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Being positive, being hopeful, being happy: Young adults reflecting on their future in times of austerity

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journals.sagepub.com/home/ecs**Minna Nikunen** 

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to analyse the ways in which young adults reflect on their futures. We are particularly interested in how they expect to organize their lives in conditions that seem to offer pessimistic rather than hopeful prospects. How does this happen under social conditions where the major public and individual concerns are with how young adults organize their material lives and how they earn sufficient livelihoods to become good citizens? What are the grounds for their future visions? In our analysis we use 40 interviews with young Finnish adults aged between 18 and 30. The respondents are students, as well as employed and unemployed young adults. Our findings show that the young adults' anticipated future experiences – contrary to common expectations – are positive. These conclusions are often drawn from social comparisons, especially with imagined peers. Those who saw their own and their peers' future as depending more on luck focused on societal insecurity. One group that had positive expectations emphasized happiness. Instead of seeking material success, many of the young adults reported that their goal was to be happy in their future lives. Happiness appears to involve both living according to, and coping with, the demands of the economy and employment.

Keywords

Affect, futurity, happiness, optimism, working-life, youth

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Introduction

The future of young adults in the current economy seems unavoidably insecure. In particular, the chances of finding a permanent job contract are not encouraging. Thus the path from school and education to a secure occupation or career for ‘would-be employees’ (Adkins, 2016) or ‘citizen workers of the future’ (Lister, 2003) looks uncertain and precarious. Indeed, since the economic crisis of 2008, unemployment figures have been alarmingly high throughout Europe, especially for young people. This also applies to Finland. In the eurozone, the unemployment rate among people aged 15–24 increased from 15.6 percent in 2007 to 20.9 percent in 2016. During the same period, figures in Finland followed the same trend, increasing from 16.5 percent to 20.1 percent (Eurostat, 2018). In addition, various kinds of precarious job contracts are widespread. In 2016, as many as 44.1 percent of employed women aged 20–24 were on fixed-term contracts, with 36.3 percent of men in the same position. In the 25–29 age-group, more women (33.0%) were on fixed-term contracts than men (20.1%) (Naiset ja miehet Suomessa, 2018). This situation has been largely static since 2007 (Naiset ja miehet Suomessa, 2007, 2012). Furthermore, feelings and experiences of uncertainty run high, even among those in employment. For example, in 2013 as many as 35 percent of waged employees in Finland aged 15–64 years felt at risk of losing their job (Pyöriä and Ojala, 2017: 52).

Thus, it is not surprising that the main public and individual concerns are with how young adults organize their material lives and how they can earn a sufficient livelihood for a decent life, thereby becoming good citizens. The importance of being a part of economic production is intensified at the same time as the working-life has become more precarious. Thus ‘concerns related to social justice have been transformed into matters of social exclusion’ (Kelly and Pike, 2017: 17). Furthermore, according to Kim Allen (2016), in these ‘austere times’ many academics have declared today’s youth to be a ‘lost generation’, and young people in the European Union (EU) are said to be losing hope for the future (Allen 2016 ref. Muizneiks, 2014).

These accounts resemble the picture that the media and government bodies – including the latter’s youth programmes – present to their wider audiences. News about, and public policies based on, the reflections of young adults themselves are not widespread, and the voices of young adults are not invoked as justifications for youth policies. For instance, the Finnish tabloid *Italehti* (Finnish News Agency STT, 2018) tells us in a headline that ‘the government is reforming young people’s collective working agreements – “short-term dreams and short-term lives are already a reality”’. The headline combines the views of the government and the opposition: the government claims that reform is needed because of youth unemployment; the opposition claims that the government is further deepening the suffering of the young. Concern over young people is most commonly presented in discussions of youth marginalization: ‘in Finland [a nation of about 5.5 million inhabitants], there are almost 70,000 marginalized young people; the situation of boys is especially worrying’, says the leading daily *Helsingin Sanomat* (Teittinen, 2017). Recently, young people’s employment insecurity has been framed as lying behind the low birth rate, and thus as a problem for the whole of society. *Helsingin Sanomat* (Vihavainen, 2017) spreads the message: ‘work insecurity postpones having children – “To put it bluntly, an unemployed man is not attractive to women”’.¹

Bearing the above figures and views in mind, in this article we draw on interviews with young adults to ask how they envision and reflect on their futures. In particular, our aim is to examine how young adults ponder and wish to organize their relationships with employment. What are the ways in which young adults expect to organize their lives, and what are their wishes under conditions that seem to offer grim and pessimistic rather than hopeful prospects? What are the grounds for their visions of the future?

We start by explaining the social background of our analysis and providing conceptualisations of anticipated futures, such as austerity and its operations, in terms of various moods, particularly happiness.

Complex anticipations and moods

Austerity connected to the economic situation and neoliberal policies was the leading strategy of Finland's coalition government, which took power in 2015 and collapsed in April 2019. Austerity measures have already been having an impact on the lives and future prospects of young adults for a long time. The previous coalition (2011–2015) in Finland made cuts to education, such as in universities (€27 million), vocational training (€28 million) and polytechnics (€51 million) (Elonen and Silfverberg, 2011). In 2015 the right-wing coalition announced a plan to cut a further €541 million from education (Boxberg, 2015). The more left-wing current coalition, which came to power in December 2019, has recently made some decisions that will increase the educational budget. However, it will take about 2 years for the increase to be fully implemented.

It is suggested that austerity operates through affective moods, meaning 'an orchestration of affects, feelings and emotions' (Coleman, 2016: 90). Accordingly, we have adopted the notion 'austerity mood'. The term 'austerity mood' illuminates the mental mood generated by austerity measures and their justifications (Coleman, 2016), rather than the direct economic effects of cuts in public spending or other reductions in state funding (Clarke and Newman, 2012, among others). The austerity mood is a general mood that treats 'youth' as a homogeneous group whose shared destiny is described as grim and insecure, especially regarding employment (Coleman, 2016; also Allen, 2016). However, the picture of youth is not as uniform as it seems on the surface – a point we will return to later.

The notion of austerity mood has mainly been based on analyses of media and policy documents (eg Coleman, 2016). How young people have adopted this mood has not yet been widely studied. In our article, we examine how both the general mood and the more concrete situations of our interviewees affect their visions of the future on the one hand, and the ways they organize their lives on the other. We do this by analysing the affects, emotions and feelings they use as resources to construct and shape their daily lives in their interview talk.

Public concern focuses on young people, who are expected to move into the labour market after their education. In Finland, those who are currently in the transitional phase grew up and went to school (from the age of 7) during the recession at the beginning of the 1990s – a time of mass (including long-term) unemployment and increasing social inequality, with prolonged poverty, permanent health differentials by socio-economic group, personal debt, large numbers of young people outside education or employment,

and regional segregation (Eriarvoisuutta käsittelevän työryhmän loppuraportti, 2018: 12). Following the introduction of austerity measures in Western market economies, particularly during the 2010s, news about cuts to welfare services was almost an everyday occurrence under Finland's previous right-wing coalition government, strengthening a mood suitable to adopting austerity measures.

As an outcome of the insecurity of the current economy, young adults in Finland and other capitalist countries are expected to be flexible and adapt to the demands of post-Fordist society. They are supposed to believe society is meritocracy, where it is your own effort – your merits – that will affect what your future will become, not gender or other differences (Gill, 2017; Littler, 2018). Young adults need to acquire special skills, such as marketing-oriented social and emotional abilities, in order to perform their potential for employers, customers, clients and abstract markets when searching for employment or livelihoods. Young adults must be continuously alert when shaping their relations to the changing world of work and the dematerialization and other transformations in the economy and society. Contemporary capitalism demands that employees devote all aspects of their lives to their work and careers: 'the prudent employee and would-be employee should continuously invest in their bodily and affective states to ensure future employability' (Adkins, 2016: 4; Irving, 2016).

This policy drive towards continuous investment in the self and its labour market potential is shared with other nations under Western market capitalism, albeit with different emphases. In the United Kingdom, the emphasis is on 'aspiration' and upwards social mobility, while other EU countries – including Finland – more often use the class-neutral terms 'employability' and 'activation' (Spohrer, 2011; on the UK, see Littler, 2018; Payne, 2018). In the United Kingdom, this policy has roots stretching back to the 1970s; in the case of Finland, it has been argued that it was legitimized by neoliberal policies which were not introduced until the deep recession of the 1990s (Kantola and Kananen, 2013). In Finland, throughout the whole educational path – starting as early as nursery school and continuing to doctoral level – education for entrepreneurship is a striking feature especially from the start of the millennia, and is provided for young people as a desired remedy to ensure survival in the future (Korhonen et al., 2011). This entrepreneurial education is more focused on forging an entrepreneurial mindset than on the abilities required to become an entrepreneur, but essentially it connects both aspects (Ikonen and Nikunen, 2019; Korhonen et al., 2011). There is also 'hopeful pessimism' or the hopeful side of the austerity mood: the future can be good for those who invest in the right skills and develop aspired-for features and attitudes (see Coleman, 2016). Thus, there is the possibility of cruel optimism: the optimistic promise is not easy for all to achieve or maintain, and it can be toxic and affect one in ways that one does not anticipate (Berlant, 2011).

Thus, the negative view – or mood – is not unanimous. In addition, social divisions exist and are being shaped. An analysis of youth policy documents at both the national and European levels shows that besides presenting visions of a desired future, these papers also produce and reproduce inequalities based on gender and class. Young people are divided into those who have potential, those who will take care of others' needs, and those who are at risk of marginalization. The argument is that the Nordic policy tendency

to conceive of youth as a resource rather than a problem (Wallace and Bendit, 2009) is no longer dominant (Nikunen, 2017).

Thus it is fair to say that optimism, while it has given way to pessimism, does prevail, but its preconditions are higher – it is not expected to encompass the whole generation. The core of the optimistic mood is – and was in Finland, especially before the downfall of Nokia – related to the increasingly knowledge-based economy, and to Generation Y or the Millennials as a ‘creative class’, especially as startup-entrepreneurs and ‘digi-natives’ (eg Palfray and Gasser, 2010). These optimistic ideals fit perfectly with the dominant view of economic competitiveness (Kantola and Kananen, 2013).

Therapeutic culture, positive psychology and positive thinking are an integral part of current neoliberal capitalism (Binkley, 2011, 2014; Brunila and Siivonen, 2016; Davies, 2015; Illouz, 2007; Kantola and Kananen, 2013; Scharff, 2016), and self-confidence is correspondingly mooted as a solution to individual problems (Gill and Orgad, 2016). Gill (2017) writes that surviving in neoliberal society requires confidence, resilience, aspiration and positive mental attitude, especially from young women. Achieving the right attitude or sensibility is part of the task of being employable. In contrast with the general austerity mood, optimism and happiness are emphasized as individual-level goals, and as a means to those goals (Ahmed, 2010). According to Ahmed (2010), negativity and pessimism – which for her are preconditions of change – are not appreciated: killjoys are not popular. Happiness also naturalizes privilege, since it is presented as both a goal and a way of achieving goals: killjoys cause their own misery; they are the ‘others’ who do not enjoy the same things as the majority (Ahmed, 2010; Binkley, 2011).

William Davies (2015) points out that happiness can be a hollow concept. Both big business and government tell people to strive to be happy. However, less interest is paid to questions about what makes people happy or unhappy. Posing these questions potentially casts doubt on the current social order. According to Davies, it is easier to change people – they should learn to be happy – than it is to transform society or working-life to make them correspond to people’s needs. Thus, people are left alone with the task of finding happiness in order to succeed in life, since happy people are expected to be more productive. Although happiness psychology emphasizes non-materialistic values, materialism is in fact part of the project of happiness-as-productivity: first, because the focus is on the individual; second, because the ‘materialism’ that is criticized is the past materialism of ‘traditional’ working-life. Although the importance of meaningful human relationships is stressed, according to Davies, this is done in a way that means one should acquire value from other people – that is, use them as instruments for one’s own individual happiness.

In sum, young adults face a complexity of desired futures, such as entrepreneurial orientations including the will and ability to commercialize emotional and social skills. At the same time, however, the future of young adults is presented in the media and in policy documents on future of work (e.g. Committee for the Future, 2018) as grim, with risks that lead to marginalization and the use of (cut) social benefits. These imagined futures are produced through moods that bring desired and frightening futures to life in people’s thinking and activities.

Next we describe our data and method of analysis, before turning to analysing young adults’ visions of their future: their hopes, dreams and fears.

Data and analysis

We conducted 40 interviews with 40 young Finnish adults, aged between 18 and 30 years. Twelve of the interviewees are men. The respondents are students in higher education (N=13), in polytechnics (universities of applied sciences), and in vocational and academic secondary education (N=6). In this age cohort, those with secondary education have usually already graduated from secondary school. In addition, the interviewees include both employed (N=11) and unemployed (N=10) young adults. The large proportion of students reflects the overall situation of this age cohort. The smaller proportion of men reflects the fact that it is often easier to involve young women interviewees than men (see Butera, 2006; Koivunen, 2010). All the interviews were conducted and analysed in Finnish, and were translated into English for the purposes of this article.

The respondents live in the Tampere region. Tampere is the third-largest city in Finland, with about 250,000 inhabitants, and is the only significantly large city in the area. According to national polls, the Tampere region is very popular among Finnish inhabitants as a place to live or visit. According to Statistics Finland (2015), Tampere is a migration gainer at the national level. However, the unemployment rate in the region was then high at about 18 percent. This is partly due to its high rate among young adults, who move to the area without employment, and because of the vast student population, who search for work in the area both during and after their education.

We sought participants from a variety of social networks, using email lists and contact persons from different organizations. Some respondents were targets of the national Youth Guarantee or support institutions; some were 'international', geographically mobile students; some were 'start-up entrepreneurs' or wannabes; some were working, and some were out of work. The idea was to reach young people in different positions in relation to employment and working-life. We also mapped their socio-demographic backgrounds: only five interviewees' parents were both educated at the university level; however, there were a lot more parents with polytechnic education in obviously middle-class positions, such as teachers, engineers, nurses, and with qualifications in business administration. Those young adults who had not been in the high school were the most likely to have parents with only basic or vocational education and being in the blue-collar positions. However, some university students had working-class or unemployed parents.

The interviews were semi-structured, lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours, and included questions about social background, previous experiences of education and working-life, current situation in relation to work and family, and future plans. In this article, we focus on a set of questions on future plans and expectations related to work and private life, including questions about hopes and fears. In addition, future expectations came up when we asked whether the labour market set gendered expectations.

We started the analysis by categorizing the various future visions into (1) negative visions, expectations and fears about the future, possible risks and (2) positive visions, expectations, hopes and dreams that the respondents talked about in the interviews. We found that far fewer fears and risks were expressed than positive visions, leading us to ask: why such optimism?

Next, we classified future plans into five groups, according to the goals that the interviewees expressed, on a continuum with openly materialist goals at one end and

immaterial happiness at the other. Thereafter, we turned to analyse why these visions were either negative or positive. This analysis was based on our categorizations, and used the same set of questions: interviewees provided spontaneous explanations as to why they felt that their future would be bright, or why there might be some risks. In the last part of the analysis, we focused on the most affective future visions connected to talk about happiness. We traced the ways in which ‘happiness’ was used, and we analysed the purposes of that use.

The analysis was ‘theory-driven’, as we categorized and contrasted our interview materials according to different themes that related to certain theories about the austerity mood and affects (Coleman, 2016), cultural studies on happiness and self-confidence (Adkins, 2016; Ahmed, 2010; Gill and Orgad, 2016; Scharff, 2016), and the emotionality of capitalism (Illouz, 2007). Through our classifications we explicated different affective positions towards and aspirations for oneself and one’s anticipated future, and reasons why these positions were taken. Our analysis of the ‘happiness’ aspiration was influenced by the affective–discursive approach. Following Wetherell (2012), we therefore emphasize the intertwining of the affective and discursive. As Wetherell has argued, ‘it is the discursive that very frequently makes affect powerful, makes it radical and provides the means for affect to travel’ (Wetherell, 2012: 19–20). Moods – which encompass more specific affects, emotions and feelings (Coleman, 2016) – are usually shared at a discursive level, and people make sense of their affects and affective encounters discursively. In our case, the young adults did this in relation to different discourses of happiness, positivity and self-confidence.

Next, we present the optimistic and pessimistic visions that these young adults thought were significant for their future. We also explore the grounds for these visions: how young people have come to understand their future possibilities. How are they affected by the general mood?

Optimism and pessimism about the future and work

The interviewees’ aspired-for futures in many ways resembled the information derived from the Youth Barometer data in Finland (Myllyniemi, 2017), even though the sample in that survey was much bigger than in our qualitative interviews and included informants who were younger (15–29 years old) than ours (18–30 years old).

The interviewees’ reflections regarding their aspirations in relation to employment were divided into five categories: (1) money and material things, (2) work and livelihood, (3) career development, (4) meaningfulness and self-fulfilment, (5) happiness/being content. The last category was more holistic than the others, relating to both work and intimate life and blurring their boundaries. We follow Davies’s (2015) definition of the difference between happiness and self-fulfilment or self-actualization (pp. 163–177). Self-fulfilment/actualization has a source – meaningful work, and self-improvement through that work. Thus self-fulfilment/actualization is caused by something, whereas happiness is a more abstract state of mind (see Davies 2015). ‘Being content’ also refers to a non-concrete mental state in the happiness category – being content with one’s life – whereas in the category ‘work and livelihood’, ‘being content’ refers to being satisfied with one’s salary and material living conditions.

A successful career was mentioned as an aspiration related to employment by 21 interviewees, self-accomplishment by 13, happiness by 13, material things by 12 and livelihood by 11. The emphasis on immaterial and self-development categories, rather than on the material and instrumental, may reflect the fact that quite a large proportion of the interviewees were women in higher education, who presumably held middle-class views (Tolonen, 2008). Forming these categories required interpretative work, and the boundaries of the categories are fluid, but the classification gives a good picture of the tendencies. While the interviews were conducted in Finnish, this did not cause problems with categories, since psychological and employability-related terms have fixed meanings and translations from Finnish into English that have spilled into everyday use from scientific language, especially from psychology. Some of these terms were originally translations from English or other Indo-European languages into Finnish.

Most of the interviewees would like to live an ordinary, mundane life – just like the majority of the respondents to the Youth Barometer survey (Aapola-Kari and Wrede-Jääntti, 2017). The interviewees' vision is to have a job or occupation for which they have been educated, or to complete an education that they are interested in and then enter employment. However, our analysis clearly suggests that 'being ordinary' – in the sense of mundane – is differentiated along class lines, indicating that there are multiple ways of being ordinary.

Aspirations connected to material things and money – including an apartment or house of their own, decent or good standards of living, and a car – are also mentioned by 12 interviewees. This tendency to emphasize material things, and work as an instrument with which to gain them, resembles the aspirational and respectable working-class way of looking at the future (see eg Reay, 2017; Tolonen, 2008). In our data, this was more common among interviewees who had a vocational secondary education background than among those who had diplomas from academic secondary education. It might be that for them, the 'future' as a concept was connected to 'life' more broadly, rather than being limited to 'employment' or 'work'.

Material aspects of life were sometimes mentioned in an apologetic tone, as if the interviewed young adults might be held to account over it. This happened especially when material goals were combined with more 'middle-class' aims such as self-fulfilment at work, career advancement and happiness in life, which were popular among those with a high-school education (although not exclusively so). For example, one student stressed that getting wealthy was not the goal *but only a means* towards meaningful work and a meaningful life – towards being empowered and influential, in a post-feminist way:

I would like to be rich but only because then it would be easier to do really huge things and have an influence on people better [laughs]. [. . .] And then I want to have a certain standard of living, so I would not like to live in a studio flat in a block forever. But the biggest dream is that I might get to do some work that is meaningful. (Woman, 22, student, middle-class background)

The answers focused on working-life and the resources it provided for private life, even though we just asked about future fears and hopes. This might be because the framing of the study: interviewees were asked to participate in study that inspects young

adults' relation to working-life and future. However, for working-class youth, an 'ordinary life' means that work provides the means to live a fulfilling life; but this is an instrumental view from the middle-class perspective, which sees 'ordinariness' in terms of immaterial contentment in both working and private life. We do not argue that these classed ways of connecting work and future life are reflections of how working-class youth, for example, experience work and working-life. Rather, these views are different ways of talking about the future, and different ways of orienting to questions about the future and employment.

What is interesting is that as many as 13 out of 40 interviewees referred to the importance of just being happy and content with one's life as a future aspiration – connecting this to both work and other realms of life, but leaving the connection somewhat open. While self-development, having meaningful work and experiencing self-fulfilment at work have often been registered as typical goals among middle-class young women (Tolonen, 2008; Yoon, 2014), and even among the whole Millennial generation (Gill and Pratt, 2008; Palfray and Gasser, 2010; Smola and Sutton, 2002), 'happiness' in a sense is a novelty among young people's future objectives. In the interviewees' expressions we heard and read an element of spiritual/mental well-being that just happened or emerged 'from inside'. Later in this article we look at this aspiration in more detail.

Fears appear to be scarcer than hopes and dreams among the interviewees. Some said that they had no fears or could see no risks in their future. However, those without fears or risks were not so numerous as in the Youth Barometer study according to which 11 percent had no fears (Myllyniemi, 2017). Some of the fears were about very unlikely or distant occurrences, such as losing one's health altogether, indicating that it would be very bad luck if anything disadvantageous were to happen to them in the future. Unemployment, financial problems, not getting onto a desired educational course, intimate relationship break-ups and health issues were all mentioned.

As a whole, the interviewees surprised us with their optimism. It was as if only a few had heard about the grim prospects for youth in periods of austerity. The Youth Barometer reveals that 12 percent of Finns aged 15–29 in 2016 had pessimistic expectations with regard to the nation's overall future, whereas in 2008 this figure was much lower (5%). Furthermore, in 2016 as many as 86 percent of the same age-group were very optimistic concerning their own future, and in 2008 the number of optimists was nearly as high (83%) (Myllyniemi, 2017: 36). It seems that the interviewees' optimism about their own futures is very much on the same track as young Finns more generally. Furthermore, it seems that trust in oneself does not resonate with trust in a 'common' future – at least in a straightforward way. This can be read as a sign of an 'epistemological fallacy' – a disconnection between the objective and the subjective (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006). Although young people see others as affected by social conditions such as class and gender, they believe in individual solutions and choices with regard to themselves. Thus, they do conceive of structural forces, but those forces have become blurred due to the individualistic ethos and greater variety of routes into working-life, especially when young people reflect their own lives (Furlong, 2009).

Next we analyse how the interviewees explained their anticipations, being optimistic or pessimistic in relation to their future goals. These explanations emerged spontaneously when the interviewees reflected on questions about their future.

Comparing individual futures: hopeful pessimism

Among the interviewees who gave any explanations as to why their future vision was positive or negative, these explanations were as follows: (1) comparisons with their peers, (2) their own personal characteristics, or (3) the general situation in society. These explanations were entangled with each other. In particular, comparisons with one's peers were intertwined with the assessment of one's own characteristics and the general situation.

In comparison with their peers – friends, schoolmates, siblings or imagined young adults – the interviewees assessed themselves as either more capable or luckier – more capable, for instance, of writing job applications, being more skilful or having a better attitude. Following Coleman (2016), we would term this hopeful pessimism: in a grim situation, I have better chances than others do. Some felt luckier, for instance, if they had entered employment immediately after education. This stance acknowledges the general pessimism, although it also invokes luck rather than aspirations or skills. Some interviewees stated that their future was insecure because they had been unfortunate compared with their peers, for instance in getting useful work experience or internships. Only a few interviewees claimed that they were pessimistic about their future because of their own personal shortcomings, failures or wrong choices. There were also a few who conceived of their own future as tied to general trends or structural changes in society, in either a positive or a negative sense.

An interviewee with a diploma in vocational education (in construction work) said that he had no worries:

Q: If you think about your future, is there any risk you can think of?

A: Well, there should not be any now.

Q: Anything you fear?

A: I hope not. . . I think I am going to be at [the telemarketing firm] for some time. I think that there are no worries.

Q: Do you think that in the current situation it is problematic for young people to get employment in construction work?

A: Well, I guess it is difficult for young people now, but I guess that it is because they do not have any initiative, or many don't have. In my own course, I think that usually, if one puts an application on the net, nobody [employers] is interested in that. They can read it [if anyone even reads it], but it doesn't give a picture of you as a person for anyone. Or it has to be a really good application if it gives a good picture of you as a person or as a type. I went personally to the headquarters of a construction firm, and handed over my papers, and that was it. So, it's like that. When I resigned from the construction firm, on the same day I had a recruitment interview at a telemarketing firm. It went very well. (Man, 19, employed)

He does not see any risks in his future because of his own active orientation and initiative. He clearly expresses self-confidence. Another explanation for this 'no worries' attitude is his time perspective: he has no worries *now*, since he is going to work in

telemarketing ‘for some time’. He does not think about the very remote future but takes a short-term perspective (Helve, 2012; Leccardi, 2005.)

As already stated, some interviewees presented themselves as being more capable than their peers – like the teleworker above. He relied on his personality and attitude – having initiative, being courageous and being an extrovert, which according to him positioned him above his peers. Another man, a 27-year-old ITC decoder, said that in spite of the recession he and his friends still had ‘the feeling that a guy who knows what he is doing does not end up being unemployed’. A third example is a young man, an engineering student who had read a newspaper report about young people being so unskilled that they could not write proper applications; they even wrote the name of the company to which they were applying incorrectly. Reading this, he concluded that his own future would be bright, since by comparison with these unskilled imagined peers he was a very skilful person. One interviewee remembered that her Finnish teacher had complimented her writing skills, and thus she was confident about getting a job in which good writing skills were demanded. There is a high level of self-confidence in these statements, but also a strong belief in meritocracy: one will get ahead if one has what it takes, the right attitude and skills (Littler, 2018).

The majority of the interviewees stated that one’s odds of employment depended on one’s own effort, skills and qualifications – responsibility was individualized. Those who relied on their own capacity – cited above – did not anticipate that they would have major problems with their employment. This group of interviewees consisted mainly of men, but also included some first- or second-year female college students. Such comments exemplify a mood of hopefulness on one’s own behalf. One interpretation is that these interviewees are committed to being ‘model entrepreneurs’ who find joy in putting their creative capacities to work, with no sense of solidarity towards others (Gill and Pratt, 2008). The gender ratio also hints that young men and women may be alike in their hopefulness – although women are possibly more prone to ‘cruel optimism’, and the somewhat older young women may have had experiences that discourage the neoliberal, post-feminist ‘can-do’ attitude. For them, being able to depend on one’s own abilities does not come without effort, although the idea of working hard to get where you want is also highly valued in post-feminist neoliberal thought (Mendick et al., 2018).

Only two or three of the interviewees pondered whether they were less capable than their peers, and this was why they anticipated their futures as less than outstanding. Their pessimism had no optimistic undertone. An example of this kind of pessimism or low self-esteem was an interviewee who considered her failing university grades as related to her own shortcomings, which she described as an inability to write essays. This small number of pessimistic interviewees, who blamed themselves for their own shortcomings, avoided pondering the future. The above-mentioned 27-year-old woman said that she had ‘no future plans’. When asked about her worries, she talked about her own and her ageing parents’ health problems. She went on to talk about monetary problems, and concluded ‘but I don’t like to think these [negative] things either’.

There were also interviewees who were less individualistic and did not allocate all the blame to themselves or others. They pondered the effects of austere times and the possibility of being lucky or unlucky. Some presented themselves as being fortunate or lucky in comparison with their peers. This was the main message of only a

few interviews. These individuals acknowledged that those who were active could have difficulties. This could be termed hopeful pessimism, in which chance is given more weight than individual investments. In that sense, the comparison between oneself and others is not so individualizing. A good example was a woman who considered herself a rare species, since she was a humanities graduate who had gained employment in the private sector immediately after getting her degree:

So I am content, since I am that unicorn-humanities graduate who has had a work contract before graduation. I have been very pleased because I have a possibility to work in my own field of expertise, and I have a very good work environment and position. (Woman, 27, employed)

In some cases, interviewees saw themselves as the unfortunate ones with a good education but difficulties in finding a job. The clearest example was a woman with a master's degree in history who had problems finding the substitute-teaching job she sought because of a surplus of history teachers in the area. Her case also reflects the fact that dual-career mobility is difficult to negotiate and organize for women; men are less likely than women to move because of their spouses' careers (Nivalainen, 2010). This group of fortunate or unfortunate interviewees consisted mainly of women with degrees or in the last stages of their education, and some unemployed men and men in the last stages of their education. Being 'unfortunate' can also be a way to maintain a hopeful spirit, since setbacks are conceived as simply bad luck in a difficult situation, and not so much as shortcomings or mistakes of one's own.

A few interviewees presented austerity and insecurity as features of their future work life and thus thought that they faced the risk of being unemployed. Conversely, a few thought that the future would be good for almost everyone, or at least would not be as grim as was repeatedly claimed. These accounts seem to put more weight on structural changes than on the individual investments that are an integral part of hopeful pessimism: some will survive (Coleman, 2016). Optimism is not cruel for everyone, even when times are hard (Berlant, 2011). The negative view of the future was more common among women than men. The difficulties of meeting expectations were often discussed after we asked whether the labour market set gendered expectations. All interviewees mentioned that the difficulties of combining work and family affected women more than men. A few women anticipated that they would have to be twice as capable as men to succeed.

Still, it seems that the majority of the interviewees are living according to hopeful pessimism (Coleman, 2016) and the rules of the self-confidence cult(ures) (Gill and Orgad, 2016) as well as neoliberal meritocratic cultures (Littler, 2018). They have internalized the idea that if you work hard and have the right attitude you are likely to have success – at least, more likely than your peers, that is, competitors:

I think that everything depends on your own attitude. And that's the way it should be. . . You have to have your own attitude properly fixed. (Woman, 22, student)

Additionally, I believe in a positive attitude. That you have to be positive also [in order to succeed]. (Woman, 27, part-time entrepreneur/employed)

Being positive and self-confident are obvious building blocks of the right attitude. Thus, being optimistic is not just a carefree or trusting attitude towards life and the future. Instead, it is more of a learned attitude: in austere and pessimistic times, hopefulness is conditional. Performing an optimistic attitude can be regarded as a coping strategy, as fully pessimistic visions can be paralysing and cast one into a position with no hope. Being positive, self-confident and extroverted is a combination that the interviewees were proud to have – often men – or to strive for – often women. It is better to focus on the positive – the promise of individual solutions and chances – and to forget the possibility that the meritocracy might be only an illusion (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Littler, 2018). Instead, one may turn to self-improvement and therapy culture, and/or conclude that there are some risks and insecurities.

Next we more carefully analyse happiness as a desired future. Is interviewees' self-confidence supposed to lead to a successful life? Alternatively, is it just a requirement for an 'ordinary' life? What kind of future did the interviewed young people have in mind?

Desired future: happiness

Some of the interviewees had a clear vision of what they wanted to become and what they hoped to achieve, as we have stated earlier. If the goal was an ordinary life, then the aim was to have a job in line with one's education (and class), reasonable living conditions and a family. This 'ordinary life' was often described in terms of material goals, and work was often regarded as an instrument to attain decent living standards. This vision of ordinariness combined with material goals was mainly found among the working-class young adults. Middle-class young adults mentioned ordinariness in relation to finding a job that matched their education, but they usually did not describe their material goals in detail. Some interviewees had higher-powered goals, such as being a movie director, the chief editor of a newspaper or a successful businesswoman. Still, these visions or hopes were concrete in that they involved an occupation, although those with high hopes did not emphasize the instrumental value of the work. Those who aimed to be successful were usually talking about the prominence of their future work or high social position, and less about the money they would make.

Beyond concrete visions of being somebody or something or possessing certain material objects, many of the interviewees had more abstract and affective visions. They expected that their work would affect them in a positive way. One was that they would find something that they loved to do, that was meaningful to them and possibly a source of self-improvement (mentioned in 13 interviews). Nonetheless, this too could be concrete – for instance, doing quality craftwork across a longer time span and with good materials. It reflected the idea that one could find fulfilment in work, develop as an employee or do something that had societal impact. Another wish was even more abstract, and related to a hope that young adults mentioned in the interviews: they wanted to be happy (mentioned in 13 interviews). For many, happiness would be their dream come true in work and life.

A media studies student stated that she had succeeded in everything. However, according to her, young adults in general felt pressure related to the challenges of getting access to a good education:

- Q: So you see that there are such pressures, but how do you succeed in not caring about them [being detached]?
- A: I don't conceive of myself as succeeding because I have not even tried to be *detached* about them. I just am. *I just live according to my own ideology.*
- Q: So you say?
- A: How should I put it? I just am sort of happy. Since I am sort of spiritually oriented [to life] – if you can say that. For me, it is important that I am happy on the *inside*, and not that some people look at me from the *outside* and say, 'Oh, that person has succeeded since she is there and studies that or has that kind of job and gets such a salary'.
- Q: What do you think being successful means? When do you think you yourself will be successful?
- A: For example, now when I am happy with my life. But actually, I have never thought I want to be successful. Because I think that it is *outside* the opinions of other people that define what is to be successful. So I prefer to say that I am content or happy or the like. *So maybe it comes along with that.* (Woman, 21, university student, our emphasis)

The interviewee here actually denies that happiness has anything to do with being successful – especially as success is seen by other people, from the outside, on a surface level. She is true to herself, authentic and self-directed. According to Lois McNay (2009), it is authenticity that is at the heart of neoliberal governance, meaning not regulation from the outside, but internalized self-discipline. 'Spiritually oriented' could mean that the young women interviewees are influenced by some forms of the happiness industry: self-discipline is interpreted as part of one's well-being and happiness (Davies, 2015). At the same time, the interviewee hints that other people – who are affected by outside pressures – think of her as successful. For her, being successful 'comes along with' being happy.

Happiness does not have to be connected to work or even to one's livelihood. There were interviewees who talked about their goals in life as related to a hobby that was fulfilling and enjoyable, such as being a musician, even if it was not a commercial success or a source of livelihood. However, these young adults did not mention the word 'happiness'. Indeed, there was only one interviewee who did not also want – beyond happiness – career success or self-fulfilment at work. Happiness as a future affect seems also to be related to 'life', 'intimate life' or 'family'. It is a holistic view of life, combining spheres of life that are often seen as separate from each other – possibly reflecting a mental as well as material merging in young lives.

Success without material rewards can be read as a counter-narrative to material incentives or discourses dominated by material issues, as it to some extent can talk about being happy. Both ways of talking about the future deny the importance of material rewards. Other people, including other young people, have materialistic values, but the interviewees stated that they were not like those:

- Q: How do you define success in life?
- A: Well, like you feel content with your life. That you are *at ease with your life*, and your daily life is like nice and cosy.[. . .]

Q: How about being excluded, how do you define that?

A: This is a bit easier, somehow. I think it is that you haven't *found your own thing*. You don't yet know what kind of life you want and where could you *find like joy*, joy and sort of your own thing. (Woman, 24, university student, our emphasis)

This emphasis on immaterial happiness was typical of the interviewed young middle-class adults, especially women. Material things can come along with a serene mind and a higher-education degree. Many of those who 'just wanted to be happy' also wanted successful and fulfilling careers – which often come with material benefits that are needless to explicate. This clearly recalls the promises of self-help literature and therapy culture (Binkley, 2014; Davies, 2015), which suggest that material things come along with mental well-being.

According to the interviewees, a happy life is not closely connected to material achievements. One interpretation is that this may relate to William Davies' (2015) suggestion that happiness psychology and related self-help genres often criticize capitalism and its materialism on a surface level, but ultimately turn out to support capitalist and materialist aims. He also asks whether the worker who identifies with his or her work, and whose boss acts like his or her best friend in order to make him or her commit to the company, without any commitment in return, is freer than a person who goes to work just to earn money. In Davies' view, happiness is an asset in working-life that 'big business' and the happiness industry sell to us in order to get more productive employees who are resistant to depression and anxiety – a resilient workforce for the market.

Concluding remarks

To sum up the empirical analysis, the interviews with young adults emphasize a couple of issues. The young adults oriented towards their futures with optimism. Fears or pessimistic visions were pretty rare. Their explanations for their expectations were entangled with comparisons with their peers, their own personal characteristics and the general situation in society. Thus the majority of the interviewees did not follow the publicly postulated austerity mood. Instead they engaged in 'hopeful pessimism' and saw their own paths as brighter than the paths of others. Individualized ways of explaining hopefulness were more common than structural ways of explaining either hopefulness or pessimism.

Furthermore, the young adults wanted to be happy in their future lives. Happiness was not straightforwardly connected to success in work, career or livelihood. Instead, the desired happiness was something they described as emerging 'from inside', and they downplayed the significance of material achievements. However, those who talked about 'happiness' as a goal usually also presented other goals, such as career success and self-fulfilment at work. Only one interviewee connected happiness with employment as a means to earn a livelihood. In addition, there were hints that denying the importance of material success could be a part of middle-class decency. As has been suggested, it is assumed that working-class young people are more prone to the old idea that employment is an instrument to earn a living. They do not regard saying as much to be morally

suspect (Reay, 2017; Tolonen, 2008), whereas the moral order of the middle class may emphasize cultural values and resources of the self (Skeggs, 2004). Discussions of an 'ordinary life' were more prevalent in working-class interviewees' talk than 'happiness', and 'ordinariness' was mainly connected to one's quality of life outside work, although this was also strongly connected to one's earnings from work.

When the interviewees talked explicitly about happiness, they rarely talked about it as futurity, as an anxiety to achieve the defined goal (Ahmed, 2010). Still, this happiness is not 'silly happy' (Ahmed, 2010). Instead, it resembles the happiness that Davies (2015) describes as something that has no cause or reason – whereas 'silly happy' has its origins, however frivolous they might be. Happiness for no reason, as a goal in itself, means that good things come to those who are happy, and therefore happy people are more productive. Following Lisa Adkins's (2008) conceptualization of futurity, one's value as a worker, or the value of one's work, does not simply stem from the capacities one has acquired. The futurity or future promise of what one is expected to do and achieve is more important than what one is already able to do or has done. The value of one's work depends on the expected gain, and so does the value of the worker.

Therefore, the discussion of happiness in the context of the neoliberal economy provides a basis for further pondering. It is suggested (Binkley, 2014; also Davies, 2015) that promoting happiness through positive psychology is a technology in human resource management, education and business, among others. Hence when people adopt happiness and a happy attitude to their lives, not only do people aim to govern their own lives, but also their lives are governed. It is even stated that 'happiness is a task, a regimen, a daily undertaking in which the individual produces emotional states just as a fitness guru might shape a desired muscle group' (Binkley, 2011: 391). Even though it is hard to argue that the interviewees connected their desire to become happy exclusively with the demands of the economy and employment, it was obvious that those who emphasized 'happiness' usually saw their professional futures as bright. However, such wishes were usually discussed separately, not in connection with each other.

At the same time, it is clear that happiness may be a coping strategy in relation to insecurities of the future, especially in working-life. The 'happiness' talk seems to resonate intensely with the current mood. It is as if those who utilize 'happiness' are more affected by the (hopefully) pessimistic atmosphere than those who have more concrete goals. The idea of happiness was based on self-confidence, and shaped by a comparison of one's luck or capability with that of known others. Furthermore, the anticipations were gendered. Our analysis hints that decent gendered citizenship and neoliberal austerity mutually support and construct each other. The (relatively older) young women said that they needed to strive for a positive attitude, whereas the young men were more optimistic and relied on themselves. Indeed, it is said that in neoliberal times, when young women are presented as natural winners, since working-life demands increasingly soft or feminine skills, these 'top girls' (i.e. 'successful girls') are held accountable for their own failings in the face of neoliberal or post-feminist ideas of meritocracy – even though the times are tough (Allen, 2016; Baker, 2010; Gill, 2017). However, hard work – including on oneself – is valued in post-feminist/neoliberal times, although it is more easily recognized when performed by a man than by a woman (Mendick et al., 2018). Softer, immaterial values are not a sign of a more lenient or inclusive society.

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Note

1. We have investigated the gendered aspects of Finnish media and policy concerns in another article. Social exclusion is often presented as a male problem, as is unemployment (Nikunen, 2017). These headlines date from 2017 and 2018, while our interview data is from 2015 and 2016. The headlines clearly demonstrate the mood of austerity, even though they were written at the start of an economic boom.

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