, clothes and dinners with friends. The participants emphasized that selling drugs was their own choice, even though friends and acquaintances helped them learn how to sell successfully. Because the participants acknowledged that drug selling is illegal and that the substances they sell are potentially harmful for their customers, they framed themselves as "good" dealers. For example, they said they did not sell drugs to children. They also justified their actions by describing drug selling as a business and as a rational way to make money. Although all participants said that they started selling because they wanted to, quitting was not easy for everyone. Some had stopped selling drugs, but others continued even though they no longer wished to. They described feeling stuck because drug selling provided them money they felt they could not get elsewhere. These findings show how young drug dealers want to be seen as smart, rational people who are earning their own money, rather than as young people who glorify crime. While the media often connects youth crime with the glorification of criminal lifestyles, the participants rejected these kinds of media narratives.

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1. Introduction

According to the United Nations annual World Drug Report (2025), drug use and its harmful consequences have increased globally over the years. Drug use, whether intended as self-medication or recreational, can cause a wide variety of harm not only to the user itself but to their friends, families and the communities they live in (p. 88). For example, in North America, the use of synthetic opioid fentanyl has contributed to the deaths of tens of thousands of people every year (p. 20). At the societal level, illegal drug trade, which is a significant source of income for organized crime around the world, is related to violence and, at times, even corruption (pp. 82–87). Additionally, drug-related violence can jeopardize the sense of security and public safety in entire cities (p. 88), as could be witnessed in the capital of Finland, Helsinki, when the use of synthetic drug alpha-PVP became widespread.

In the summer of 2025, the rise of alpha-PVP and its unpredictable and violent users caused moral panic in Finnish media and public discourse, as the public was advised by media outlets on how to act if coming across dangerous drug users (Finnish Government, 2025; Koskinen & Ihalainen, 2025). This resulted in anyone acting suspiciously on the streets being quickly labeled as an alpha-PVP user, prompting some residents to avoid certain areas of the city. The amount of media coverage and sensationalizing of what was, in reality, a relatively minor phenomenon drew criticism for further dehumanizing and stigmatizing drug users, who already face significant challenges in accessing proper support for their addictions (Tapiola & Lukinmaa, 2025). Nevertheless, by exposing only the tip of the iceberg, the alpha-PVP panic brought attention to broader issues of drug use that are often hidden from the public. Indeed, increased drug use and its associated problems have been bubbling beneath the surface for years in Finland.

Drugs are heavily regulated and policed in Finland, since all types of use, sales, and possession of drugs are illegal, and penalties vary from fines to sentences of up to ten years in prison (Narcotics Act, 2008). The strict laws, however, have not prevented people from using drugs. In fact, drug use has increased in Finland ever since the 1960's both among the adult and youth populations (Hakkarainen et al., 2020, pp. 456–466). According to a 2020 report from Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare, as drug use has expanded, harm from drugs among young users has increased significantly in the 21st century, including the number of drug poisoning deaths and people who use drugs problematically (Rönkä et al., 2020). Young people are using more drugs than previous generations (Police, 2021) and Finland experiences a disproportionately high number of drug-related fatalities compared to other EU countries (Statistics, 2024). On top of that, not only are youths,

categorized as individuals aged 15–24 years (United Nations, n.d.) and used interchangeably with young people, using drugs at higher rates than before, but they are also more often involved in illegal drug trade.

The transition from selling drugs, used interchangeably with drug dealing, on the streets onto social media platforms has made it easier for anyone to sell – even for underaged youth (Demant et al., 2019). This has not gone unnoticed by the police, since the drug crime situation in Finland has been a cause for concern for a long time now and has made police worried about the risk of adolescents drifting into drug crime and being hired into international crime organizations (Aholuoto & Aalto, 2026). In fact, young people's increased involvement in delinquent youth gangs where they terrorize the streets of Helsinki has been linked to drug selling (IS Työryhmä, 2023), glorification of crime (Ahjopalo, 2021; Silfsten & Peltomäki, 2023), and to the fear of Finland being soon on the same path with Sweden, where brutal gang violence has become everyday life in certain parts of the country (Jokinen, 2022). The increase in young people's drug selling and violence related crimes has also been noticed in the work of a Finnish third-sector youth work organization, Children of the Station.

Children of the Station is a non-profit, non-governmental organization (NGO) that works diversely with children and youth. They, for example, run a youth café, encounter youth in public spaces, do mediation and interventions in school bullying cases, and support young people who suffer from substance abuse and escalating criminal behavior. While drug use and related crime are well-known themes in their work, recently, they have stumbled upon a new phenomenon. Over the past few years in their work, Children of the Station have come across with minors who have sold drugs for money and not to finance their own drug use, which is a more familiar phenomenon. From their experience, drug selling is most often linked to one's own drug use, since it enables to maintain addiction, by allowing people to obtain and finance their drugs. However, this is rarely the case for profit-oriented sellers. Indeed, those who sell for profit differ from those who sell to finance their own use.

Evidently, selling drugs for financial profit while being underage can be explained by classical criminological strain theory (Merton, 1938): young people sell drugs for financial profit because they feel pressure to gain money but lack the legitimate ways to do so, thus, they turn into illegal ways. While this is likely true for underaged drug sellers as well, it represents a simplistic and short-sighted explanation, highlighting the need to look beyond surface-level interpretation. Improving our understanding for young people who sell drugs is especially important considering that they are in a vulnerable time of their life, where engaging in criminal behavior can have long standing impacts on their futures. Additionally, a deeper understanding of their experiences can contribute to more tools

in helping young people out of criminal cycles. In other words, with research focusing more on adult dealers, this thesis provides complementary insight on young people selling drugs for financial profit in Finland.

1.1 Research aim and question

The aim of this thesis is to expand our knowledge on how young people make sense of their drug selling and construct drug dealer identities in Finland, utilizing semi-structured interviews. In this research, making sense refers to how people make meaning in their actions through storytelling, following the approach in narrative criminology (Presser, 2009). Since the ways that people tell stories reveal how they perceive themselves and the world around them, examining the narratives of drug sellers provides insight into how they make sense of their involvement in illicit activities, as well as how they justify or neutralize behaviors they recognize as illegal or morally questionable (Presser, 2009). Additionally, since identity is constructed through storytelling and meaning making, exploring the narrative identities of drug sellers can reveal how they navigate their moral boundaries and how it shapes their choices of the continuation of their drug selling careers (McAdams & McLean, 2013). The research question guiding this research is:

How do young people, who have sold drugs for financial profit while underage, make sense of their drug selling and construct drug dealer identities?

By answering this question, this study can provide insight into some young people's experiences that have not yet been heard and provide valuable information that can benefit both the work of Children of the Station and scholarly research.

1.2 Outline

This thesis is divided into six chapters, of which this introduction is the first. The second chapter, presenting the previous research, illustrates how the previous research has focused predominantly on survey data, leaving the lived experiences of young people's drug selling secondary. The third chapter includes an overview of narrative criminology and narrative identity theory, which are used in analysis to interpret the narratives of drug sellers. The fourth chapter presents methodological choices and argues that narrative analysis is a fruitful approach for finding meaning in storytelling. The fifth chapter presents the analysis of this thesis, that includes how the participants described their first involvement in drug selling, how they framed themselves as good, moral sellers, as well as how they saw their selling not only as a quick and easy way to earn money but as a business opportunity.

Additionally, the findings end in the presentation of the narrative identities participants constructed, that either desisted or persisted in criminal identities. Finally, in the sixth chapter, the thesis presents the conclusion and discussion of the analysis and how they relate to previous research and Finnish society.

2. Previous research

Current research focusing on youth drug dealing remains relatively limited, often concentrating in the context of United States, and reliant on quantitative methods (see e.g. Shook et al., 2013; Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998; Vaughn et al., 2011). The following section provides a general overview of previous research on youth drug dealing and illustrates the gap in qualitative research, which this thesis aims to fill. For the purpose of this study, first, the drug legislation and attitudes of drug use in Finland will be discussed to better understand the context in which young people are selling illicit substances. After that, previous research is presented.

2.1 Drug use, laws and attitudes in Finland

As mentioned before, drugs are heavily regulated and policed in Finland. All types of use, sales and possessions of drugs are illegal, and penalties vary from fines up to ten-year prison sentences (Narcotics Act, 2008). The age of criminal responsibility in Finland is 15 and minors are not fined for their first drug offences but are interviewed by the police and guided towards social work and rehabilitation (Police, 2026). The list of drugs considered illegal is lengthy. In addition to including the most well-known drugs, such as cannabis, amphetamine, cocaine, heroin, ecstasy, and hallucinogenic mushrooms, it also includes certain pharmaceutical substances intended for medical use, such as buprenorphine and opioids, when they are misused as drugs (Narcotics Act, 2008; THL, 2023, p. 6). From these, the most common used and tried drug in Finland is cannabis, after which comes the use of sedatives, sleep aids, and painkillers for non-medical purposes, and stimulants like amphetamine and ecstasy (THL, 2023, p. 3). Despite the heavy regulations, drug use in Finland has increased over the years.

Even though drug use was marginal in Finland compared to other Western European countries up until the 1990s, it has quadrupled since (Rönkä et al., 2020). The emergence of internet and borders opening to international traffic enabled drug use culture to arrive in peripheral Europe too (Rönkä et al., 2020). Nowadays almost a third of Finns have tried or used some drug at some point in their lives, and from young adults almost half (THL, 2023). Indeed, younger generations experiment and use more substances than older generations (Hakkarainen et al., 2020). However, the rise in drug use has been accompanied by unwanted consequences. In addition to the increase in drug-related deaths and other health risks (Rönkä et al., 2020), the shift of drug sales to the internet and social media platforms has made drugs available for more young people who would not have been exposed to them otherwise, which is suggested to tempt users to expand their drugs of choices (Demant et al., 2019,

p. 4). Drug use is not the only thing that has changed over the years in Finland, so have attitudes towards them.

Especially attitudes towards cannabis use have loosened up both among youth and adult populations. People do not consider cannabis as harmful of a substance as before, which contributes to the increase of cannabis use (Karjalainen et al., 2019, p. 318). Nevertheless, changes in attitudes have not yet been followed by policy changes, even though multiple citizens' initiatives to legalize cannabis have been submitted to Parliament over the years, most recently in February 2026 (Eduskunta, 2024). The legalization of cannabis is not the only policy change that has been discussed in public debate. Additionally, the decriminalization of drug use, to lower the threshold to seek help for drug problems, and so-called drug use rooms, where especially intravenous drug users can change to clean needles and use them under medical supervision, have been under consideration by politicians (Eduskunta, 2023). No changes have been made so far, and politicians have been extremely hesitant even about trying out the drug use rooms, because some believe they normalize or even increase usage (Aaltonen, 2024). However, media presentations play a crucial role in influencing public views on drugs, and more broadly, on crime.

Media uses and produces narratives of crime that affect societal attitudes towards them, which has been emphasized in cultural criminology for a long time already. As Jeff Ferrell (1999, pp. 411–412) argues, the way media discusses about crime and crime prevention influences how the public perceives these phenomena, and modern policing cannot be separated from its connection to the media. In the case of cannabis use, for example, increased media coverage emphasizing the medical benefits of cannabis is likely to influence public attitudes by contributing to more positive and accepting perceptions of its use. Another example, moving from cannabis use itself to crime associated with it, is how the Finnish media has linked the youth's increased violent crimes in the 2020's to deviant 'street gangs', as discussed in the working paper of the Finnish Youth Research Society (Fransberg et al., 2026, pp. 10–20).

According to media publications (see e.g. Ahjopalo, 2021; Jokinen, 2022; Kantola, 2023; Puukka & Nelskylä, 2023), the rising youth criminality in Finland has been linked to delinquent youth subcultures that spend time together in "street gangs", consisting mainly of youth with immigrant backgrounds, who consume specific kinds of violence inciting popular culture products, and glorify crime, further inducing the fear of Finland going to the "Swedish path" of brutal gang criminality soon taking over the Finnish streets (Fransberg et al., 2026, pp. 10–20). However, these narratives have limited back up in research, suggesting that normal group activities of young people are easily

mixed up with delinquency, which endangers youth's ways of social expression and contributes to possible stigmatization of immigrant background youth (p. 20). Thus, media presentations can have unwanted and harmful consequences for innocent people. This section has now presented the current debates on drug use and laws in Finland, linking it to the effects of media narratives. To situate the study further, previous research on drug dealing will be presented.

2.2 Youth drug dealing research

Research on youth drug dealing, especially on minors, is limited. As Sandberg and Copes (2013) highlight in relation to ethnographic studies, researching offenders and especially drug dealers is not only difficult to gain access to the field, but raises multiple ethical and safety questions. Researchers must consider ethical issues throughout the research process, for example, regarding whether intoxicated participants are able to give informed consent, since drug dealing and use often go hand in hand, as well as how to balance between ensuring participant anonymity and when to intervene if witnessing crimes or plans to commit them (p. 193). These ethical considerations do not apply only to ethnographic research but to qualitative research on drug dealing overall and are even further emphasized when participants are young or even minors. Presumably for this reason, a considerable amount of research on youth drug dealing has been quantitative and based on survey data.

Interestingly, the research on youth's and minors drug dealing seems to be fairly dated and often based in USA on either national surveys (e.g. Fairlie, 2002; Shook et al., 2013; Vaughn et al., 2011), surveys in juvenile residential facilities (Shook et al., 2011), to detained youth (Korf et al., 2008), and student surveys in either high school (Smart et al., 1992) or college (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998). In Finland, even though young people's drug use is studied regularly (e.g. in *Kouluterveyskysely*, 2025; *Nuorisori-kollisuuskysely*, 2020), according to my knowledge, only in the two most recent International Self-Report Delinquency Studies (ISRD) can data on Finnish youth's drug selling be found (Kaakinen & Raeste, 2024). Survey data, however, does not provide in depth knowledge on the lived experiences of drug dealers and leaves out the voices of hard-to-reach youth, which many problematic drug users and sellers are, who are outside of service systems and thus not included in survey data (Kaskela et al., 2026, pp. 2–3). Therefore, this thesis can contribute both to the existing gap in qualitative youth drug dealing research and to include voices in research that are often left out.

Though relatively limited, some qualitative research on youth drug dealing has been conducted over the years. For example, even though more concentrating on young adults, Andreson's (1999) and Bourgois' (2002) classic ethnographic studies have meritoriously examined how drug dealing in

underprivileged areas can sometimes be viewed as the only available source of income for young people, and an alternative lifestyle to the youth's in the area (Bourgois, 2002, pp. 10–11). In Finland, similar extensive ethnography on drug markets in the capital Helsinki has been conducted in the early 2000s (Perälä, 2011) and at least a qualitative thesis has been conducted about adult drug dealers in Turku (Räisänen, 2020). Additionally, in the working paper of the Finnish Youth Research Society (Fransberg et al., 2026, p. 42), young people's profit oriented "solo entrepreneurship" was linked to illicit e-cigarette (vape) sales, which in some cases was suggested to potentially drift some youth into drug selling. Yet, research focusing on young people and minors who sell drugs seems to be missing. On top of extensive ethnographies, in a study by Duck (2016), an ethnography of a young person's path to becoming a drug dealer has been conducted. Similarly in Denmark Søgård and Bræmer (2023) studied how young adults drifted into profit-generating drug selling, and Stallwitz and colleagues (2024) studied how young Afghan men who came to Sweden as unaccompanied minors started using and selling drugs.

What is known then about youth who sell drugs, according to previous research, is that even though they are a heterogeneous group of people (Shook et al., 2013), most young drug sellers are boys (Smart et al., 1992, p. 1563), who use drugs (Vaughn et al., 2011), and sell them to other youth (Korf et al., 2008, pp. 154–155) to finance their own drug use (Shook et al., 2013, p. 373). Youth who sell drug are also more likely to not have a parent involved in their life or someone to talk about serious problems (Vaughn et al., 2011) and they are more likely to engage in other risky and delinquent behaviors as well, than youth who do not sell drugs (Shook et al., 2013, p. 365). Encountering violence is also common and perceived as a part of drug dealing (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998, p. 42).

Selling drugs to ensure own drug use and selling for economic gain are both acknowledged reasons for selling, since drug dealing both provides access to drugs and the income from sales enables to buy more (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998, p. 37). It is, however, unclear if it is the drug use that leads to dealing or the other way around (Shook et al., 2013, pp. 373). In the case of Afghan men who came to Sweden as unaccompanied minors and started using and selling drugs after arrival (Stallwitz et al., 2024), drug use and selling were both to self-medicate and to make money in a difficult situation. Even though financial gain might be a prevalent reason to start selling, research suggests that choosing a career as drug dealer is rarely a conscious choice (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998, p. 40), implying that some youth drift into dealing.

Whether someone drifts into dealing or not depends a lot about the situational contexts and choices that are available for them (Duck, 2016, p. 1081), because for many, drug dealing is intended to be a short-term experience to fix the lack of legitimate jobs (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998, p. 42). For example, in Anderson's study (1999, pp. 110–113), drug dealing was described as the only accessible way to gain money for young black men in Philadelphia, who were unable to get legitimate jobs. Many of them were able to quit selling once they got legitimate income from somewhere else, thus drug dealing offering only temporary help. However, not all were able to do so once they grew dependent on the income. Due to the economic need for drug dealing for the whole family, even though parents of dealers disliked their selling, they often overlooked it when they benefited from it, thus indirectly approving illicit drug trade (pp. 132–135). In addition, some recounted becoming addicted not only to the income, but to adventure, thrill and respect that they gained through sales (pp. 114–118).

On a more positive note, according to a study by Fairlie and colleagues (2002, pp. 561–562), the youth who do get legitimate jobs after selling drugs are more likely to become entrepreneurs, highlighting the important entrepreneurial skills they have developed through drug selling. According to previous research, even when selling drugs, young people seldom see themselves as real drug dealers. Young people do not consider them as drug dealers easily because they reserve that designation for someone at a higher echelon of the distribution hierarchy (Korf et al., 2008, p. 160). Thus, identifying as a drug dealer comes gradually and only after having successfully sold drugs for a while (Tewksbury & Mustaine, 1998, p. 40). Additionally, many drug sellers reject drug dealer identities and rather describe themselves something more socially acceptable, like entrepreneurs (Carroll & Dickinson, 2025) or friends who supply drugs to friends (Coomber et al., 2016).

This chapter has illustrated an existing gap in qualitative youth drug dealing research which this thesis aims to fill. Next, the theoretical framework of this study is presented and argued how narrative approach can provide insight into young people's sense making and identity construction in illicit drug selling.

3. Theory

To expand our knowledge on how young people make sense of their drug selling and construct drug dealer identities, this chapter presents the theoretical framework for analyzing the narratives of offenders, first drawing on narrative criminology (Presser, 2009; Sandberg, 2010) and extending to narrative identity theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013). In this research, making sense refers to how people make meaning in their actions through storytelling, following the approach in narrative criminology (Presser, 2009), rather than the theoretical perspective known as sensemaking (e.g. Weick, 1995). Similarly, identity construction is understood through the lens of narrative identity theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013), where identity is constructed through storytelling. Thus, narrative criminology offers a foundation on how to examine narratives of offenders, where narrative identity compliments the understanding of criminal identity construction through storytelling. Both narratives and narrative identities of drug dealers have been researched before (see for example Carroll & Dickinson, 2025; Dickinson & Jacques, 2019; Dickinson & Wright, 2017), but not in the context of specifically young, underage dealers, who sell drugs for financial profit and are at a different, yet pivotal point in their life in means of identity construction.

3.1 Narrative Criminology

Narrative criminology is a theoretical approach first introduced by Lois Presser (2009) and further developed by Sveinung Sandberg (2010), where the interest is in how perpetrators and bystanders use storytelling to make sense of their involvement in delinquent and criminal behavior. Narratives, used interchangeably as stories, people describe when recounting past experiences reveal how they view themselves and the world they live in (Sandberg, 2010, p. 448). Through examining narratives of offenders, it is possible to see how criminal behavior is legitimized and how meaning for these actions is constructed (Presser, 2009, pp. 179–187). Thus, by analyzing the narratives of young drug dealers, it is possible to see how they make sense of their involvement in the drug selling scene; whether they see their selling as business (Carroll & Dickinson, 2025), as something good friends do to supply drugs to acquaintances (Coomber et al., 2016) or possibly something else.

Presser (2009, pp. 181–186) conceptualizes criminological narratives in three ways: narratives as record, narratives as interpretation and a constitutive view of narrative. Narrative as record simply indicates criminal behavior and what has happened (p. 182). An example of this is when narrator recalls how they once stole food from a grocery store. Narratives as interpretation on the other hand serve not only record of what has happened but as a record of what has happened through a social

lens (p. 182). For example, a recollection of stealing food from a grocery store becomes a narrative as interpretation when narrator adds that the reason for stealing food is that they cannot afford to buy it due to unemployment. In other words, narratives as interpretation are the narrator's socially constructed versions of what has happened. Both ways still only reflect reality, whereas the constitutive view of narrative not just reflects reality but influences it (p. 184).

In the constitutive view, narratives do not only tell what has happened, but they also influence and guide future behavior, fulfilling the narrator's narrative identities (Presser, 2009, pp. 184–186). For example, stealing food from a grocery store due to unemployment becomes a constitutive view of narrative, when the narrator adds further that their unemployment is a result of an economically bad situation and a lack of jobs. Drawing on the lack of attainable jobs can be used to justify why the narrator is forced to continue stealing food, thus the constitutive view of narrative guiding and legitimizing future behavior (p. 184). In this thesis, the main interest is in the narratives as interpretations that reveal how young drug dealers make sense of their selling, and in the constitutive view of narratives, that present how they construct drug dealer identities, which influences their continuation of drug selling careers. To understand how narratives can be interpreted, first the concept of narrative must be defined.

Even though there is no unanimous definition of what a narrative is, it is broadly understood as a subjective recollection of a life event in the form of a story (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 127) that answers why something happened (Presser, 2009, p. 179). Because narrative is a story, and not just a list of events in random order (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 127), it includes some of the basic elements of a story: a sense of time, an organized plot, different characters with different roles and most importantly, interpretation (Sandberg, 2022). A story connects the past to present, or even future, where events happen in a chain, some characters being described as evil villains and others as righteous heroes. Thus, with closer examination of how offenders e.g. recall the sequence of events in their stories, how they describe different characters and how they portray themselves, reveals how they make sense and justify their involvement in illicit activities. To put simply, the narratives of offenders in narrative criminology are interpreted through story elements familiar from narrative analysis, that reveal narrators' moral evaluation and boundary work (Sandberg, 2022). Even though narrative criminology has only been conceptualized less than a quarter of a century ago (Presser, 2009; Sandberg, 2010), analyzing narratives has been an important part of criminology for a much longer time.

The neutralization theory by Sykes and Matza (1957) is one of the earliest criminological theories that were interested in narratives of offenders. According to the neutralization theory, perpetrators often try to neutralize their actions to reduce feelings of guilt, even when they acknowledge that they have done something wrong. Sykes and Matza developed a list of five neutralization techniques that other researchers have later complemented. The original neutralization techniques included, for example, denial of responsibility, denial of injury and denial of the victim. Through these, one can for example deny that something bad happened because of their actions, belittle the harm they have caused or deny that anyone was hurt. To give an example, in Dickinson and Jacques' study (2019), drug dealers used denial of injury to deny that their drug selling harmed anyone, by claiming that none of the customers were forced to buy illicit substances and that they just helped them to get something they wanted. However, narrative criminology has criticized the simplistic categorization of different neutralization techniques and urged to go beyond them.

As argued by Presser (2009, p. 187), the categorization of different neutralization techniques oversimplifies individuals complex meaning making processes and treats justifications as fixed, overlooking the complex circumstances where crime is committed. She further argues that, since neutralizations are only used to explain and rationalize one offense, not long-lasting criminal and delinquent behavior, they cannot provide insight into broader identity construction processes and thus cannot be seen to indicate any future behavior either. Still, neutralization techniques can be used to help identify narratives in which offenders neutralize and make sense of their involvement in illicit activities. In this study, neutralization techniques are used to interpret how young drug dealers justify their involvement in illegal drug trade and how they reduce guilt in distributing potentially harmful substances. On top of neutralization theory, analyzing narratives of offenders have been in great interest and an important part of cultural criminology from the beginning.

In Jack Katz's work *Seductions of crime* (Katz, 1988), the narratives of offenders were analyzed to understand how people involved in crime made sense of their actions and motives. Groundbreakingly, and as a critic of mainstream criminology, he acknowledged that the motives for committing crimes and being involved in delinquent behavior do not always stem from economic pressures, but at times it can be purely pleasurable and exciting to break the law. Katz argues that the adrenaline and fear of getting caught contribute to the excitement of criminal activities, particularly for adolescents (pp. 52–53). He describes this as the 'sneaky thrill', that happens when a person secretly feels drawn to breaking the rules, manages their feelings to act normally, resulting in enjoyment and the exciting feeling of having pulled it off. If young people's increased involvement in delinquent youth gangs and drug dealing is indeed linked to the glorification of crime (IS Työryhmä, 2023; Silfsten &

Peltomäki, 2023), similar “sneaky thrill” narratives described by Katz can be expected to emerge from the data.

Narrative criminology has been criticized for depending solely on perpetrator’s own point of views on incidents that cannot be taken as self-evident truths (Sandberg, 2010). This is because the stories people tell are not always true. People tend to belittle, exaggerate or leave things untold from stories to present themselves in a better light, depending on what they think the audience wants to hear (p. 453). For example, in this study, participants are recruited through an NGO that supports them in quitting criminal behavior. They agree to participate because the important insights they can provide about a new phenomenon can aid Children of the Station help other young people in similar situations. Thus, it is expected that the participants are not primarily going to boast about their experiences in illicit activities, as they more likely would to their friends. But rather, they might feel the need to justify why they are still doing something they acknowledge is wrong or bad and possibly belittle the harm they have caused by omitting details from stories.

This, however, does not make analyzing narratives unreliable, on the contrary, it makes analyzing narratives more interesting. In narrative criminology, whether the narratives people tell are objectively true or not is irrelevant, because the interest is in the way they interpreted situations and the fact that they chose to tell it in a certain way (Presser, 2009, p. 183). Put simply, whether participants are telling the truth does not matter, because even if the stories they tell are false, they still reflect their values, identities and the cultures they come from (Sandberg, 2010, p. 448). Therefore, the narratives participants use to justify their illicit drug sales reflect their values, morals and self-images, whether the stories they tell are completely true or not.

To conclude, narrative criminology offers a way to examine how young drug dealers make sense and justify their selling by analyzing the ways they narrate their involvement in illicit activities. For example, analyzing how they describe different characters in their stories reveals moral boundary work and self-positioning, and the neutralization techniques can be used to identify justifications. To deepen the understanding of how young people construct their drug dealer identities, narrative identity theory is extended to analyze identity construction through storytelling.

3.2 Narrative Identity

Originally emerging from personality psychology (McAdams, 1993, as cited in Maruna & Liem, 2021), narrative identity theory and studies of identity have had a significant influence on narrative criminology (p. 128). While narrative criminology provides insight into how offenders make sense and justify their involvement in illicit activities through storytelling (Presser, 2009; Sandberg, 2010), narrative identity theory complements this approach by acknowledging that identity, too, is constructed through life stories and that identities affect sense-making and justification processes (Loseke, 2007, p. 661). Additionally, narrative identities affect decision making, since they determine what people see is possible for them in life (McAdams & McLean, 2013, p. 233). For example, someone who has never done well in school is unlikely to consider a career in research because they view it as unachievable. Similarly, the narrative selves of young drug dealers might influence how they see their future and the possible continuation of their drug selling careers.

Narrative identity is constructed with recounts of past life experiences, that are evaluated through present identities and further reflected with aspired future identities, all to create a coherent account of self-identity through time (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Coherent self-identity is important for humans to find meaning and sense in their lives (p. 233). Thus, when people act in ways that conflict with their identity, they often feel compelled to justify their behavior to maintain a coherent sense of self. According to narrative identity theory, this is done with storytelling and identity work. For example, in a study by Carroll and Dickinson (2025), people who sold drug were found to reject drug dealer identities to distant themselves from the negative stereotypes of dealers. Instead of calling themselves drug dealers, they framed themselves as something positive: friends, entrepreneurs or risk managers. Through this identity work and by reframing illicit drug selling as something positive, they were able to maintain a coherent sense of self while doing something they acknowledged was morally questionable. Indeed, narrative identity is often constructed through symbolic boundary work and by distancing what the narrator is not, like in this example, a drug dealer (Copes, 2016; Lamont & Molnár, 2002, as cited in Sandberg, 2022, p. 225).

Loseke (2007) sees that narrative identity is produced in three levels of social life that shape each other and are inextricably interrelated: cultural, institutional and organizational, and personal levels. These different types of narrative identities are inherently reflexive and affect how we understand ourselves and others. Cultural narratives are the most broadly shared stories that shape how people understand themselves and the world they live in (p. 663–667). An example of a cultural narrative is the widespread story valuing individualism and entrepreneurship, emphasizing hard work and

achieving success through one's own efforts. Institutional and organizational identities on the other hand are less broad and unlike cultural narratives, they are consequential (p. 667–670). This means that the identity categories people are assigned to by institutions and organizations affect what is possible for them to do. For example, it is considered unacceptable for a president to be publicly intoxicated because their institutional role expects them to represent their country wherever they go. Similarly, a child deemed troubled in school is likely to be treated differently by teachers and given other opportunities than a gifted “straight-a” student.

Personal narrative identities then are the stories that individuals construct from cultural storylines and personal experiences, and which are negotiated constantly, to present a coherent sense of self (Loseke, 2007, pp. 672–675). To put simply, personal narrative identities are constructed through individuals' life experiences, which wider societal, cultural meanings, and institutional environments surrounding them affect. Thus, all these different elements need to be considered when analyzing how young people construct narrative identities through drug dealing. Following Loseke (2007), the personal narrative identities young drug dealers construct are analyzed through the lens of cultural, organizational and institutional narratives and how participants draw on these and negotiate between them. However, not only are narrative identities a combination of cultural, organizational, institutional and personal narratives, but they are also co-produced with audience, which can have a decisive effect especially in vulnerable youth.

While identity construction continues throughout life, youth is seen as the emergent development of life stories (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Narrative identity has been thought to emerge first in late-adolescence and early adult years, both because of cognitive development and social pressures, that push youth to decide what they want to study and do in the future, in other words, to figure out who they are (p. 235). Interestingly, studies suggest that by gaining positive feedback and agreement from important people in an individual's personal story, they are more likely to internalize them (p. 236). Meaning that, especially in youth, gaining positive feedback on narrative identities can have a determining effect on young people's futures. Narratives are also always co-produced with the audience (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 137), which means that, for example, the work of Children of the Station influences young people's narrative identities. Since Children of the Station helps young people to create and maintain a crime-free life, it can be suggested that they contribute to their desistance narratives. To understand narrative identity further and apply it in the analysis of youths selling drugs for profit, I will now turn to desistance research.

As Maruna and Liem argue (2021, pp. 131–133), desistance research in criminology has capitalized on offenders’ narrative identities and has become a full-blown research area. Desistance research, concentrating on understanding how individuals can exit criminal lifestyles, argues that new narrative identities, apart from criminal ones, are crucial for an exit to succeed. For example, it has been argued that to be able to recover fully from addictions, one needs to develop alternative narrative identities, because addict identities can prolong addiction problems. Thus, strong identity narratives, especially an internalized desistance narrative, help to stay on the “right path”, even when facing difficulties that are inevitable in the process. While personal narrative identities are never uniform and resistance narratives differ based on narrator’s background factors, the most successful desistance narratives have been found to be redemption narratives, where negative past experiences are overcome by positive ones.

Continuing on Maruna and Liem (2021, pp. 131–133), typically in redemption narratives, narrators see themselves as good people whose past offences were out of their control, resulting from things such as peer pressure or limited opportunities. After a shift in agency or self-efficacy, where own choices, actions and control are highlighted, instead of accepting to be a victim of circumstances, people can quit offending and get back to their good core selves. Additionally, redemption narratives are linked to a desire to give back to one’s community and help others, which works as reaffirming desistance. In contrast to successful desistance stemming from redemption narratives, condemnation narratives, in which the narrators describe themselves as being stuck or doomed to an inevitable criminal lifestyle, were linked to persistence in criminal activity (p. 132). This highlights the role of agency in shaping narrative identities, which becomes relevant when analyzing how participants navigate identity shifts related to entering or exiting drug selling, possibly drawing on desistance narratives that have been built in the work with Children of the Station. In fact, agency is not only central in desistance narratives but overall in identity narratives.

As defined by McAdams and McLean (2013, p. 234), agency refers to narrators’ ability to affect or take control of their own life. It is not only highlighted in desistance narratives, but agency is constantly negotiated in narrative identity construction. In storytelling, narrators position themselves between active decision makers with high agencies and passive victims of life circumstances. Thus, by examining how young drug sellers narrate their agency, it is possible to see how they understand their control of selling and responsibility as drug dealers. Particularly interesting is to examine how participants frame their entering and exiting in drug selling, since it implicates desistance and persistence narratives. Additionally, agency is not trivial, in fact, high agency has been linked to empowerment and better well-being, for example when narrators find redemptive meaning in life

setbacks and highlight own agency and finding oneself in their life stories (p. 234–235). Indeed, storytelling is a balance between personal agency and socially available cultural narratives, where people actively choose to tell stories on their own but are constraint to the social and cultural narratives that are available to them (Sandberg, 2010, p. 461).

To conclude, this chapter has described how analyzing narrative identities of young people who sell drugs for profit can provide insight into how participants view themselves, the world they live in and how they justify their deviant actions through identity construction. How participants construct narrative identities as drug dealers can be analyzed by interpreting how they convey identity work in relation to other characters in stories, their desired selves, as well as cultural, institutional and organizational narrative identities. These, on the other hand, can reflect how they see the possible continuation of their drug selling careers, by analyzing how participants describe their own agency in entering and exiting drug selling. Continuing to the next chapter, methodological choices of this thesis are presented.

4. Methodology

To answer the research question and to expand our knowledge on how young people make sense of their drug selling and drug dealer identities in Finland, a qualitative approach was taken, and a narrative analysis was conducted on individual, thematic and semi-structured interviews with young people who sell, or had sold, drugs for financial profit while being underage. Researching young people and minors already poses ethical challenges that are further accentuated when researching them about their delinquent and criminal activity, which requires special attention to ensure both the anonymity and safety of the participants. In light of this, the methodological choices, starting with the research setting, data collection and sampling, analysis methods and ethical considerations, as well as the limitations of the methodological choices, are discussed in the present chapter.

4.1 Research setting

This study would not have been possible to conduct without the internship that I carried out at Children of the Station last Fall. Firstly, Children of the Station gave me access to a population that is often considered a hard-to-reach for research, young drug dealers (Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 2), and facilitated interviews where I was able to interview even underaged youth, that alone would have been ethically impossible for me on my own. Usually gaining access to people who sell drugs is difficult from the outside, since many are wary of outsiders and assume easily that any outsider is some kind of an authority or police (Duck, 2016, p. 1071; Sandberg & Copes, 2013, p. 180). Through Children of the Station however, and because of the strong bond between the workers and the young people they work with, I was able to earn the trust of the interviewees. Children of the Station would not have been able to facilitate the interviews for me if they had not known me and trusted my abilities to conduct this research.

For our cooperation with my thesis, it was vital for Children of the Station that I understood the nature of their work. During my internship I had the opportunity to familiarize myself with the young people they work with and the kinds of realities that they live in, which can involve both substance abuse and criminal activities. Children of the Station's work is free, voluntary and focused on long-term harm-reducing work alongside young people, as opposed to expecting fast results in overcoming addictions and quitting all criminal behavior. Because young people's life situations can change rapidly, the work requires flexibility, patience and fast responses. All this meant, for example, that last-minute cancellations of meetings were a part of their job and something that I had to prepare for

the interviews too. After a mutual understanding of the practical aspects of interviewing the potential participants, Children of the Station were able to recruit interviewees for me.

4.2 Data collection and sampling

Participants were selected using a combination of convenience and purposive sampling (Given, 2008, p. 562). Convenience sampling, in which participants are selected based on accessibility, was used to recruit young people involved in criminal activities, whom Children of the Station work with. From this group, participants were further selected based on specific criteria using purposive sampling. To narrow down the participant pool to those matching the research focus, young people who had sold or were selling drugs for financial profit while underage were recruited through Children of the Station. The participant selection followed the United Nation's definition of young people (United Nations, n.d.), which also applies to who Children of Station primarily work with. Additionally, in the Finnish context, individuals are considered of legal age at 18, therefore, underage refers to anyone below 18 years old. This approach allowed the recruitment of a population often difficult to reach for research, young offenders (Kaskela et al., 2026; Sandberg & Copes, 2013). In total, seven participants were recruited, and interviews were conducted between February and April 2026.

The participants were between 15 and 24 years old, in line with the definition of young people (United Nations, n.d.), with a mean age of 19. Of these seven participants, five were boys and two girls. Regarding participants' backgrounds, all had had some form of contact with social services during childhood, and several had also interacted with authorities in both drug-related and unrelated cases. These experiences largely reflect the population Children of the Station work with, rather than being able to draw conclusions of broader backgrounds of young people involved in drug selling. Although ethnicity or immigration background was not directly asked, as it was not the focus of the study, it emerged in a few participants' stories when meaningful to them. However, to protect participants' identities, any information concerning possible immigration backgrounds is not reported. While all participants had started selling drugs while being underage, only a few reported still selling. The duration and types of substances sold varied, ranging from one participant who had sold only cannabis for a few months to others who had sold multiple substances over several years.

After participants were successfully recruited and had agreed to participate, interviews were chosen as the method of data collection because they are considered youth-friendly and provide a natural way to give a voice to young people, whose experiences are often interpreted through an adult perspective (Heath et al., 2009, p. 79). More specifically, thematic and semi-structured interviews

were conducted, in which predetermined questions guided the discussion while participants could speak freely about the themes most meaningful for them (Given, 2008, pp. 810–811). This also gave the researcher the possibility to ask follow-up questions. While none of the interviews were identical, the same recurring themes enabled similar and comparable narratives to arise in the analysis. Additionally, since the participants were young, efforts were made to keep the interview situations as comfortable as possible and reduce the distance between the researcher and participants. This included, for example, using same language and slang familiar to the participants and highlighting the researcher's position as a student, to encourage openness and authentic responses (Luker, 2008, p. 178).

The interviews were all held in person on private properties in either Children of the Station's office or other agreed premises, to ensure privacy and that the participants felt secure discussing sensitive topics. The interviews were conducted and analyzed in Finnish and quotes have later been translated into English for presentation in this thesis. The interviews ranged in length from 40 minutes to 1 hour and 15 minutes, with a mean duration of approximately 50 minutes per interview. The interviews were audio-recorded using researcher's personal phone, and the recordings were stored securely with a password, accessible only to the researcher. Facial recognition features were disabled during the study to further ensure that recordings containing sensitive material could not be misused. Due to the narrative approach of the study and the interest in both what is said and how things are said (Sandberg, 2022, p. 217), the recordings were transcribed in detail. After transcription and removal of any information that could identify participants, the recordings were deleted. Participant anonymity was maintained by assigning each participant a pseudonym. Additionally, some stories have been slightly modified or combined in the analysis, to further protect participant identity.

4.3 Analysis

To examine how young people make sense of their drug selling and construct drug dealer identities, narrative analysis was conducted on interview data (Riessman, 2008). While the analysis started with inductive coding, abductive coding was used in the end as well. After transcription as the first step in familiarizing with the data, each interview was reviewed multiple times and read as coherent stories to delve into the material. This was done to examine how participants narrated their involvement in drug selling as a whole with analyzing the plot and characters mentioned in their stories (Sandberg, 2022). All data was coded using NVivo. After initial thematic coding of the contexts of interviews, narrative coding was conducted using primarily thematic narrative analysis and performative/dialogic narrative analysis (Riessman, 2008).

First, a thematic narrative analysis was conducted to examine how participants make sense of their drug selling, i.e. what kind of narratives they use to justify and neutralize their involvement in illicit actions and what kind of common narratives can be found among participants (Riessman, 2008, pp. 53–76). This was done by concentrating on how deviant actions were evaluated (Sandberg, 2022, p. 218). After thematic narrative analysis, performative/dialogic narrative analysis was used to explore the narrative identities participants constructed through drug selling (Riessman, 2008, pp. 105–140). This was done by considering the context and audience of the narratives, that co-construct narrative identities, as well as analyzing the language and word choices of participants and how those are used for moral framing. Additionally, since narrative identity must be reconstructed when narrator has to justify an action that conflicts with their identity, structural narrative analysis was conducted to examine the turning points of these conflicted actions and how they were evaluated by participants to keep a coherent self-identity (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

4.4 Ethical considerations

Due to the double vulnerability of participants being both young and involved in criminal activity, special attention to ethical issues was given throughout the study and revisited regularly. The following will describe the practical steps that were taken throughout the research process. Studying young offenders and offenders in general is not simple and poses multiple ethical questions that the researcher must acknowledge beforehand. Ethical issues should not, however, automatically override the possible information that can be gained, since refraining from conducting research due to possible issues only further silences the voices of those who are already overlooked and under researched in society (Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 3; Ward, 2008, pp. 9–10). In this case, conducting the study and gaining deeper understanding of young people's involvement in drug selling in Finland was possible following the Swedish Ethical Review Authority's guidelines of research on humans (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, 2023) and those of the Children of the Stations work.

The ethical guidelines for Children of the Station's work also applied in conducting the interviews, which meant, for example, that I never met alone with the participants. Working in pairs is one of the principles of Children of the Station's work, but it also helped to secure participant's identities, because I never needed to get their contact information. The age limit for participants was limited to 15 years of age and over, both because of practical reasons of not needing parental approval, but also because they are more likely to understand their agreement to participate (Etikprövningsmyndigheten, 2023, p. 39). Informed verbal consent was recorded before the start of the interviews (Luker, 2008, p. 171) with the presence of the worker from Children of the Station as an additional support to ensure

that the young person is capable of consenting (Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 7). The interviewees were not reimbursed by the researcher in any way, but like in a typical meeting with the workers, they were often offered a meal. After informed consent was ensured, the worker left the room and during the interview itself, only the interviewee and the interviewer were present.

Verbal consent, instead of a written one, was decided on because not needing a signature helped to secure participant anonymity and it was expected that they might not have the patience to read a consent form (Heath et al., 2009, pp. 26–27; Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 3). This turned out to be a good decision, because even though all were given the opportunity to read the information on paper as well, only some wanted to skim it through (Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 7). The informed consent included, for example, the following. Participation was voluntary and the consent to participate was able to withdraw at any point of the research and during the interview. None of the questions asked in the interview had to be answered or discussed if the participant did not wish to do so. Participation, or the refusal of, did not affect their work with Children of the Station. Participation was anonym, meaning that in the final paper all personal information that the participant could be identified from was removed. However, they were reminded that there is always a chance that someone who knows them well can recognize them from the stories and events they tell in the interviews.

Evidently, to be able to research offenders, ensuring participants confidentiality is key, but even that has its limits. Researchers, for example, need to be prepared to hear about illegal activity, some of which participants might have been convicted of and some that have never been brought to the attention of the police, and decide what is serious enough for the researcher to intervene. In this study, the same general rule that has been acknowledged in ethnography was followed, where hearing about a serious crime being planned, where the life or health of a person, especially children or innocent third parties, is in danger, the researcher is obliged to tell the authorities (Sandberg & Copes, 2013, pp. 188, 193.). This was also emphasized for the participants in informed consent. Even though the interviews were well-prepared, the emotional impact of the material came as a surprise (Kaskela et al., 2026, p. 9). While participants were known to have been involved in criminal activity, the extent of some of their involvement was striking, particularly given their young age. In hindsight, this highlights the challenges of conducting research on sensitive topics, especially when accounts are shared by young participants, and underscores the importance of including young people's own voices in research.

The well-being of the participants was double-checked by the Children of the Station's workers who knew the participants well and asked how the interviews went afterwards, in case anything came up

that made the participants uncomfortable. Everything went accordingly with the interviews, perhaps because the participants are used to discussing these, sometimes heavy, themes with the workers and, even if these themes would be considered heavy for most, for the participants, it was about their everyday life. It is also possible that the interviews could have been therapeutic for the participants, as often is the case when researching people who sell drugs or are involved in other illegal activities, since it concerns topics that cannot be discussed with many people (Sandberg & Copes, 2013, p. 182). Nevertheless, even if nothing came up instantly after the interviews, the contact with Children of the Station continued normally and the young could bring things up later too, if needed.

4.5 Limitations

A limitation of this study's methodology is the small sample size of the interviews. Even after knowing the realities of interviewing the young people Children of the Station work with, it was still difficult to arrange the interviews. Young people's life situations change rapidly, and because the time reserved for data collection was limited, some good interview candidates were unfortunately left out because they were not available. Even though the aim of qualitative research is not to gain generalizable knowledge, when multiple participants bring up similar themes and narratives in interviews with same topic, it can be understood as social information that tells about something bigger rather than individual (Luker, 2008, p. 167). However, with this small sample, only indications of social information about young people's drug selling for profit can be found.

This chapter has presented the methodological choices made to examine how young profit-oriented drug sellers make sense of their illicit sales and construct drug dealing identities, that included adopting a narrative approach to analyze interviews both thematically and performatively, as well as ethical considerations. Now, moving onto analysis, where the narrative findings of this study are presented.

5. Analysis

In this section, the analysis of the study is presented. Drawing on narrative criminology (Presser, 2009) and narrative identity theory (McAdams & McLean, 2013), the analysis examines how young people make sense of their drug selling for financial profit and construct drug dealer identities based on interview data. The analysis explores how moral evaluation and neutralization techniques are used to justify and rationalize illicit drug sales through storytelling, as well as how drug dealer identities are constructed through symbolic boundary work. Since these processes of meaning-making and identity construction are closely intertwined in narratives, they cannot be meaningfully separated. Instead, the analysis is organized chronologically, from initial involvement in drug selling to possible exit.

5.1 Entry into drug selling

Evidently, since all the participants had sold drugs for economic gain, they had felt some kind of financial pressure to start selling drugs while still being underage (cf. Merton, 1938). For this, participants described two main reasons: selling to help their families pay the bills and to be able to buy and finance things for themselves. While financing own substance use was not a primary reason to start selling drugs for any of the participants, many used profits from drug selling to both legal and illegal substances such as alcohol and cannabis. Mainly, however, the money was used for clothes and being able to go out for dinner with friends, or even holidays abroad. For many, the frustration of growing up without money and never receiving financial support from their parents was described as a driving force that pushed them to find their own ways of earning. To this, selling drugs was seen as a great opportunity to gain “quick and easy money”. For example, when Sam was asked why he initially started selling drugs he described coming from a poor family and never having money as a child. Drug selling, for him, appeared as an opportunity to both help his family out and get a little extra for himself too:

Interviewer: Did you have slightly different reasons to sell at that time [when being younger]?

Sam: Well yeah, basically I didn't really have any fucking money ever. And then there was an opportunity to get money for yourself. So, I kind of went off to do some stuff.

Interviewer: You didn't have money in your family or? What do you mean?

Sam: Yeah, fuck no. My family is fucking poor. Like honestly. I do remember in...was I maybe fifteen or something, when my mom asked me to loan 200 euros to pay the rent, you know?"

In this excerpt, Sam describes seizing the opportunity to get money, which he did not usually have, by starting to sell drugs. He also recounts how her mother had asked him to help to pay the rent when he was only a teenager, as evidence that he grew up in a poor family. Thus, Sam justifies his first involvement in drug selling as both a necessity coming from external pressure and as an opportunity to get extra money for himself. Portraying himself as a victim of his poor childhood circumstances can be seen as a neutralization technique of denying full responsibility (Sykes & Matza, 1957), which he uses to frame an illegal action as morally acceptable (Presser, 2009). Additionally, by seizing the opportunity to get out of poverty by starting to sell drugs, he emphasizes his own choice and agency in not accepting his fate as a victim of circumstances, but as someone who takes initiative (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Thus, he constructs a narrative identity, where he is not only a caring family member, but also responsible and resourceful initiative taker.

Similarly, Frankie emphasized his frustration of childhood home circumstances as a force to start making own money. He recounted how the lack of clothes he liked, the simple, repetitive food that was served at home and parents' money being spent to support their alcoholism started to "get on his nerves" and him starting to sell drugs spontaneously. Eventually, being able to decide for himself what and where he eats, which kind of clothes he buys, and not needing to ask for permission anymore on what he spends his money on, acted as a solution to being tied to inattentive parents:

Once that happened, I didn't have that problem [being tied to parents' income] anymore. I got clothes, I got food, I got whatever I needed, I didn't have to ask for anything anymore, you know, there wasn't, if I wanted a phone, you know, I sold some stuff and got a new phone and everything, so you know, then it's like, this is just so damn good, like the vibe, you know, there aren't any problems with anything, like when you're still so young and stuff... you know.

In this excerpt, Frankie recounts how liberating and good it felt when he realized that he could finally get what he wanted, whenever he wanted. And if he did not have the money at the moment, he knew how to get it: he just needed to sell a bit more. Even though Frankie narrated that he just "happened to start selling", the moment he realized it solved his frustration of never having anything, acted as a turning point, from which on he took full agency in his selling (McAdams & McLean, 2013). From a narrative criminology perspective (Presser, 2009), both for Sam and Frankie, the freedom to take control of own consumption enabled by the profits from drug sales was experienced as liberating.

This way, a morally wrong action was reframed positively, and became associated with self-empowerment and independence (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

Another common theme among all the participants was that the initiation of drug selling often happened through older friends or other people they knew. For example, one participant, after acting as a middleman to more experienced sellers and getting a share of the profits, was offered to sell drugs with buying them on debt. Another recounted how they were guided step-by-step on how to create an account on messaging platforms and put up announcements, through which potential customers could contact them. Despite these depictions of being almost enticed into selling seemed conflicting with the narratives of selling being an independent choice, participants held on to their agency (McAdams & McLean, 2013). It was important for them to highlight drug selling as something they did for themselves because they wanted to, never for someone else – even when being tied to other actors in the field through debt. Perhaps, by highlighting their own agency, participants wanted to reject the media narratives of young people being recruited to youth gangs to sell drugs (Aholuoto & Aalto, 2026; Ferrell, 1999), or they wanted to distance themselves from those who are victims of grooming. This way, they were able to frame drug selling as a rational and empowering action they did for themselves, not something they were forced or victimized to do.

While framing selling as empowering and rational was important for participants to justify their actions, it was not enough on its own. To maintain a moral sense of self while selling potentially harmful drugs to customers, participants presented themselves as “good sellers”, in comparison to bad, unethical and malicious dealers.

5.2 Ethical seller in an unethical underworld

Even when participants were able to justify doing something illegal as beneficial and a source of empowerment (Presser, 2009), selling potentially harmful substances remained morally questionable. Thus, the participants had to negotiate with their moral boundaries: what is reasonable to sell and to whom. The participants had a rather unified image of what they thought made a good drug seller, though Anna pointed out that “probably nothing is good” in the end, suggesting that she acknowledged drug selling being inherently problematic. However, she continued by saying that a good seller “at least doesn’t screw anyone or sell to kids”. Both honesty and not selling drugs to children were agreed on by all the participants being good principles when dealing illegal substances.

Honesty was closely tied to the promise of a good seller having no “säätöjä”, which was mentioned by most. The Finnish slang phrase having no “säätöjä” is difficult to translate to English, but in the

context of drug selling it simply means that you have no problems and sales run smoothly, in an otherwise often chaotic transaction, as defined by Perälä (2011, p. 98). Since selling drugs is illegal, it is important to keep low profile when completing transactions to minimize drawing too much unwanted attention and the risk of getting caught by the police. It is, however, often not that simple. For example, sellers and buyers might disagree on the quality and quantity of the product and customers can hinder business by being too high on drugs, not having enough money, or trying to buy with other goods than money – or even for debt (p. 98). By having no “säättöjä”, the sellers promise smooth sales, honesty and reliability, and are able to portray themselves as responsible sellers, who are not there to rip off customers (Sandberg, 2010).

When it came to selling drugs to children, for example, Anna thought that it is not anyone’s, let alone adults, job to enable a child to start using drugs. When asked what she considered a child, she said it depended on what kind of drugs and how young children we were talking:

See, it's hard to say, in a way...a kid is someone who is under eighteen, but what I mean is like...well, if someone, you know, say a fifteen year old is already injecting Subutex [buprenorphine], if you sell them weed, I don't see it as that bad if you are underage too. But, if you are an adult, then I don't think you can sell to under eighteen-year-old. Or, if someone has never...I could assume, that you see, if someone has never used anything, it is not your job to make them use or like that you are the one who sells them for the first time. Of course, there is always someone who does it, because no one would otherwise [start using]. [But] I don't think that's sensible.

For Anna, who is a child and what is ethical to sell them is relative. To a teenager who has been using intravenous buprenorphine, selling cannabis does not make a difference, in case the seller is young as well. However, an adult selling any drugs to a teenager, even cannabis, is never acceptable. She sees that no one should be provided to start using drugs, but in the end, what is done is done. By making this distinction between young and adult sellers, Anna draws to societal expectations and cultural narratives where adults are seen as responsible over children, thus selling drugs to them is not right (Loseke, 2007). But since young people are not expected to have the same kind of responsibility over children, young people selling to peers does not seem immoral. Thus, Anna negotiates selling drugs to underage with boundary work on different levels of harm from drug use and responsibility over others by drawing on cultural narratives and societal expectations (Loseke, 2007; Sandberg, 2010). On top of selling to children, selling the synthetic drug alpha-PVP was deemed immoral by many.

For example, Adrian did not want to sell alpha-PVP at any cost, because he thought that benefiting from it did was morally wrong and that selling it was “actually fucked up”:

I don't sell that. Not at any price. Because, you know, it's not like I think that you can benefit from it a lot or something. I just think that it's actually fucked up, like, I do know what those can do to people and so on. I have friends who have gone to it, you know, so you know, it's not my thing. No, because I don't even wanna see it. The smell alone gives me a headache.

Adrian describes alpha-PVP as an especially harmful substance, having experienced its' impact on his friends. As a result, he has decided not to sell it. For Adrian, declining to sell alpha-PVP can be considered as moral boundary work, where he distinguishes drugs according to their harmfulness (Sandberg, 2010). He does not sell drugs that can “actually” be harmful to users. This way, Adrian can keep a coherent sense of moral, responsible and caring self, while selling products that can cause harm for the customers, since he at least does not sell the worst kind of drugs.

To conclude, while participants were able to justify drug selling as a source of empowerment, to reduce guilt over selling possibly harmful products, they constructed positive narrative identities and to distinguish themselves from bad drug dealers. Thus, with symbolic boundary work, participants framed themselves as “good sellers” opposed to bad unethical sellers, who do not rip off customers, sell drugs to children or sell harmful products, (Copes, 2016; Lamont & Molnár, 2002, as cited in Sandberg, 2022, p. 225). However, for the profit-oriented participants, ethical questions remained secondary. What mattered more was what was good for business.

5.3 Business mindset and rational deviance

As expected from profit-oriented drug sellers, the business mindset was the most prominent narrative that emerged from the data. After the participants realized how seemingly easy and quick it was to make money with drug selling, they seized a “business” opportunity. For example, Frankie recounted how he and his friends “started to build their business, so to speak” after moving from selling clothes to drugs, which was seen as a more profitable opportunity. What made drug selling quick and easy was the simplicity of closing deals on messaging apps and how it did not require any special skills to start with. The simplicity and ease of earning money came as a surprise to Adrian, who described being shocked at how fast the money started coming in and how there seemed to be no limit to selling:

I mean, the stuff does sell. And people want to buy stuff from morning till night, so there's really no time limit. You can set your own working hours and stuff like that. So yeah, it was kind of an easy life, and I'm not saying it's over, you know...it has its own benefits.

Adrian recalls how the constant demand of drugs meant that if he wanted to, he could sell around the clock. He also described how the freedom of being able to choose his own working hours was a positive thing that contributed to “kind of an easy life”, which is a reason why he cannot promise that his selling career is over, even though for now he has quit. With talking about “working hours”, he uses vocabulary from formal work culture to refer to drug selling as a legitimate job. Additionally, the positive framing of the benefits of drug selling and the reluctance of letting go of it can be seen as reflecting appreciation towards entrepreneurial values. Thus, Adrian frames drug dealing positively by drawing on cultural narrative identities of entrepreneurial values, where being your own boss is appreciated (Loseke, 2007), and drug dealing is justified as an economically rational and convenient way for gaining money (Presser, 2009). Once the business opportunity had been seized, the attraction of “quick and easy money” led participants to want to sell more and more.

Participants described sales often increasing gradually from small quantities to larger ones on the retail level, where customers were not drug users anymore, but other sellers who sell to users or even to other sellers. While some participants described first selling smaller quantities of mild drugs, such as cannabis, and later continuing to sell larger amounts on retail level, Frankie and Sean narrated how they went “straight to the deep end”. Frankie and Sean both started their drug sale from hard drugs, and Sean even recounted being robbed for the first time only after couple of days since he started selling. Indeed, from the very beginning, participants identified several risks in drug selling. On top of the risk of encountering violence, such as being robbed or stabbed, the risks of a drug dealing “business” included typical risks familiar from lawful businesses, such as bad investments, but more importantly getting caught by the police and family.

To manage the risks in the business, different kinds of measures were taken. Some expressed that selling big quantities was easier and less risky, because they sold only to people they knew and not to random drug users who can in worst case scenarios be undercover police. Yet, carrying out these sales included higher risks if getting caught, since selling bigger quantities meant harsher sentences. Then again, getting caught by the police did not only mean possible prison sentences, but also losing all the money they have gained so far. As a result, many were highly aware of what amount of drug passes the threshold of an aggravated crime and thus carried out as little amounts as possible. On the other hand, getting caught was not the only way to risk losing money. For example, Frankie recalled

how he has had “some business bankruptcy cases” over the years and how he has lost money when a substance he had bought in large quantities suddenly lost its street value when its volume on the street market increased unexpectedly. One way mentioned to reduce the risk of being caught by the police was working alone, in which case the responsibility lies entirely with oneself.

For example, Adrian described preferring going to sales alone, rather than being accompanied by a friend, since he does not want anyone else’s mistakes to contribute to him getting caught by the police. Even though he acknowledged that going with a friend might lower the risks of encountering violence, he said: “I rather get stabbed or something, than get caught, you know. Because you know, it affects you for the rest of your life, if you get caught”. When pointed out that stabbing, too, can affect the rest of one’s life, he saw that it only had either “temporary or permanent” affects. He, however, admitted that he has not put much thought into the risks of violence, since he has always considered selling as “money first in mind”. Thus, interestingly, Adrian perceives legal consequences as worse than possible life-threatening violence, essentially evaluating financial gain more important than personal health. Additionally, with his profit-oriented decision making, he normalizes encountering violence. All these measures taken to manage the risks of getting caught contribute to rationalization of drug dealing (Presser, 2009). For some, even ethical considerations were secondary to maximizing profits.

Even though none of the participants claimed to have sold drugs to children or alpha-PVP, for some it was not a matter of ethics, but rather a profit-driven decision. While others did not want to sell alpha-PVP because of knowing how harmful the product is and how it affects the customers, for Frankie, immorality was not the problem. He, however, saw it as too risky business and explained how it is impossible to sell it without being robbed:

I could sell alpha-PVP as well, but you cannot sell it. Because, like, let’s say you sell cannabis. For cannabis, the usual amount is one gram, right, like usually it is the one gram that people come get from you. But for alpha-PVP, the amount you use is 0,1 grams. Like, it’s that small. So, if you have even 0,2 grams you will be fucking robbed. Like, you cannot sell the alpha-PVP because you will be robbed straight away. So, you know, they are not just any, like, I’ve seen those alpha-PVP dope heads, they are totally crazy, you know, they don’t, like, you just can’t sell alpha-PVP. It is not like...you can’t sell it. Even if you want to sell, it doesn’t matter if you have a knife or a gun, whatever the fuck, you just can’t sell it. You know, because they don’t have money and they will rob you, I’m totally like...you know...it just cannot be sold...you know...

For Frankie, the decision to not sell alpha-PVP was not about the harm that it causes to the users, even though he knows how “crazy they go”. For him, it was more about ensuring own safety. According to him, the users of alpha-PVP are unpredictable, have no money, and are so desperate to get their portions that they will try to rob you, even if you have a knife or a gun to protect yourself. Thus, Frankie deemed the drug was not worth selling, even if there's good money involved. Evidently, choosing what one sells is one of the ways to manage the risks of illicit drug sales that include encountering violence and of getting caught. By recounting how to successfully manage risks, Frankie frames drug dealing as a business and presents himself as strategic and calculating, thereby portraying drug selling as rational and controlled rather than purely criminal (McAdams & McLean, 2013; Presser, 2009). To do this, somehow Frankie, like other participants, was able to distance himself from the harmful products and addicted drug users who he sells to.

Participants distanced themselves from drugs and drug users in multiple ways. As Sam saw it, drug use is “up to each person to decide what they put into their body” because in the end “it’s pretty rare for people to be forced to use drugs”. By claiming drug use as individuals’ free choice, Sam denies his responsibility in harmful action (Sykes & Matza, 1957). He continued his argument by saying that “they’d probably get their stuff from somewhere else anyway, and if I can benefit from it in some way, then why not.” By implying that it does not matter if it is him or someone else who supplies the drug to a customer, he rationalized his drug selling as a mean to benefit financially and reduces his guilt by claiming his actions do not cause any harm, or rather, that the harm would be caused anyway, indifferent of his actions (Presser, 2009). Distancing oneself from the harmful products and potentially suffering drug addicts was especially easy when only selling on retail level, and thus never needing to meet the users at the end of the supply chain.

Distancing from the harmful products and addicted customers was additionally achieved by linguistic choices. Calling drug users “junkies” and “druggies” was used to dehumanize drug users and to reduce moral responsibility of their addictions. Since this would not have been credible if they had used drugs themselves, many refrained from using drugs as a more or less conscious decision. For example, one participant had quit using drugs once he started to sell more seriously, saying: “You can't be a drug dealer and a user at the same time. It just doesn't make sense to me. You have to be one or the other.” For them, not using drugs was a conscious decision made to be able to concentrate on selling, as they believed one cannot do both at the same time, because it hinders business.

Others explained that drug use just “isn’t their thing” or that seeing drug addicts in streets has made them not want to use themselves. One participant even recounted that they felt like “junkies” even

taking medication that is prescribed to them. In addition to refraining from drug use completely, many also draw a clear line between acceptable drug use. The only drug that all considered somewhat acceptable and less harmful was cannabis, which many used or had used at some point in their lives. Overall, derogatory word choices, conscious decisions to abstain from drugs and drawing clear lines between acceptable substances functioned as symbolic boundary work that separated participants from drug users (Copes, 2016; Lamont & Molnár, 2002, as cited in Sandberg, 2022, p. 225). By distancing themselves from stigmatized drug users, participants were able to construct narrative identities in which they maintain a morally acceptable self-image as disciplined, pragmatic and responsible people (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Interestingly, distancing was not made only between drug users and sellers, but between other sellers too.

One of the two girls that were interviewed for this paper, Emily, made a distinction between men and women who sell drugs. According to her, many women sell drugs too, but they do not get caught as often, like their male counterparts. This claim came after the interviewer made the assumption that boys sell more than girls:

No, boys and men are stupid and they get caught...because boys and men are like show-offs and braggarts and such...then they are stupid and they don't think rationally and they get caught...I think this way a 100%.

Emily describes that the reason men get caught more often than women is that men have a need to boast about their sales and thus they cannot think rationally. To enrich her argument, she followed by giving an example how men get caught by the police because of their show-off needs:

There are a lot of men who have worked together with these women. Those women have not been caught, and those men get caught all the time. And you wanna know why? Because men, when they have money, they take pictures with their phones, when they have a lot of stuff on the table, they take a video. Then, they talk about everything on their phone when they are out of it...of course they get caught! And then, when they get caught once, of course they are under the police radar. Then, after that, these monkeys think that: yeah, I'll take this picture again, or that: I'll take this video again. Then, of course they get caught! So, I noticed it straight way, men are like this...show-offs. The second they have money they want to show off. They want to show that they are living the high life.

In this excerpt, Emily describes that men get caught more often than women because they want to show-off and brag about their sales with taking pictures and videos of drugs with their phones.

Additionally, men are not careful about what they discuss over the phone and do not stop selling even after getting caught once, after which they are under police radar. On top of that, she calls these men “monkeys”. All this distancing is made to differentiate lousy men sellers from proficient women sellers. By calling men who get caught selling drugs “stupid monkeys” who cannot keep themselves from showing off their success, Emily uses symbolic boundary work to distance herself from bad sellers (Copes, 2016; Lamont & Molnár, 2002, as cited in Sandberg, 2022, p. 225). Additionally, she draws on cultural narrative identities and stereotypes of women being naturally more calculated and rational than men who have an inherent need to show off (Loseke, 2007).

While starting to sell drugs was not narrated as a thrill-seeking action by any of the participants, successfully avoiding getting caught was described exciting (Katz, 1988). When Sam was asked if he ever felt nervous about getting caught by the police, he said:

In certain situations, yeah. Yeah, when I have a fucking lot of drugs with me. Like, if I have a ton of drugs. Then I start to feel a little anxious. But yeah, it gives me a fucking good feeling once it's done. I could get rid of those jitters by taking some benzos [benzodiazepine] or something. I wouldn't have the jitters anymore, but...But... I mean... I think that's just part of it.

In the excerpt, Sam describes how he feels anxious about getting caught by the police in certain situations, especially if he is carrying a lot of drugs with him. But, once he gets out of the situation, it feels good to have succeeded. He adds that he could get rid of the anxiousness by taking sedative drugs, but he thinks the thrills are part of the job. His description is very similar to what Katz calls the “sneaky thrills” (pp. 52–53), that attract young people to rule-breaking through the emotional rewards of risk-taking and successfully getting away with it. In this instance, drug selling is not narrated only as rational, but as exciting. At the same time, the way Sam describes being able to avoid getting caught acts as an argument for his competent drug dealer identity. Since he believes that occasional anxiousness is a part of the job, which he can manage without taking the help of sedatives, he frames himself as a good drug dealer who has the potential to succeed (McAdams & McLean, 2013).

To conclude, the most prominent narrative that emerged from the data of profit-oriented drug sellers was the business mindset, with what delinquent action was legitimized as a rational way to earn money (Presser, 2009). This was done by describing drug selling as a business, themselves as entrepreneurs and distancing drug users as customers who they could benefit from. Drug dealers

weren't brutal criminals anymore; they were skillful entrepreneurs and risk managers who knew the best way to run a business (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

5.4 Desistance or persistence?

Despite ambitions of financial success and running a profitable business, most participants' drug selling careers had already come to an end by the time of the interviews. Of the seven participants, only two were still actively selling, yet even they expressed a desire to stop. Many had come to the conclusion that the potential rewards of drug dealing were not worth the risks in the end. However, for some, quitting was more attainable than for others. Participants' views on the continuation of their involvement in drug selling varied significantly depending on the opportunities they perceived for their future.

5.4.1 Desistance: selling as a phase

The participant with the most successful desistance story was Mike, who narrated his drug selling as a phase that only lasted for a couple of months and was something that happened a while ago, when he was "stupid". Mike, like others, had started to sell drugs through his friends in hopes of getting "easy money" to spend on things he wanted, primarily on clothes and going out with friends. In the beginning, he had big dreams to sell "hell of a lot", but somehow, he had lost motivation for selling and realized it was not "a good idea to sell drugs". For him, a turning point was seeing his friends, who were selling too, drifting from cannabis into hard drugs, and becoming "greedy for money". Looking back, he described being glad he knew to quit early, before being caught. Now, he has put all criminal activity behind and is pursuing lawful life.

He believes that getting caught would not have helped him to stop selling. Instead, he might have drifted into "more serious stuff", because "once you get caught, it doesn't feel so bad to get caught the next time." Now, he thinks selling drugs is "stupid" and has even tried to help other children, who he knows are selling drugs, to quit. Mike's desistance narrative closely follows a redemption script, which has been identified in previous research as a key narrative in successful desistance processes (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). Mike had been able to reject a criminal identity, by narrating his drug selling as a phase and constructing a new narrative identity apart from offending. He even recalls helping others in a similar situation to quit criminal activity, which is known to reinforce one's own desistance narrative identity (p. 132).

Similarly, Adrian, who narrated his drug selling as a phase that he is now trying to let go of, was making efforts to get “back on track” with lawful life. He emphasized that he came from a good family where he was the only one who had been involved in criminal activity. He saw it as a good thing because “at least his family cannot be blamed for his wrongdoing.” Even though he described having enjoyed the income from drug sales, he had recently been caught by the police and was facing possible jail time. For him, getting caught acted as a turning point. It made him realize that he does not want his life to be continuing like this forever and that he saw the possible upcoming sentence as a good way to start over with a “clean table”. Still, even with great efforts, he was not quite there yet and described how quitting selling has not been easy:

Umm...well, I have tried to avoid it, selling and stuff. The phone that I sold with I have discarded it, you know, and basically, I have nothing I can sell with. And this phone I have, I think I have a fucking [police] surveillance on it, so I don't even wanna do anything with it. So now that I have just done, you know...everything, seen my family, trying to be as civilian as possible that so...keep all routines et cetera, everything in order. That, in any case I do want to get my life back on track and like this. Like, that phase has been gone through in life. Now is time to move forward.

In this excerpt, Adrian describes having made effort to stop selling by getting rid of the phone he used to sell with and how he has tried to do keep up with his routines and, for example, see his family. Additionally, he mentioned that the phone he has right now cannot be used to sell drugs, as he believes the police are surveilling him. In the end he emphasizes how he wishes to leave selling behind and move forward with his life. From a narrative identity perspective, Adrian can be seen negotiating with his desistance identity (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). He expresses a desire to stop permanently but finds it difficult to let go of drug selling. Following a redemption narrative (p. 132), he describes a “good core self”, stemming from his proper family, that he is striving to return to, although temptations to continue selling slow down this process. He even describes being so afraid of letting down his family, that he was not planning on telling them if the sentence he might get would be a short one. Clearly, his family is unaware of his involvement in drug selling, or at least the extent of it, which Adrian wishes to keep hidden.

Frankie, on the other hand, described having stopped selling drugs partially by accident, after he got caught by the police. Initially, he had thought that he would stop selling for a while, just so the situation would calm down, but start selling again as soon as he could. However, he never started selling again. When asked if it was easy for him to quit, he answered:

Well, yeah, it was easy. I've never, I've never been the type to... if someone pressures me, I just don't go along with it, I don't care. All my friends were smoking back when we were selling, and they'd just say, "Take it, take it, take it—don't be such a pussy," stuff like that, you know, the usual pressure to "take it, take it," but I wasn't interested, I didn't go along with it, like, "oh, am I some kind of..." you know, if they don't want to be my friends because I don't smoke, then they're not, you know, I don't care... that was just the vibe, you know... it wasn't hard to get rid of them, but after that they have come and said, "why are you quitting?" "Chip in, chip in [into sales]," and I'm like, "no, no, no, no, I can't, I can't."

In this excerpt, Frankie describes how quitting drug selling was easy for him and how he has never been susceptible to pressure from others, providing an example of being encouraged by friends to smoke cannabis. He further explains that after quitting, his friends have occasionally asked, or pressured him, to contribute to joint purchases, which he has consistently declined. By presenting himself as someone who cannot be pressured into anything, whether it involves drug use or drug selling, Frankie emphasizes his agency in decision-making (McAdams & McLean, 2013), which has been proved to be crucial in desistance narratives (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). Interestingly, even with strong indications of desistance narratives in both Frankie's and Adrian's stories, they both express that they cannot promise that they will never sell again. This conflict between a strong desire to not quit selling but also not ruling out that they could go back to it, frames drug selling as resembling an addiction. Indeed, previous research has found that young people might get addicted not only to the money, but also the thrill and respect they may gain by drug dealing (Anderson, 1999, pp. 114–118), which complicates desistance.

To conclude, while some participants narrated rather clear desistance identities, where offending has been left behind a while ago, others were still in the process of negotiating their desistance and not yet willing to let go of the idea of never selling drugs again, but still all essentially rejecting criminal identities and turning back to good citizens; following a redemption narrative (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). Thus, desistance emerges not only as behavioral change, but as an ongoing process of identity negotiation in which young people make sense of their past involvement and future possibilities.

5.4.2 Persistence: internalizing a criminal identity

Interestingly, even those who were still actively involved in selling did not express a desire to continue. For example, when asked by Sam if he had ever thought about quitting selling, he answered:

Of course I have. There's no point in doing this. Honestly, but fuck, you can't get a job here. And fuck, even if you do get a job, it's such a shitty gig, you know. There's really no point in actually going to do it.

In this excerpt, Sam recounts how he thought about quitting drug selling and admits that there is no point in doing it. However, at the same time, he expresses his frustration at finding a way out by stating that it is impossible to get a job. He adds, that even if you can get a job, it is a “shitty gig”, implying that he is not willing to do just any work either. He argues that in the shitty gigs “there’s really no point in actually going to it”. Thus, he narrates being stuck in selling drugs. The conflict between wanting to do something other than selling drugs, yet feeling unable to do so, can be understood as an internal conflict within his narrative identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Even though Sam has not yet been caught by the police, he has had multiple close calls and scares and sees that ending up in prison while “doing these kinds of jobs” is inevitable and even sort of a part of it:

Yeah, it's bound to happen sooner or later. It's not like...I mean, everyone who's really involved in this kind of thing is aware of it. Sooner or later.

Sam sees that ending up in prison is inevitable for him, since he is so deeply involved in criminal activities. Here, Sam can be seen as internalizing the criminal identity (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). Even though he still expressed a desire to do something else than selling drugs, he seems to have quit trying to work towards desistance. Instead, he can be seen internalizing a criminal identity as a part of him, even when it is conflicting with his desired self, who would want to do something legitimate. In line with previous research, even though starting to sell was claimed to be a conscious choice to gain money, it did not seem like a conscious choice to continue selling (Duck, 2016; Murphy et al., 1990; Søgaaard & Bræmer, 2023), as it sounds like for example in Sam’s case. It is possible that because Sam’s family has been benefiting from his sales, as recounted earlier by how he helped to pay his family’s rent when he was younger, they have at least indirectly approved of his selling. Further, this might prevent him from quitting selling and building a new narrative identity, because at the moment he receives support from those close to him in maintaining his criminal identity (Maruna & Liem, 2021, p. 236).

Adrian and Sean shared several similarities in their accounts. Both described coming from stable, “good” family backgrounds in which they were the only ones involved in illegal activities. In addition, both had recently been caught by the police. While both had been caught by the police, only for Adrian did it act as a turning point in narrative identity. Sean, however, was conflicted. Even though he expressed wanting to make a change towards desistance after being caught, he felt that his chaotic life situation did not allow for it now and he could not make up his mind with what to do:

Sometimes I just think, like, that...I'm facing such serious charges, with a trial and everything, and I'll end up serving time. So like, none of it really matters. But then, sometimes I think that I want to make that change now, before the trial. So, they'd see that I could get an anklet or something instead. But, I don't know, my thoughts are all over the place, so I can't really figure out which way to go, or like, get anything sorted out in a good direction, and like, it's just easier to go in that the shitty direction since I've lived there my whole life and stuff...

In this excerpt, Sean describes uncertainty in his life and not having decided what he wants to do with his future. On the other hand, he is thinking of trying to get his life back on track, but on the other hand, he is ready to give up because his current life situation is so chaotic and nothing seems to matter. Thus, he can be negotiating with his narrative identity. He justifies his selling as a necessity he is now dependent on and frames himself as a victim of poor circumstances (Sykes & Matza, 1957). He draws his selling back to his troubled past, describing his life taking a “shitty direction” since he was young, following a condemnation narrative (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133). Thus, Sean can be seen negotiating between adopting the criminal identity and figuring out what he wants to do:

...Well, basically, I'm like the perfect criminal, you know, if I wanted to be, but I don't really want to. I don't want to sound cocky, but I'd be the perfect criminal because, you know, I'm really good at doing all my stuff, but I don't want to...

Sean, while describing himself as the perfect criminal if he wanted to be, narrates a strong agency with which he rejects the criminal identity (McAdams & McLean, 2013). Still, this was not yet enough for him to construct a coherent desistance narrative, since it did not stop him from continuing selling drugs. Thus, even though both Adrian and Sean described coming from good families where they were the only ones involved in criminal activity, only Adrian was able to desist the criminal identity. To conclude, instead of constructing new, law-abiding narrative identities to reject criminal identities, Sam and Sean were internalizing them through condemnation narratives (Maruna & Liem, 2021, pp. 131–133).

6. Conclusion and discussion

This thesis asked how young people, who have sold drugs for financial profit while underage, make sense of their drug selling and construct drug dealer identities. The findings show that young people justify their entry into drug selling by framing it as an outlet for financial freedom and empowerment. They emphasize their own agency in decision making, despite being introduced to and guided into selling by older friends and acquaintances. Since participants acknowledged that selling drugs was both illegal and potentially harmful for their customers, to maintain a coherent self-identity, participants used moral boundary work and framed themselves as “good” sellers, who, for example do not sell alpha-PVP or to children. Additionally, profit-oriented selling was legitimized and rationalized by describing it as a business, using language familiar from licit businesses and positioning themselves as rational, competent entrepreneurs, where drug users were reduced to clients who they could benefit from. Even though all participants expressed a desire to quit selling, only some were able to do so. A successful desistance required participants to construct new narrative identities to replace criminal ones, in which drug selling was framed as a temporary phase and desistance as a return to their “good” inner selves, following a redemption narrative. On the contrary, the ones who could not exit criminal lifestyle described being stuck in selling and saw no way out, following a condemnation narrative and persisting in crime.

The narratives people use depend largely on the audience they have and how one wants to be perceived by them. In this case, it is important to remember that the interviewees agreed to participate through a non-profit organization that they work with, who are actively trying to help them out of the cycle of crime and substance abuse. Participants were deliberately asked to talk about their own experiences of selling drugs for financial profit while being underage to gain deeper understanding of the phenomenon both for the academic world and to the NGO itself, so that they get better tools to help others in similar situations. Thus, due to the setting of the interviews, desistance narratives were expected, as they can be seen having constructed together with Children of the Stations workers (Maruna & Liem, 2021).

Due to the narrative criminological approach of this thesis, participants’ stories cannot be taken as self-evident truths and as generalizable information about young people’s profit-oriented drug selling (Sandberg, 2010). However, participants’ stories offer insight into how they wish to be perceived by the public. Rather than framing their drug selling as thrill-seeking or crime-glorifying deviance (Ahjopalo, 2021; Katz, 1988), participants emphasized their own agency and drug selling as a rational

business opportunity. This can be seen as drawing on the same cultural narratives and entrepreneurial values from legitimate world, where financial success, making it on your own and being your own boss are valued (Loseke, 2007), rather than youth glorifying crime. It was clear that many participants appreciated freedom in working on their own and overall entrepreneurial values, in fact, it would not come as a surprise if some of them would become entrepreneurs in the future, as research suggests is likely for youth who have sold illicit substances (Fairlie, 2002). Even if the values for financial success derived from legitimate world, some of the participants had drifted into the criminal underworld at a young age and did not see a way out of it. This raises broader questions regarding the extent to which young people in Finland have genuinely equal opportunities to exit criminal lifestyles.

In line with previous research, even in this studies' small sample, the heterogeneity of drug seller's characteristics were highlighted (Shook et al., 2013). Even though all the participants had some experience of selling drugs for financial profit while being underage, their experiences and background's varied, for example, from whether they were still actively selling or not, how long their so-called drug selling careers have lasted, what substances they have sold and how much, and what kind of personal relationship they have with substance use. All had some kind of contact with law enforcements, and many had both drug related and non-drug related court cases, which supports previous research on youth who sell drugs being more likely to engage in other risky and delinquent behaviors as well (Shook et al., 2013, p. 365). Of the seven participants only two were girls, which supports previous research on most young drug sellers being boys (Smart et al., 1992, p. 1563), though interestingly this view was challenged by one of the participants. For this study, girls were harder to recruit also simply because Children of the Station works with less girls than boys, whether it reflects the phenomenon's true gender distribution or not.

The picture I got from the drug selling scene in mainly Helsinki Finland differed from Jussi Perälä's (2011) observations from the beginning of the century. For example, participants drug selling was not tied to their own substance use in the same way that they are thought to be intertwined, and instead of a clear hierarchy between sellers in different levels of drug distribution, it seemed like participants were working as freelance based, emphasizing never working for anyone and choosing themselves how big quantities they wanted to sell. Of course, same observations cannot be made with interviews and years of ethnography, yet, it is presumable that the drug selling scene has changed dramatically since the emergence of internet, that has been suggested to have opened the doors and lowered the threshold for more and younger people to start selling drugs than before (Demant et al., 2019).

In Finnish and Swedish media, young people's involvement in drug selling has been linked to the rise of youth gangs that consist mostly of boys with immigrant backgrounds (IS Työryhmä, 2023; Jokinen, 2022). For this reason, future research should focus on the role of immigrant background in youth who sell drugs, to better understand how those are interrelated. In this study, the immigrant backgrounds of participants were not explored both because it was not the focus of this study but also to protect participants' identities. However, immigrant background did come up in some of the interviews, when it was meaningful for the participants and their stories. Yet, none justified or linked their drug selling stemming from an immigrant background, suggesting that an immigrant background itself does not drive young people to sell drugs, but the associated poverty may be a contributing factor. On top of future research focusing on immigration backgrounds of young drug dealers, more emphasis should be put to the gender aspect of drug selling. Girls' role in the illicit drug markets remains even less studied than boys, even though it is known that their roles in the drug economy differ significantly from their male counterparts. Especially since girls' involvement was suggested to be as high as boys in one of the interviews, it would be interesting to find out more about it.

Due to the scope and focus of this study, a significant amount of insightful and important material could not be addressed in depth within the framework of this thesis. However, the richness and complexity of the participants' stories highlight the importance of research that directly includes young people and their own perspectives on issues that affect their lives. Their accounts provided nuanced insights into their motivations, experiences, and ways of understanding drug selling that would likely not have been accessible through second-hand sources alone. For this reason, future research should continue to focus on young people's own voices and lived experiences, particularly in areas where they are often talked about rather than listened to. By giving young people the opportunity to share their experiences themselves, we can develop a more comprehensive understanding of young people's involvement in delinquent and illicit activities.

7. References

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