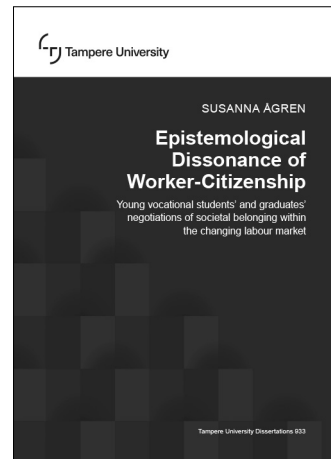


# Epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship

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I have a great deal of respect for vocational upper secondary education. This is due to my long work history in the field of vocational education since 2007, which is also where my interest in this research comes from.

In my dissertation, I wanted to focus on young vocational students and on young adults who have graduated from vocational institutions. This was because I think that their voice is rarely heard in social, political, and academic discussions. Often, these discussions become interested in these young adults, their lives, choices, well-being, and future mainly from the perspective of their future occupation and working life participation.

This kind of working life-related viewpoint was central also in my own earlier jobs within the field of vocational education; how to get these young people to participate and cope in their occupation, how to support them so

that they can pass their studies and graduate as skilled workers? Even work with their well-being often had to be justified by the fact how it helps their employment. For a youth researcher who recognises the diversity and complexities of young adults' lives, the promotion of these working life-centred goals was not always ethically problem-free. Therefore, my main motives for my dissertation were to better understand young adults' negotiations with these worker-citizenship related ideals and to bring out their points of view.

In the dissertation, I am interested in the concept of worker-citizenship. With worker-citizenship, I refer to how the relationship between the individual and society is constructed around paid work (Suikkanen & Viinamäki 1999). In a society where working is regarded as a significant part of individuals' societal function, individuals can claim their rights and status through their participation

in work (Beck 2000; Marshall & Bottomore 1992). Simply put, I regard that worker-citizenship, one's participation in work, is a well-respected social norm in a work-based society such as Finland. Here, we also have worker-citizenship ideals that define what kind of persons we should be and become, what we should aspire for in society and also define how our value is assessed in society (Weeks 2011; Kelly 2013): we should educate ourselves, strive to find employment, pay our taxes, and thus fulfil our obligations in society.

Worker-citizenship-related norms and ideals, the way we value work and what kind of worker-citizens are needed, shape in accordance with the changes in society, culture, industry, and in the labour market (Suikkanen & Viinamäki 1999; Billett 2006). For earlier generations it might have been enough that they were ready to dedicate themselves to their work (e.g. Sennett 1998). They could spend their whole working life career in their own specific occupation and for many, there were not so many choices to make in the labour market. The current labour market is by contrast claimed to be much more unpredictable (Beck 1992, 2000). It requires that we are continuously ready to re-shape ourselves, our abilities, and skills in accordance with labour market's changing needs (e.g. Kelly 2013; Weeks 2011; Beck 2000; Sennett 1998). In other words, the current labour market requires that we are flexible with our choices and skills and that we are able to adapt to its unpredictability and its risks.

In this context, especially young adults face pressures in society regarding their worker-citizenship. They are expected to find their own place in society and strive efficiently towards worker-citizenship (Farrugia 2021). They face increasingly demands that relate to their choices in their lives and in the labour market. They are expected to be ready to continuously adopt skills and personalities

that align with the labour market's needs (Kelly 2006; Brunila, Vainio & Toivainen 2021). All of these place pressures also on their transitions to working life and adulthood.

We know from earlier youth research for example by Johanna Wyn, Peter Dwyer, Dan Woodman, and Hernan Cuervo, that these worker-citizenship related expectations that we place on young adults as a society might lean on a too simplistic idea of how young adults' transitions should and could proceed (see Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Woodman & Wyn 2015; Cuervo & Wyn 2014, 2016). Youth researchers have noted that the adulthood where young adults navigate has changed: Contemporary young adults may not have as stable basis for their life planning as earlier generations. For them, the unpredictability of the labour market and their life planning, their uneven chances for doing choices amidst this unpredictability, and the overall complexity of "new" adulthood that they face might actually be in contradiction with the societal expectations relating to worker-citizenship (see Dwyer & Wyn 2001; Woodman & Wyn 2015; Wyn 2020).

In the dissertation, I am interested in this contradiction, especially as earlier studies, such as by David Farrugia (2021), have claimed that regardless of the contradictions, young adults learn to interpret their value and lives in society through certain worker-citizenship ideals.

Vocational upper secondary education is an interesting context to study this contradiction. Scholars have claimed that the purpose of vocational education is constructed around worker-citizenship (see e.g. Isopahkala-Bouret, Lappalainen & Lahelma 2014; McGrath et al. 2020; Billett 2011; Colley et al. 2003); vocational education aims to educate young people to become workers to needs of the labour market, economy, and society. Vocational students are expected to become skilled workers in their occupational field

and are guided towards ‘right’ occupational attitude and work ability; they should learn to take the responsibility of their employability on their own hands. While being dedicated to their own occupation, they should also become flexible worker-citizens so that they can navigate within the current labour market (e.g. Nylund & Virolainen 2019).

I have completed my dissertation in a situation where vocational upper secondary education and young adults’ participation in employment are once again receiving attention in the political and societal discussions. In Finland, we are worried about young adults’ moral and coping in the labour market. We have discussions that claim that the employers are not satisfied with the skills of vocational students<sup>1</sup>, and we have discussions demanding a shorter vocational education in order to provide the needed workforce quicker<sup>2</sup>. At the same time, the media is filled up with stories about how young adults get exhausted within the labour market<sup>3</sup>. We want to push young adults ever more effectively into ever narrower worker-citizenship without trying to identify the complexities of our worker-citizenship ideals.

Generally speaking, young vocational students’ and graduates’ post-graduation lives raise interest mainly from the perspective of how they manage to find jobs in their occupation. Funding for vocational upper secondary education is also partly steered from this perspective. In the dissertation, I am showing that this view needs a more qualitative perspective on how these young adults see their lives and possibilities within the post-graduation labour market.

In the dissertation, I discuss the contradiction between the worker-citizenship ideals and young vocational students’ and graduates’ actual chances in their post-graduation lives through Martha Nussbaum’s (2013) idea of a ‘life worthy of human dignity’. I

utilise Nussbaum’s thinking to emphasise the responsibility of society to guarantee young adults their opportunities to feel that they are valued in society as they are and that they can determine the meaning of their post-graduation lives. For Nussbaum, especially these opportunities form a basis for a decent life.

I am complementing Nussbaum’s thinking with the concept of societal belonging to discuss how worker-citizenship ideals shape vocational graduates’ possibilities to experience belonging in society. Shortly said, I interpret that societal belonging simply refers to a young person’s experience of being an accepted and valuable part of society (May 2013; Anthias 2006). The sense of societal belonging is negotiated in everyday interaction with others and is linked to the social norms and values relating to worker-citizenship, based on which young adults’ lives and decisions are guided and assessed in society (May 2013; Yuval-Davis 2006; Antonsich 2010).

In the dissertation, I am thus interested in young vocational students’ and graduates’ negotiations about their worker-citizen selves (who they are, who they want to be, who they should be and who they can be) within the contradictory labour market and with the worker-citizenship ideals. I ask how these young adults negotiate with the worker-citizenship ideals and understand and position themselves as worker-citizens within the contemporary labour market. I also ask how their views and experiences appear regarding societies’ responsibilities to sustainably guarantee them the preconditions for societal belonging.

My findings are based on several group and individual interviews with young adults. If the entire data of the fourth sub-study is included, altogether 100 young adults have been interviewed<sup>4</sup>. The first sub-study also contains survey data from Finnish Youth Barometer 2019 including views of 1900 young people of whom almost 200 were vocational

students. My observations are based on a careful examination of this rich and valuable data in four sub-studies.

My observations show how these young adults know that their lives, choices, and value are assessed in society through worker-citizenship. Many of them dream of a fair job where they can use their skills, are supported, and encountered as they are, and which has fair terms and salary and is supportive for their well-being and changing life situations. For them, worker-citizenship is not only about a job, but it has varied meanings that relate to their senses of societal belonging. While studying in vocational education, they want to trust that their occupation guarantees them personally the opportunity to start their own independent lives like their peers do and fulfil the expectations of society. At the same time, they stay aware of the labour market realities.

My results show that young adults are shaping their worker-citizenship within a quite contradictory adulthood after their graduation. Their working life stories show that they continuously need to justify and reflect on their worker-citizenship, balance their well-being with their worker-citizenship, and sometimes compromise on their dreams, be prepared to change their occupation, or tolerate uncertainty in relation to their livelihood and future. Their post-graduation lives include several negotiations on their societal belonging and worth as worker-citizens.

From these starting points, I began to reflect more closely on the concept of 'epistemological fallacy' by Andy Furlong and Fred Cartmel (2007), which has been broadly discussed in the field of youth research. According to them, in today's individualistic society which highly emphasises individual responsibility, although being aware of the uncertainties in the current labour market, young adults learn to trust that they can personally solve these uncertainties despite

the risks related to the unpredictability of the labour market. Therefore, like some of the young adults also in my data described, they may feel ashamed when they fail to do so.

Although I find the concept of 'epistemological fallacy' as partly descriptive, I regard that it is not entirely sufficient to describe my observations. I see that the complexities of worker-citizenship ideals that young adults face in their mundane lives are something on which they have to actively take a stand on, and because of which they are also well aware of the injustices and demands involved. In this claim I rely on the arguments presented for instance by my honoured Opponent Carmen Leccardi (2014; Cahill & Leccardi 2020). The way young adults emphasise their own value as worker-citizens is a justified negotiation strategy for them when they face unrealistic demands of worker-citizenship ideals from the perspective of their own possibilities within the complex conditions of the current adulthood (see Cahill & Leccardi 2020). Instead of 'epistemological fallacy', I am thus introducing a new concept of 'epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship' to contribute to the related youth research debate.

I use this concept to demonstrate the multifaced complexities that shape young adults' negotiations about their societal belonging as worker-citizens. In my empirical understanding, the 'epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship' shapes from the sometimes-contradictory institutional expectations of how young adults should implement worker-citizenship, but also from young adults' working life experiences, from their changing life situations, from their actual chances to do labour market choices, from their chances to start their adult lives, and of course, from how they regard themselves as worker-citizens. Through this epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship, young adults negotiate their value and meaning in

society, and it shapes their senses of societal belonging.

This means that in my view young adults negotiate between their worker-citizen selves (who they are, who they should be, who they want to be and who they can be) and the current labour market realities (cf. e.g. Cuervo & Wyn 2016; Cuervo & Chesters 2019). Here, the contradictions in worker-citizenship do not only relate to the amount of work in their field but to their resources and opportunities to respond to the worker-citizenship related expectations and shape their worker-citizenship in a way that their skills, life situations, and personalities fit to it and in a way which is supportive for their well-being and their chances to plan and determine their adult lives.

This obviously relates to their negotiations between their worker-citizen selves and the worker-citizenship ideals (cf. e.g. Farrugia 2021; Nikunen 2021). Not all young adults feel that they have genuine opportunities to implement 'ideal' worker-citizenship and make related choices so that they can progress in their lives as expected and as they desire (cf. e.g. Chesters et al. 2019).

Therefore, I also see that young adults engage in negotiations about their rights for societal belonging (cf. e.g. France 1998; Kallio 2023). I regard that their interview stories, especially regarding how some of them described labour market injustices, unfair employment contracts, the unrealistic expectations by the employers or the employment services, were also negotiations of their rights in society: they want to have a fair start for their adulthood.

I am thus claiming that this epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship I have described, is not sufficiently acknowledged in the policies that guide young adults' lives after their graduation from vocational education. Therefore, on the basis of my findings, I have presented four recommendations directed to the policies relating to vocational education

and employment services of young adults.

From my empirical point of view, these policies should aim to better acknowledge how this epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship is intertwined with young adults' senses of their post-graduation well-being and societal belonging (see e.g. Harris, Cuervo & Wyn 2021; Cuervo & Wyn 2014). Worker-citizenship is not a self-evident position but contains multiple negotiations about young adults' chances to live, determine and plan their good adult lives and feel as valued part of their occupational community and of society. The epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship where they have to balance their lives makes these negotiations complicated.

Therefore, I also claim in the dissertation that these policies should aim to reduce the pressure on young adults to fulfil the worker-citizenship by identifying the diversity, complexity, and inequalities of worker-citizenship as a guarantor of young adults' decent adult lives (see e.g. Farrugia 2021; Chesters et al. 2019). I see that the 'epistemological dissonance' is not 'solved' with individual skill-building as it is constructed within the contemporary society and might be reality for contemporary young adults, no matter what they try.

Thirdly, I claim that these policies should guarantee secured resources for vocational education and youth-related guidance services to acknowledge and encounter these dissonances in young adults' post-graduate lives. This means that this knowledge of youth studies is needed at the policy level but also at a more practical level in vocational education and employment services. All these institutions produce worker-citizenship ideals through which young adults interpret their value and chances within the complex and contradictory conditions of their adulthood (see May 2013; Kallio 2023).

Finally, I claim that the epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship relates also

to the sustainability of the worker-citizenship ideals. Young adults' views and experiences should be involved in the debates that relate to the future of vocational education and labour market (as claimed also by e.g. McGrath et al. 2020). While worker-citizenship might be an important construct for them to negotiate their value in society, young adults also regard it as a contradictory, and sometimes also an unsustainable and unfair construct. Therefore, I hope, that my concept of epistemological dissonance of worker-citizenship could inspire other researchers to have a multidisciplinary debate on how to make worker-citizenship and the demands we place on young adults more sustainable.

## Footnotes

- 1 e.g. see news articles Yle 31.3.2023, "Lehtoria hävettää lähettää opiskelijansa työelämään – ammatillisessa koulutuksessa ei riitä aikaa opettaa nuorille tarvittavia perustaitoja" (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20024910>), and Yle 19.10.2023, "Lähes 40 prosenttia työnantajista on tyytymättömiä ammattiin valmistuneiden osaamiseen" (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20055935>).
- 2 e.g. see news article Yle 21.4.2023, "Valtiovarainministeriö haluaa leikata ammattikoulutuksesta – taustalla kiistanalainen tilasto" (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20028051>).
- 3 e.g. see news articles Yle 20.3.2023, "Nuoret uupuvat jo pian päästyään työelämään – Noora Lehtinen, 22, saa lyhentää työaikaansa, jotta jaksaa" (<https://yle.fi/a/74-20022339>), and Yle 11.1.2024, "Miksi tekisit superraskasta työtä pienellä palkalla?" kysyy tukien varaan heittäytynyt Alma Tuuva" (<https://yle.fi/aihe/a/20-10006082>).
- 4 including 12 group interviews with vocational students in 2018 and 2019 (56 young adults) and 32 individual interviews with young adults graduated from vocational education (of which 11 were follow up -interviews and including data from Määttä (2018, 2019)). In addition, the fourth sub-study also contained life course interviews with 25 young adults collected and analysed by the co-author of the article, Jenni Kallio (see Ågren & Kallio 2023; also, Kallio 2023).

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