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Margareta Bohlin
Emma Sorbring
Soly Erlandsson

Voices on risk-taking

Young women and men in an existential and social world

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Abstract

The present study was influenced by existential - and gender aspects on young people's everyday lives with the aim to shed light on the complexity of the phenomenon of risk-taking, the meaning and purpose of adolescent risk-taking in a traditional sense (e.g. smoking and drug using) and in noisy environments (e.g. discotheques and rock concerts). The intention was to identify possible new ways of understanding young people's experiences and apprehensions about different risk behaviours by the use of qualitative method; The Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Sixteen adolescents (8 men/8 women, aged 15-19) were interviewed, 4 in separate interviews and 12 in focus groups. The analysis revealed two dimensions: "Social identity" and "Existential identity" and six superordinate themes of the phenomena of risk-taking. The two dimensions and the six super-ordinate themes were equal for women and men, while the sub-themes were found to be gender-related. The interviewees' responses revealed social (gender) - and existential considerations which affected the participants in many areas of their daily lives. The study implies that one of the challenges for the preventive strategies is to be able to talk about risk-taking in terms of both threat *and* development, and not as a case of either or.

Voices on risk-taking -Young women and men in an existential and social world

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Young men and women constantly receive messages about how to adapt their behavior to norms in society from the media, school, health care services and parents. Nevertheless, activities that, from an adult perspective, present a risk to adolescent health are not always the same as adolescents' own perceptions of risky activities (Gullone & Moore, 2000; Siegel & Cousins, 1994). As professionals investigating risk-taking behaviours we tend to take an adult perspective on young people's lives. The contribution of this study was therefore to emphasize the experiences and the perceptions of young people by allowing them to raise their own voices in dialogues with the researcher.

Testing boundaries and risk-taking are inherent elements in young people's lives and allow them to develop. However, it is the balance between reasonable risk-taking, and risk-taking that puts health at risk that, for many young people, is difficult to achieve. Many young people are not willing to restrict their freedom and their lives to an extent that would benefit their health partly due to the difficulty to absorb and conform to all of the warnings and rules in the society. Further, adolescence is a time of transition when freedom is rather limited. Meanwhile, a glimpse of the next phase in life with increased freedom takes place defined as emerging adulthood (EA). EA is a phase in between adolescence and adulthood characterized as an age of instability, together with a rather self-focused identity (Arnett, 2006). According to van Exel, de Graaf and Brouwer (2006), future or current health is not of major concern to adolescents since they feel physically healthy, are happy and satisfied with their lives, or simply do not care. In general, young people

have positive attitudes towards risks (i.e. pro-risk behavior) and they might engage in risky activities since this provides them with certain privileges (Siegel and Cousins, 1994). Those having positive attitudes are those who more frequently engage in risk-taking activities, suffer more from the consequences and are less inclined to use protective strategies (Benton, Benton & Downey, 2006). Attitudes seem to explain more variance than either gender or protective strategies but men are more inclined to take risks than women and, since protective strategies are used more frequently by women, they are thus in less danger of harm (ibid).

The feeling of powerlessness is central to humans due to difficulties to manage our cultural, social and economic problems (May, 1981). Risk behavior can be seen as a way for adolescents to fill a life that is perceived as being existentially empty. Adolescence is a time filled with conflicts, many of which are reminders of existential questions, such as levels of perceived freedom, options, awareness of death and anxiety (Ellsworth, 1999). An existential perspective on violence and risk behavior supplies the possible foundation of a new understanding. Who am I, what am I going to do with my life, how will I manage on my own? These are questions that revolve around the concept of identity, and arise in adolescence. Adolescents seek answers in many areas in life and build, along with this, their identity (Santrock, 2004). This is also a time when music preference and taste are determined (North & Hargreaves, 1995). Adolescents have normative expectations regarding the characteristics and norms of people with certain musical tastes. People who enjoy particular musical genres are valued as having high social prestige and are expected to possess more positive social traits and even believed to become more successful in life (North & Hargreaves, 1999). According to Ellsworth (1999), the dark lyrics in some genres of music, the way in which young people dress, and lack of interest in their future and their own survival can be understood within an existential framework constituting youth. Adolescents often expose themselves to loud music when they engage in other risky activities,

such as partying, drinking and smoking and it is played loud in order to make the experience intense and powerful (Arnett, 1992; Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007; Wang, 2001). However, music and high levels of sound have not traditionally been associated with risk-taking behaviors.

There seems to be an overall variation between the sexes as regards how they reason about risky sound exposure and methods of prevention. A study including Swedish female and male adolescent students revealed that, even though young women judge a number of risky situations to be more dangerous compared to young men, they nevertheless behave in the same way in traditionally risky environments and noisy environments (Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007). Compared to young men, young women experience music at discotheques and rock concerts as more hazardous, although they spend just as much time in such environments as their male counterparts. Talking to strangers and being out late at night are also considered to be more risky by women, even though they are out late and converse with strangers equally as often as men. Ekervald (2003) argues that, today, women participate in risky activities that have traditionally been male domains. This contradicts certain previous research which suggests that women judge risky situations as more dangerous than men and that they don't participate in them to the same extent (Gullone & Moore 2000 b; Byrnes, Miller & Schafer, 1999). Young women, more so than men, respond with anxiety and worry about occasional hearing-related symptoms and also use hearing protection to a greater extent (Olsen Widén & Erlandsson, 2004a; 2004b). Interviews reveal that young men tend to assume a sense of invulnerability in order to follow social norms of masculinity. At the same time, it is socially acceptable for young women to be vulnerable by demonstrating concern such as, for example, by using hearing protection or removing themselves from sources of loud noise (threat) at discotheques or rock concerts (Widén & Erlandsson, 2006). Risk behavior among men seems to be related to an orientation towards their social peer group, whilst women's relationships with parents are prominent in their risk behavior. Depressive moods

in females were shown to be associated with parental factors, although there was only a weak association to risk-taking (Keren & Ben-Zur, 2007).

Theories about gender are often based on a social constructive view of the world, meaning that individuals collectively create and reproduce norms and values in society. From a social constructivist perspective, gender is regarded as a social category where individuals actively contribute to social influences that may have implications in a larger sense (Giddens, 1991). People are expected to fit into stable gender roles, have fixed gender-related qualities and physical attributes, and are not supposed to change between “feminine” and “masculine” expressions (Deaux & Kite, 1987; Skeggs, 1997; Witley & Ægisdóttir, 2000). A gender- and social constructive perspective on young people’s everyday lives has influenced the present study. The aim was to shed light on the complexity of the phenomenon of risk-taking, the meaning and purpose of adolescent risk-taking in a traditional sense (e.g. smoking and drug using) and in noisy environments (e.g. discotheques and rock concerts). Furthermore, the intention was to identify possible new ways of understanding young people’s experiences and apprehensions about different risk behaviors that might be related to norms and gender roles in contemporary society.

Methods

Informants

The study involved 16 adolescents (8 women and 8 men) aged between 16 and 19, who participated in 4 focus groups and 4 separate interviews. Half of the subjects were recruited from 3 upper secondary schools in the west of Sweden and had participated in a previous quantitative study on risk behavior among adolescents (Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007). The additional 8 adolescents (4 women and 4 men) were recruited from 2 upper secondary schools, also in the

west of Sweden. The five schools were located in four municipalities. Socioeconomic status (SES) for each municipality was 2.11, 2.03, 2.15 and 2.16 and were calculated for both parents educational level year 2006 (1= compulsory school, 2= upper secondary school & 3= higher education such as university marks). National average level was 2.17 (Skolverket, 2008). An even distribution according to sex was obtained both for the focus groups and among face-to-face interviewees.

Procedure

Principals and teachers were contacted and informed about the purpose of the study and gave their permission for the interviews to be performed during school hours. The pupils who had participated in the previous study and had shown interest in being interviewed were contacted by letter. The pupils choose whether they wanted to take part in focus groups or in individual interviews. The remaining 8 pupils were invited to participate by staff at the specific school and were contacted by letter if they showed interest. In the focus group discussions, separate groups were created for female and male participants. Both the focus groups and the individual interviews were performed in group rooms at the school on a single occasion. They were tape-recorded and lasted for between 1 ½ to 2 ½ hours and between 1 and 2 hours respectively.

Ethical considerations

The participants were assured discretion and confidentiality and were also informed that their participation was voluntary and that they could terminate the interview at any time. They were allowed to decide for themselves whether to participate in the focus groups, or, in case any of them felt uncomfortable speaking in a group, in the individual interviews. Each of them was given the telephone numbers and e-mail address of the interviewer should they, subsequent to the interview, want to add or remove anything in the interview. They were also informed that there was a psychologist at their disposal should they feel the need to talk to someone about a matter

that had come up in the interview. However, in the event, none of the interviewees expressed a desire to make use of this facility.

Instrument/Interview

Focus groups were used to encourage the participants to speak about a topic that they all had some knowledge about, from own experiences or from others. The individual interviews were considered to reach the more silent adolescents and encourage them to share their subjective experiences. Both focus groups and individual interviews can be seen as tools to examine the individual's life world and explore personal experience. It is the individual's personal perception of an event that is of interest (Smith & Osborne, 2003).

Four vignettes were created in order to facilitate the discussions both for the focus groups, and for the separate interviews. Subjects for the vignettes were different types of risks. 1) A young person who attended a rock concert without using hearing protection, in spite of having tinnitus. 2) A young person with noise sensitivity who didn't want to engage in risky activities with friends. 3) A young person who engaged in dangerous street racing with a borrowed car. 4) A young person who drinks alcohol and later in the evening use drugs. The vignettes were developed from results from earlier studies, such as Bohlin and Erlandsson (2007) and Widén and Erlandsson (2006). In order to try out the vignettes, five young people (3 women and 2 men) gave their opinion on the significance of the vignettes prior to the data collection (these adolescents were not participants in this study). After being informed about the interview the participants were given one of the vignettes to read and then encouraged to discuss the case amongst themselves, from their own experiences, or from experiences of their friends and peers. When the discussions seemed to tail off, they were asked to read the next vignette. The researcher adopted a withdrawn position in the focus groups but ensured that all interviewees

were able to speak. In the face-to-face interview the discussion about the vignettes took place between the participant and the researcher.

Analysis

The analysis was of an inquiring type in order to remain receptive to all of the different aspects of the phenomena. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is a qualitative approach developed within psychology and used in an area such as health, and in clinical and social psychology. The aim of IPA is to try to understand lived experience and how people make sense of such experiences. Of major interests are the meanings the experiences hold for the study participants, which involves an examination of their life world. In this process, it is the individual's personal perception or account of an object or an event that is of interest, as opposed to objective statements (Smith & Osborne, 2003). One of the most important theoretical aspects of IPA is phenomenology, established by Husserl's attempts to construct a philosophical science of consciousness. IPA is phenomenological in that it explores personal perceptions of an event or state. It does not attempt to produce objective facts of the event or state itself. However, when the researcher is trying to get close to the informant's personal world, IPA holds that this is not possible to achieve, at least not directly or completely. Access is dependent on the researcher's own conceptions which are necessary in order to make sense of the other's personal world through a process of interpretative activity. Another important aspect of IPA is hermeneutics - the theory of interpretation (Smith, Jarman & Osborn, 1999; Smith & Osborne, 2003).

The recorded sessions were typed out verbatim and then subjected to detailed qualitative analysis in order to find meaningful themes in the participants' statements. Since risk-taking is complicated with regard to gender (Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007; Byrnes et al, 1999; Gullone, Moore, Moss & Boyd et al, 2000a) separate analyses were performed; one for the young women

and one for the young men. Phenomenological thought suggests that social contexts influence people's experiences, and, given the focus of the current study, one can reasonably expect that context vary between women and men. For instance, Gilligan argues in her critique of Kohlbergs' theory on moral development that the moral stages may be correct but the content differs between men and women because of their different living conditions (Gilligan, 1982).

After the text had been read through a number of times, the text in each interview was coded into meaning units, and was combined several times in accordance with the approach advocated by Smith and Osborn (2003). Sub-themes from each interview were then brought together and compiled to create larger, superordinate themes. The sub-themes were, at all times, analyzed in relation to the original text. In the next stage the analysis for men and women were compounded and yielded six superordinate themes which culminated in two dimensions of the phenomena of risk-taking. All meaning-units, sub –themes, superordinate themes and dimensions emerged from the analysis of the interviews and were not determined before. All data was co-judged by and discussed among the authors.

Results

Although the texts for the most part were analyzed separately for men and women, it needs to be clarified that men spoke about women and women spoke about men during the interviews. The participants were encouraged to speak about their images of male and female gender roles in relation to risk behavior, which means that there are utterances about men in the section of the result with a focus on women's experiences and vice versa.

Two dimensions of the phenomena Risk-taking emerged as a result of the analysis: "Existential identity" and "Social identity" concerning both women and men. The two dimensions have derived from six superordinate themes and twelve sub-themes (see figure 1).

Existential identity

Social identity

	<u>Transcendence</u>	<u>Introspection</u>	<u>Conditional freedom</u>	<u>Expressiveness</u>	<u>Individuality</u>	<u>Accessibility</u>
<i>Women</i>	Presence of threat and desire	To control and conceal yourself	Awareness of how fragile we are	Strain to present an ideal image	Break and adhere to demands	Experiences of social restrains
<i>Men</i>	A matter of life and death	Crossing boundaries	Awareness of autonomy and responsibility	A leeway to feel unrestrained	Suppress feelings of vulnerability	Experiences of social control

Figure 1. Description of dimensions and superordinate themes and sub-themes of risk taking emerged from the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).

Existential identity

Existential aspects of risk-taking emphasize thoughts about life and death and the aspiration to be vital and alive. It concerns young men's and women's questions about health and their conceptions about strengths, weaknesses and limits, bodily as well as mentally. Thoughts are dealing with good and evil, meaning and coherence vs. emptiness and meaninglessness in life.

Transcendence

“Transcendence” is one of the superordinate themes of existential identity with two gender-specific sub-themes: “Presence of threat and desire” and “A matter of life and death”. The Presence of threat and desire is applicable to the women. Taking voluntary risks can change otherwise presumably unpleasant feelings into positive experiences. The women discuss feelings of vitality when they expose themselves to danger, although they are aware of the consequences of such behavior. Bodily experiences are expressed as “It makes you feel real and alive but sometimes you get scared too” (Women, focus group 2). These ambiguous feelings appear to be based on the assumption that protection (i.e. hearing protection or avoidance) stands in the way of the total experience of a phenomena. Taking risks appears to imply feelings that comprise excitement, amusement but also danger, a mixture of physiological and psychological sensations. The physiological sensation is described as a jittery and tickly feeling, a pounding of the heart and the experience of blood rushing in the veins. The psychological sensation implies feeling anxious and uncertain.

The sub-theme “A matter of life and death”, applicable to the men, implies that death is the greatest consequence of a risk. Death can also be part of the creation of meaning behind risk-taking. A person, who dies, it is reasoned, will not notice it and may even loose something by

staying alive - thus death is not necessarily perceived as a threat. Taking risks may be life-fulfilling in the sense that the surrounding world makes you feel powerless.

- I believe that it is more risky to lose something...like...more risky to lose money or something...because if you're at risk of dying ...than you die and then...yes, you die.. you don't notice it...if you risk something else, you will live with the fact that you have lost something...and that is worse.

(Man, focus group 2)

Physical sensations are discussed also by the men, for example having a jittery feeling, a pounding heart, blood rushing and adrenalin pumping. To be involved in illegal activities, such as playing a cat-and-mouse game with the police, can lead to high spiritedness and fulfillment. Male participants obtain great satisfaction from speed, loud music and intoxication. At the same time, they want to adhere to legislation and understand that their behavior can have harmful effects on other people.

Introspection

The superordinate theme "Introspection" deals with the unwanted influence of the outside world, and the will to focus on inner experiences. The sub-theme for women "To control and conceal yourself" implies that risk behaviors such as the consumption of drugs and alcohol, or travelling at speed can make you feel in control and alive. When discussing the influence of noise, the women argue that it is the individual's responsibility to avoid loud levels of music or to lower the volume. Loud music is perceived as coming from the inside of the body. "It's like I want to feel it sometimes...I turn up the music sometimes...I know I do. But it's like I sometimes want to feel it more...feel as if the music is coming from the inside of my head." (Woman, individual interview 1). Such experiences are, according to the women, more common among men.

Loud music also conceals noise, i.e. sounds that you would like to avoid, such as traffic noise. By masking unwanted noise with loud music it is possible to concentrate on a task, and experience positive, instead of negative feelings. The women verbalize that they sometimes try to escape noise exposure by listening to music on their MP3 players. In this way they are able to shut out the surrounding world.

I feel...when I listen to my I-pod, that I want it to be loud. When I'm biking the sounds will be muffled, for example the sounds of cars and such things...then I want the music to be louder than the other sounds...

(Women 1, individual interview)

The young men express a need to dismantle walls and "Crossing boundaries". Certain risk activities seem to contribute to the crossing of boundaries, giving way to strong inner experiences. For example, by turning the volume up you are able to sense the rhythm of the bass or drums in the body. Decibel racing, street racing and styling are often interrelated, according to discussions amongst the males. Competitions and exhibitions of custom built stereos in the baggage compartments of cars, so-called 'decibel racing', are demonstrated by music so loud that it makes the ground vibrate. Peers, in such situations, can push each other to extremes when listening to loud music in their street racing cars. The young men experience that men encourage peers to take risks, for example by exceeding road speed limits, but, when an accident occurs, they rebuke their peers for being reckless.

You want to see how far you can go, push yourself...how fast you dare to drive.

You you've been up to 140 and now you might be able to drive even faster... You push yourself and sometimes you have people beside you...it gets worse when someone sits beside and spurs you on, peps you: Drive faster, faster,

faster. Maybe you know that you're not able to manage the speed but...it becomes a competition... (Man, focus group)

Conditional freedom

Conditional freedom signifies "Awareness of how fragile we are" in many areas in life and women are trying to balance risk-taking and responsibility for oneself and others. Although the women realize that there are many unavoidable risks in society and they talk about the need to experiment in order to learn and develop, they also feel vulnerable and in need of self preservation. Decision making about potentially risky situations may affect health and social life and the correct decisions must be made regarding education, friends, love life, exercise and health. They are encouraged by significant others to be mature, to think about the future and to make responsible choices. Sometimes they simply don't care about the consequences, because risks in adolescent life are prevalent, and it is not possible to avoid them all.

- I believe that we get too much information about what is happening...you can read that loud music is dangerous...
- Yeah, there's so much you should avoid nowadays...you can't go around like...
- Yeah, like, watch out for cancer!

(Women, focus group 1).

At the same time, news about the consequences of health risks (avoidable or not) make them feel powerless and anxious. An example of this is tinnitus (buzzing ears), which one of them refer to as a "plague" that has an intractable negative power over human beings; "I'm terrified when I think about tinnitus. It feels like madness, I am terrified to get noise in my ears. I am very cautious." (Woman, focus group 1).

Experienced negative consequences of risk behavior are imagined by the male respondents to lead to raised questions about “Awareness of autonomy and responsibility”. “It’s not responsible... if someone already has symptoms of tinnitus they should protect themselves!” (Man, individual interview 1). It is however argued that ear protection or avoidance will have a negative influence on someone’s freedom. Many adolescents sense that they are lacking control and according to the interviewees they feel powerless because they can’t imagine how to influence the course of events in the world, such as, for example, poverty, war and lack of freedom.

When you begin to reflect over the value of people; what kind of risk is it? Should we risk a whole generation in order to study...a rock, from outer space? /.../ sometimes I feel...that I can read about millions of people dying of starvation and then you turn the page and there you can read that 10 billion has been paid to study the hierarchy in prehistoric times!

(Man, individual interview 1)

The male interviewees point to the consequences of serious risks and everyday risks which may be very different. Their conclusion is that everything in life is risky to some extent, and therefore you have to balance the advantages and disadvantages of risk-taking. The risk-taker is regarded as someone who is calm, in control and self-disciplined, but also as someone who is infantile, naive and with poor self-discipline. Risks may be dangerous but you choose to take them, because risk-taking motivates people to learn and obtain positive experiences, which, in turn, can lead to higher self-esteem. Those who take risks, knowing that they will be hurt, do not act in a responsible way. Some situations are more obvious than others, for example standing beside a loudspeaker at a concert. “Fans stood close to the speakers digging the beat. Then they came out with serious headaches and bleeding ears...” (Man, individual interview 1).

Social identity

The dimension “Social identity” concerns what it is like to be a social human being in the world where risks is a part of life. The young interviewees have thoughts about the social context and of its influence on the shaping of their identity. Body and body image in relation to inner qualities seem to be central issues here. Beliefs, and sometimes stereotypes about individual and collective differences and variations are common in their statements about social identity.

Expressiveness

The superordinate theme for women “Expressiveness”, includes the importance of normative looks and behavior and “Strains to present an ideal image”, i.e. how normality like audacity and status are produced. Looks are presented as what matters for a young woman, and an attractive appearance is more important than intelligence, future expectations, and inner qualities. The demands to be beautiful, slim and attractive have become internalized as being self-imposed, i.e. an attitude that is hard to do anything about, or to change. A woman, who chooses to avoid risky situations and protect herself, is often seen as boring, ‘straight-laced’ or ‘square’. “It is respected when someone doesn’t want to drink, but they may say: God, you’re boring! Come on!” (Women, individual interview 1). The pressure can be hard to ignore since the woman like to be perceived as an attractive person with social skills. It is believed, for example, that using ear protection, or a helmet, will detract from a person’s appearance.

- It’s like when you were a kid and didn’t want to wear a helmet, you didn’t want it...it was kind of goofy to use it...no one else wore a helmet...
- Yes, going round with big yellow things in your ears!

(Women, focus group 1)

That young people drink more and successively lose control is argued by the male interviewees as ways to “enter a leeway to be unrestrained”, a need to improve self-esteem and test new aspects of the self. Such behavior which sometimes leads to intoxication is regarded as more acceptable for men than for women, since women may risk gaining a bad reputation or to be at risk of abuse.

A friend of mine would think that a man can drink lots of alcohol, but if a woman drank until she passed out he would not regard her as a good woman./.../I believe that if a girl becomes dead drunk, she is at risk of being abused and is exposing herself to violence and sexual abuse.

(Man, focus group 2)

The men consider alcohol to be less dangerous than other drugs (e.g. marijuana and hashish) and easier to control than other drugs, partly because there is more knowledge about the consequences of alcohol consumption. They mean that some people consider certain drugs to be worth the risk due to the effects such substances have on feelings of emptiness.

Individuality

”Individuality” refers to the experiences of “Break and adhere to demands” by the women.. It seems as if the participants feel restricted in the way they act and present themselves. Alcohol, for example, is considered by the women, to facilitate relationships, making it easier and less problematic to socialize at parties. They have a ready access to drugs and alcohol, both in school and in their leisure time environments. Drinking often involves a feeling of sadness or anger, and can be a source of psychological distress. The group pressure to drink is so powerful that it may cause young people to pretend that they are in a drunken state in order to obtain status among

peers. “One of my friends, when she drank....I have never seen anyone in my whole life who passes out and vomits after just one beer! She exaggerated!” (Woman, focus group 2). Using heavier drugs, which are often relatively easy to get hold of, are experienced as harmful, deceptive and addictive. People who use drugs are regarded as suffering from psychological anguish, as having poor parental relations and as people unable to stand up to or resist group pressure.

(Int: Why do you think that some people use drugs?)

- Curiosity
- You are not feeling alright, maybe...
- Maybe you have a difficult time at home?
- It might be group pressure too.

(Women, focus group 2)

“Suppress feelings of vulnerability” is the superordinate theme for men and they confer that they often keep quiet about their own vulnerability. Young men tend to avoid speaking about problems such as sound sensitivity, tinnitus, anxiety or depression making it difficult for others to show consideration and support. It is regarded as important for men not to panic or lose control since there is no real cure for tinnitus for example. “It (the noise) doesn’t sound too much. Not as bad as you know it is for other people who panic and wear ear protection. I don’t. I manage without it.” (Man, individual interview 2). Those who report tinnitus see themselves as responsible for the onset and keep quiet about it because they believe it might worsen the symptoms. Generally, they believe that women are more tolerant towards people with health problems, and that they show more consideration than men do.

I believe that guys have more difficulty to understand a person with problems....you know, we are very much like, no problems, you

know...And then we blame our symptoms or problems on other things. A girl would say if she had problems, because girls are more prudent. They understand other people better.

(Man, focus group 1)

Music is experienced to be a way of expressing feelings that may otherwise be hidden. Different musical styles are believed to be having differing degrees of danger; classical music being the least dangerous and hard rock the most.

Accessibility

“Accessibility” is a superordinate theme which includes “Experiences of social restrains” expressed by the women interviewees. Stereotypes influence both women’s and men’s potentials in many areas in life and they seem to live under a severe social pressure to reproduce gender roles. Women are not supposed to expose themselves to danger instead they should take care both of themselves and others and behave according to the female role, i.e. caring, capable and responsible. A woman staying out late takes a risk and expose herself to abuse or violence. She should not take risks other than emotional risks in relationships.

Women ought to be so ...you feel the pressure to be smart, beautiful, successful and you’re supposed to achieve and be on the same level as the guys... career, mother, cleaning lady, everything...you ought to be everything...and in addition to all of this you should look good too!

(Woman, focus group 1)

Men, on the other hand, are expected, by the female interviewees, to challenge each other in order to obtain high status and to ascend in the social hierarchy. They believe that women in general are impressed by a macho attitude, although, it is a misconception of masculinity.

- Guys have to be better than each other all the time. They try to impress the girls!

(Int: Do they impress the girls?)

- NO! (all women)

- It's not particularly fun to listen to guys wanting to be best...

- And it's no fun watching them fight either.

(Women, focus group 2)

The adolescents are aware of class differences regarding risk behavior, i.e. those with a lower socioeconomic status take more risks than those whose status is higher. "It's horrible but if we take say, the natural sciences program....if we compare them... I don't want to be mean but...I believe that you use more drugs in other, more vocational programs." (Woman, focus group 1)

Such statements are also emphasized by the men

Male interviewees express "Experience of social control". To behave in a "macho" manner is seen as typically male and requires both an element of competition as well as demonstrations of status and social power. Even though the young men report that they are fully aware that women can enjoy risky activities too sometimes, they believe that, generally speaking, women are more passive, calm and less interested in such activities. They believe that the general opinion among men is that a man would feel humiliated if a woman performs better than him, particularly in traditionally male domains. But they can't explain why such an idea exists.

- If a woman has been in a competition and won over a guy, well I think he would feel humiliated. But if a guy wins over another guy, he (the loser) will look up to him...But if a girl wins you feel humiliated.

(Int: Why is that?)

- I don't think that we guys can accept that a girl can do better than us.

(Man, focus group 2)

The men argue that norm-breaking is more problematic for a young woman since she would be seen as deviating from acceptable behavior (e.g. if she gets too drunk or has many sexual partners). As a man, they argue, you can be proud of being a member of a certain group and use drugs or alcohol in order to maintain membership status. "He wants these friends so badly... that he does things like he does... they are very good friends...but...yes he keeps up with them...okay, we drink alcohol, I'll take the risk of being dead drunk." (Man, individual interview 2).

Discussion

The responses of the interviewees in this study revealed social reproduction of gender and class and uncovered deep existential and social reflections on relations, life and the surrounding world. Young men's and women's concerns about health and how they experience bodily and mental strengths/weaknesses are to be regarded as existential dimensions of life and deepest seen as the individual's experience of an *Existential identity*. Risks are sometimes unavoidable and to follow the dictates of society and messages from the media, schools and parents create anxiety, but they can also lead to an indifference to risks.

In conjunction with theory and research by May (1981) and Ellsworth (1999) research, the present study demonstrates, that risk-taking in adolescence may be a way of filling an existential emptiness (e.g. by the consumption of drugs, loud music or alcohol). According to Siegel and Cousins (1994) adolescents engage in activities leading to increased risks since such

engagements can provide them with certain privileges. In the context of the current study, Siegel and Cousins' findings can be referred to as existential fulfillment. This is close to a level of consciousness described by Maslow (1979) as a peak experience and here this is labeled *Transcendence*, the theme reflecting *Existential Identity*. A peak experience is a state of transcendence that resembles a religious event, but can also be a moment in time when you feel whole and coalesce with the surrounding world and in touch with the meaning of life. People often feel powerless in the case of poverty, war, accidents and global inequality. During adolescence conflicts and existential questions, such as liberation and freedom, individual options, awareness of death are in focus (Ellsworth, 1999). It appears from our study that risk taking experiences (i.e. using drugs, smoking, driving at high speeds, listening to loud music) may lead to the men feeling less empty inside and giving them opportunities to expand on existential dimensions. On the other hand, freedom can be restricted by avoidance or protection according to our interviewees. It is not even certain that death, which is often seen as the ultimate consequence of risk-taking, poses a threat to them. Since death is absolute and something they are not consciously aware of, the young men see injury as more threatening.

According to previous research loud music is sometimes used in order to articulate intense feelings and to be in control (Arnett, 1992; Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007; Wang, 2001). The desire to control the influence of the outside world can be reached through *Introspection*. As loud music is perceived as arising from the inside of your body it can make you feel alive and in control. In the present study the young men talked about music and volume as a way to dismantle walls and cross boundaries, e.g. cross over to strong inner feelings. They turn the volume up in order to sense the rhythm of the bass or drums in the body and when involved in competitions, so-called 'decibel racing', the music is so loud that it makes the ground vibrate. The study revealed, rather unexpectedly, that a risk can function as a protector against other risks or

inconveniences - another way of understanding adolescent exposure to loud music and risk-taking behavior. For example, loud music conceals unavoidable noise (e.g. sounds like traffic noise) and can be masked by the use of mp3-players, helping you to relax and be in control.

The interviewees are aware of the ambivalence between risk-avoidance, as a means of staying healthy, and to jeopardize their health when engaging in risky activities. This contradicts for example the view of van Exel, de Graaf and Brouwer (2006) that future or current health is of no concern to adolescents and that they sometimes do not care. The participating women experienced *Conditional freedom* in their need to preserve themselves from harmful events expressed by worrying thoughts about physical and psychological health. To be worried is socially more acceptable for women than for men, and there seems to be a gender discrepancy in the way young people report anxiety and worrying thoughts about occasional symptoms in the ears as a result of heavy noise exposure. Olsen Widén and Erlandsson (2004a) found that women were more worried than men. In the present study the men consider themselves to be responsible for their own health. At the same time they like to have a freedom of choice, for example by exerting pressure on each other to reach extreme levels, which may involve a risk to their own life, as well as the lives of others. However, when accidents do occur, they are severe in their criticism of the risk-taker. According to Rosenstock (1972) a certain trigger is required to adopt positive health behaviors. In the situation of being exposed to high volume music such a trigger might be the experience of temporary tinnitus after a concert.

Gender stereotypes were sometimes articulated in both female and male interviewees' statements representing the dimension *Social identity*, which accentuates what it means to be a social human being and *express* your-self in a social world. Regarding the adolescents' thoughts about music, these were often determined in a context where judgments about social qualities, such as music tastes and lifestyles, are made by peers (North & Hargreaves, 1999). Among the

women issues on body image, inner qualities and identity were brought up and can be referred to merely as social constructions. The public appearance is important and how the use of protection (i.e. a helmet or ear protection) may be detrimental to the image of an attractive young woman. Avoidance or protection in risky situations is somewhat awkward since it can jeopardize one's image and social status. Deaux & Kite (1987); Skeggs (1997); Witley & Ægisdóttir, (2000). Skeggs (1997) assumes that women create a representation of femininity, which in this study appears as femininity constituted by a beautiful facade that must not be tarnished, for example, by unattractive ear protection. The male interviewees believe that drinking alcohol is also a more common, less risky and a phenomenon that is easier to control than other drugs. However, some of them consider certain drugs to be worth the risk because those can provide them with social status and an improved self-esteem in relation to their peers – a release from inhibitions.

The superordinate theme *Individuality* Due to collective demands the young women feel a need to be restricted in the way they act and present themselves. The group pressure to drink is powerful and may cause the adolescence to pretend that they are in a drunken state in order to obtain status among peers. At the same time, someone who becomes drunk can risk to be seen as undisciplined or suffering from psychological anguish, having poor parental relations or as a person who is unable to stand up to or resist group pressure. As a consequence, it is difficult to claim the right to express the own *individuality* in the collective environment. It appears that the male interviewees struggle to fit in with and adapt to the norms of masculinity. Their group involvement is founded on social status and implies certain lifestyles expressed by a macho attitude that encourages them to compete and to succeed. A similar finding on social norms of masculinity was reported by Widén & Erlandsson (2006). Along with the aforementioned study, the males in our study may be invisibly vulnerable in the way they avoid speaking about problems such as anxiety, depression and tinnitus.

Accessibility is the superordinate theme of social identity which includes experiences of social restrains and social power.

The indications are that women are expected to take risks, but not to the same extent as men. It is not socially acceptable for them to be too drunk, to drive too fast, or to be too sexually active, even though they do. It is clear that stereotypes influence their *accessibility* in life in many different ways and the women describes that they try to comply with the demands from the social environment. Young women judge risky activities as more dangerous than men, but all the same behave like men do according to Bohlin and Erlandsson (2007). Here Skeggs (1997) suggests that women have a socially confirmed belief, that they are exposed to abuse and violence in public life leading to restricted lives since their freedoms are, in many ways, governed by social and gender-related norms. Our interviewed men were convinced that women, compared to men, are more caring and understanding towards people who suffer from health impairments, beliefs that accord well with the ideas of Deaux and Kite (1987). They suggest that people are expected to conform to stable gender roles. Men and women, who adopt behaviors that are associated with the opposite gender, may not be seen in a positive way (Witley & Ægisdóttir, 2000). Risk-taking was seen as a matter of social class among the interviewees who believed that students enrolled on vocational programs are more inclined to take risks than those on theoretical programs, findings in line with Widén and Erlandsson (2004b). Adolescents' normative expectations about music imply beliefs such as that people who enjoy music possess better social skills and are believed to become more successful in life (North & Hargreaves, 1999)

Methodological implications

Phenomenology focuses on meanings of peoples' experiences, and involves examination of their life world. The individual's personal perception of an object or an event is of interest, as opposed

to objective statements (Smith & Osborne, 2003). Because we live in the same world and have mutual experiences and interests these subjective perceptions may be shared – we may capture an essence of the phenomena. However, the phenomenological also suggests that social contexts influence people's experiences, and in this study the context vary between women and men. The IPA-analysis uncovered the same two dimensions and six super-ordinate themes of the phenomena of risk-taking for both genders, although the sub-themes were found to differ. It is assumed here that the social conditions under which young people live seem to be influenced by gender norms. This is in conjunction with Gilligan's critique of Kohlbergs' theory on moral development - the moral stages may be correct but the content differs between men and women because of their different living conditions (Gilligan, 1982). Among laypersons, in society as well as within the media- and research community, it is not unusual that assumptions about gender are based on an existing norm – a norm that is primarily male. The study result suggests that the concept of risk-taking includes both social and existential aspects of identity as well as aspects of gender.

Biases as the influence of social norms and conditions on the researchers are found in all studies, quantitative as well as qualitative, when philosophical presumptions are made and analytical methods are chosen. As discussed by Dahlberg, Drew & Nyström (2001) it is not possible to repress all presumptions that the researchers have. The IPA analysis asserts that the subject (the researcher) always has previous knowledge of the phenomena studied; however, this previous knowledge is also required in order to formulate appropriate questions. Expectations within this pre-knowledge are colored by the researcher's conception of the world. Nevertheless, the researchers are constrained to handle their own previous knowledge when data are analyzed (Smith et al, 1999; Smith & Osborne, 2003), an ideal that we have tried to live up to.

The choice of selecting data by the use of focus groups and individual interviews was based on the assumption that 1) the focus group would be a perfect arena for adolescents to become aware of social and psychological aspects of risk behavior and 2) individual interviews would be a better choice for those who were not comfortable articulating their ideas in a group. All of them were, however, allowed to make their voices heard concerning an important aspect of their lives. The vignettes were designed in accordance with results obtained in a previous study (Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007) and influenced by existential and gender based theories. In resemblance with young peoples' perspectives on risks and gender the vignettes can be categorized as rather stereotypical. This was intentional in order to adopt a child (adolescent) perspective on stereotypes regarding risks and gender. As Tiller (1991) points out, adopting a child and adolescent perspective in research on children and adolescents is an important task.

Conclusions

In summary, as risk behavior in adolescence can be understood within an existential framework and seems to be influenced by social norms; we suggest that these aspects are taken into account in future research on adolescent risk-taking behaviors. To understand the social aspects of risk-taking, particularly the reproduction of gender, it is important to appreciate the need of belonging in young people's lives. Social belonging is, according to Baumeister and Leary (1995), a fundamental need in humans and we have a strong desire to maintain interpersonal attachments. However, the conditions for humans seem to be rather gender-specific. In this study, for example, the literature review on risk-taking behaviors among adolescents seemed to fit the statements of the male interviewees more than the females. Theories about humans are often influenced on gender norms, and so are some of the important and very contributing theories on risk-taking behavior. In this study we try to take gender norms into account, but in qualitative studies like

this, there are very few participants. This stresses the necessity to adopt a gender perspective when attitudes and risk-taking behavior in adolescence are investigated, both in large and small samples. It is particularly important as the statements articulated by both females and males in this study mirror the reproduction of gender. Such aspects may contribute to the already existing important theories.

In order to understand the existential identity of risk taking, the existential perspective plays crucial roles in the current study, as within our previous research in the field (Bohlin & Erlandsson, 2007). This has shown to be a good way to understand risk taking. In addition, the inclusion of music and hearing as risks has greatly contributed to the understanding of both hearing risks and traditional risk taking. It is apparent that those of us who do practical and research-oriented work with young people need to consider that risk taking does not simply represent a threat; it also provides existential meaning and opportunities for young people to mature. It is also a time when young people may be in emerging adulthood, which according to Arnett (2006; 2007) is the time between adolescence and young adulthood. The preventative work that takes place, with its messages of illness, suffering and death, is often designed in a way that may cause young people to be apprehensive. It is a distinct possibility however, that for some young people, this approach means that they emotionally switch off, instead of weighing up the risks that give existential meaning and those that can endanger health. One of the challenges for the future is thus to be able to talk about risk-taking in terms of both threat *and* development, and not as a case of either or.

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