

## Negotiating Uncertainty

*Finnish Female University Students' Experiences on Transition from  
Education to Work*

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## Abstract

The research at hand observes closely the education-to-work transitions of eleven Finnish female university students, who were interviewed in Autumn 2008 for a more extensive research on processes of achieving adulthood in contemporary Finnish society. The interviewees' transitional processes are studied as told experiences, and the focus is in the subjective meanings the respondents give to education and work. The research aims to illustrate how these meanings intertwine with the respondents' conceptions of adulthood, and to observe how these conceptions relate to contemporary social conditions that have rendered institutionalized biographical transitions fragmented and heterogeneous. The intention is to try to understand the respondents' articulated experiences by placing them within wider societal context, which structures individual life choices. The interview data has been analyzed using central elements applied from *Grounded Theory* and qualitative content analysis. The societal context of the research is the contemporary, early 21<sup>st</sup> century Finnish society, where central social institutions, including education system, labour market and family are undergoing dramatic changes that affect individuals' biographical designs. Theoretically the research is situated close to the recent theorizations on life course and biography in highly individualized and increasingly global risk society.

## 1. Introduction

This research illustrates the uncertainty faced by academically educated young people entering working life in the early 21st century Finnish society, and the ways in which they construct their biographies in a societal situation where traditional markers of adulthood are in transition. This is done by observing closely the education-to-work transitions of eleven young Finnish female university students. I am suggesting that the young academic women's transition from university education to working life in today's Finnish society can be seen as negotiation with uncertainty concerning educational choices, employment, and social relationships.

The research is based on interviews conducted in the Autumn 2008 that help in perceiving those social conditions under which highly educated young people construct their biographies and their relation to adulthood in contemporary affluent Western societies. The societal context is primarily Finnish, but in the contemporary globalized world one might find more similarities between highly educated young people in Australia and Finland, than between Finnish young people with different educational backgrounds, an issue which has become evident in the course of the research process.

The emphasis of the research is in the ways the respondents tell about their experiences of the life phase during which they are finishing their university education and soon to enter the labour market. The focus is on one hand in the empirical observation of the transition processes and what kinds of subjective meanings the respondents give to education, work, and adulthood. On the other hand, besides the more or less descriptive dimension of bringing up diversity in experiences, an applied *Grounded Theory* approach has been used in formulating the storyline of uncertainty, which's dimensions these young women negotiate with in their life situation.

Young people's education-to-work transitions have been under a lot of discussion in Finland during recent years. Settling oneself steadily into the world of work obviously minimizes young people's experiences of uncertainty and idleness, but youth transitions matter on the societal level, as young labour force is needed to cater for

shifting occupational demands and currently, to contribute to the Baby boomer generation's pensions as they start to retire in masses from the Finnish labour market. In recent years the Finnish government has been especially worried about university students' lengthy studying times, and various policies<sup>1</sup> have been planned and implemented that would make the path from school to work as straightforward as possible, and thus lengthen working careers.

There exists plenty of quantitative information on educational transitions, as both international and national statistics concerning the topic are being published regularly. Should one be interested in finding up-to-date statistical information on educational transitions and newly graduates on European labour markets, for instance OECD reports like the *Education at a Glance* are excellent sources. To find information from Finland, *Statistics Finland's* annual reports are worthwhile to look into. The aim of this research is to deepen the knowledge on transitional processes by dipping into subjective transitional experiences, and trying to find out what kinds of social processes are connected to them.

This research also ends up challenging the persistent discourse of highly educated youth hesitating to embrace adulthood, and allegations of them deliberately postponing adulthood by staying in education for longer, getting married and starting families later, instead engaging themselves in all sorts of unconventional lifestyle experiments. Alternative approaches to this *Delayed adulthood thesis* (Blatterer 2009) are sought by putting the respondents' seemingly individual life choices into a wider societal and historical context. Young people are understood as social agents trying to adjust their lives according to existing social conditions, and the respondents' life

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<sup>1</sup> For instance, the Finnish government has been trying to reduce gap years, that until now have been very common between secondary and tertiary education, by giving advantage points in entrance exams for newly graduated applicants. Secondly, specialization in certain subjects is currently encouraged already in high school in order to shorten the period of time used for weighing out different career options before entering higher education. Thirdly, restrictions have been made upon recommended study times.

orientations and choices are considered as meaningful actions that they consider fit for the prevailing social conditions.

Many societal institutions, as the state, educational system, labour market, and family, mold the processes of achieving adult status. Changes within these institutions always affect young peoples' life courses. It seems that the traditional meanings and measures for education, work, and adulthood are in transition, as are their relations to each other (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 8-10). This study attempts to deepen the knowledge on how today's youth negotiate them within their life situations.

Young people's transition from education to work is the key empirical phenomenon in this research. The school-to-work transition is considered a very central life event in affluent societies where acquiring a relatively high level of education is common and also a central prerequisite for achieving a more or less steady position on the labour market. It has been an important criterion for achieving adult status, a sort of an initiation ritual (Komonen 2001, 72).

This transition can be summarized as the period between the end of individual's primary involvement in education and their relatively stable settlement in working life (Müller & Gangl 2003, 1; Couppié & Mansuy 2003, 64). During this period, school-leavers strive to find work where their qualifications and personal interests meet labour market demands, and which would provide them also opportunities for professional development.

Patterns of individual transitions reflect young people's integration to the world of work. According to Walter Müller and Markus Gangl these patterns reflect both continuity and change in the societal division of labour. At the micro-level, individuals experience transition processes as a series of events that arise from individual expectations and action. These individual factors are always affected by specific *macro-level opportunity structures*, in other words, jobs available in particular occupations, industries, or areas for people with particular qualifications and other resources (Müller & Gangl 2003, 6.)

The macro structural conditions and institutional settings vary in time and place, and so do the individual choices and outcomes of action. At the macro-level, transition

patterns can reflect the experiences of certain age-group members leaving the educational system. The research interest within this kind of approach lies within *structural and institutional observation*, whereas in my study the focus is on trying to understand *transition processes* within a small peer group.

Ideally the transition from school into the labour market happens smoothly, without long or repeated periods of idleness before school-leavers establish themselves in working life. This ideal has its origins in the post-War years of economic boom and the building of the Finnish welfare state, the period of time when many interviewees' parents were entering the labour markets. The situation differed greatly from the one faced by the majority of Finnish youth of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. This change is also reflected in the data, where the interviewees compare their own, uncertain life situation with the relatively smooth transitions experienced by their parents.

Over the last two decades there have been massive structural changes on labour markets across Europe. The structural and institutional context of working life has become increasingly unstable, or *precarious*<sup>2</sup>, and mass unemployment has become a permanent phenomenon. Due to these reasons even the most highly educated young people might have to face repeated periods of unemployment, under qualified and underpaid work, or having only short- or fixed-term contracts and part-time jobs.

These phenomena are tightly connected with the topic of *lengthening youth*, an issue that a lot of discussion in recent years has been revolving around. Youth indeed seems to be a shifting concept, as are its boundaries. Lengthening refers here to the boundaries stretching both down- and upward, and youth *expanding* into what used to be seen as territories of childhood and adulthood. When macroeconomic factors were less turbulent, reaching 25 used to be the benchmark age, when things started to settle for young people, whereas now even banks and insurance companies have started to

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2 The adjective precarious in English means uncertain, or dangerous, whereas in Finland a commonly used new term precariate/ prekariaatti (fin.) refers to the growing number of work force in an unsecure labour market position, working on short fixed-term or part-time contracts.



react to the situation, where growing number of their customers are well into their 30's, and without steady income related to adulthood status. This is reflected in companies "youth service packages", targeted to customers up to 28 or 30 years old.

Measuring with the classic markers of adulthood, like the age of getting married, or having children, it is easy to state that adulthood is being reached five or so years later than some decades ago. Whether this is a question of young people's shifting values and lifestyles choices, or due to structural changes on the labour markets that make getting and keeping jobs difficult, causes constant debate both within academia and media. Whatever the case, the pathway into traditionally defined adulthood seems to have become more winding than before. People have to be ready to educate themselves over and over again, be flexible, and adapt to constant uncertainty. (Laaksonen 2001, 94.) The very basic structures of modern, industrialized society are under constant deconstruction, but activity in working life seems still to be the absolute criterion for full membership of the society.

According to Italian researcher Carmen Leccardi, we are living an era which is substantially transforming the coordinates of the relationship with time constructed by modernity. This has caused profound changes in individuals' temporal experiences. The crisis of industrial time becomes the crisis of normal biography that is constructed around this time: "youth as preparation for work, adulthood as work performance, and old age as retirement". (Leccardi 2006, 15-17.)

Often it is assumed that transition to adulthood is being deliberately postponed by today's young people, for instance to take time out for traveling or other leisurely activities. While it is clear that it does seem to take longer for them to graduate and establish themselves on the labour market than it took for their parents' generation, the structural and institutional factors affecting their transitional processes are most often left unnoticed, at least in public discussion. In any case, young people of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century have had to adjust to a rapidly changing and uncertain social environment, which does give way to, or even requires, new ways of defining and living adulthood.

## The Structure of the Research

The research is divided into eight main chapters. Following this introductory chapter, the second chapter describes the context of the research, data collection, and study design. Third chapter presents the preliminary analysis, concentrating in the interviewees' educational choices. The fourth chapter continues the analysis, but the focus is shifted into the respondents' views on the world of work. The third and fourth chapters make visible the dimensions of uncertainty within different aspects of the respondents' lives.

The fifth chapter then discusses the findings of the preliminary analysis, and presents the key categories derived from the data. In the sixth chapter the societal context of the interviews and related theoretical discussions begin to take form, building upon the derived categories. Seventh chapter then opens up a new perspective to the discussion, while the final, eighth chapter draws the diverse themes together with concluding remarks.

## 2. Transition Process and the Study Design

In this chapter the study design, research data and methodological choices will be presented. The research is constructed upon eleven semi-structured<sup>3</sup> theme interviews that provide in-depth information on a group of young Finnish female university students, and their experiences on the transition from university to working life. To get started, the research setting and some problems inherent in the concept of *transition* are briefly discussed. Then, to get a hold on the interviewees' transition experiences, attention is paid to how they spoke about their education, employment, and personal life situation.

The purpose of this chapter is to illustrate how the study has been designed upon ideas derived from *Grounded Theory* and qualitative content analysis. The processes of collecting the research data as well as the methodological approaches of analysis are described in detail.

The reason for choosing a *Grounded Theory* -influenced approach lies in the fact that the study has been originally conceived within another research, for which the interview data were originally produced. Thus, as it has not been possible to select the theoretical framework and hypotheses from the beginning, it has been a logical choice to use a data-driven approach that allows theoretical ideas to be derived from the interviews. What has to be made clear, though, is that the approach is not “orthodox” *Grounded Theory*, as described by its founding figure Barney G. Glaser (1967, 1978, 2001). Despite being aware of Glaser's arguments for using pure form of *Grounded Theory*, I have had to develop an approach, where certain elements central to the *Grounded Theory*, and some features typical of qualitative content analysis are used together.

According to the principles of *Grounded Theory* I started the analysis of the interviews without pre-conceived theoretical framework, concepts or categories in

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<sup>3</sup> The interview questions were pre-structured, but the tone of the interviews was maintained conversational, allowing important and often very informative “off-topic” sidetracks.

mind. Nevertheless, I wasn't able to adopt the required "know nothing" approach (Glaser, 2001) of *Grounded Theory* either, since my research-design was heavily influenced by the larger research project, the given interview structure, and not least my own close familiarity, as a young academic woman, with the topic.

However, in the analysis I used some methods of *Grounded Theory*, as *open* and *selective coding*, and was able to arrive at a *core category*, or story line, by conceptualizing the interview data (1978, 56-62, 94). Only after that I did a literary review to place these conceptualizations into societal context. Thus, instead of having pre-existent analytical categories in mind, into which I would have tried to fit the data, I have formulated and sought categories that fit *the emergent basis* of the interviews (Glaser 1978, 4). In the research report however, the storyline that the analysis eventually led me to, is present from the beginning.

From qualitative content analysis I have taken the descriptive approach to the data, although heavily criticized by Glaser (2001). Also, in contrast to Glaser's approach, I have strongly contextualized my research and data (ibid., 9, 12). To summarize the research design, the applied *Grounded Theory* approach has made it possible to find out what the data suggests, instead of forcing it to fit pre-existing hypotheses. The coding processes, that resulted in the emergence of the core category of the data, *uncertainty*, have then guided me into the literary review of relevant theoretical writing. Instead of attempting to "transcend people, time, and place", and formulate general theory, as suggested by Glaser (2001), the research is strongly rooted in all these. However, this does not close the possibility that something more generally applicable could emerge from the data.

## 2.1. Interviews with Young Academic Women

The main empirical data for this research were collected within a comparative research conducted as a part of a research project *25 and Something: Transition to Adulthood in Europe*, led by Eriikka Oinonen at the Department of Social Research, University of Tampere. The comparative research conducted by Aurélie Mary studies young female university students' transitions to adulthood in France and Finland.

In order to gain access to in-depth knowledge of these life events Mary decided to study transitions from young people's own points of view. She conducted eleven semi-structured single-person theme interviews in Lyon, France in the summer 2008, and another eleven with my assistance in Tampere, Finland the following winter. While Mary's comparative research utilizes both the French and the Finnish data, this research concentrates in the eleven Finnish interviews.

I was employed to Mary's project to be present in most of the interview situations as a Finnish-speaking research assistant. The interviews done in France were conducted in French but the Finnish ones had to be conducted in English due to the relatively complex language (i.e. education and labour market vocabulary) used that could, despite the researcher's competency to communicate in Finnish, cause difficulties. Although Finnish university students can generally be expected to be fluent English-speakers, I was present in case the Finnish interviewees needed to express something in their native tongue.

I also assisted in translating the interview questions from French to English and to Finnish. Importantly, transcribing the recorded interviews into text was also part of my work, which has given me the optimal starting point to familiarize myself with the extensive data that we gathered.

### The Trouble with Transition

The framework of *transition* was given in the research design from the beginning. To me it appeared somewhat problematic. The problem of the concept lies in its in-built ambiguity. On one hand transition refers to process and movement, but in the same time the assumed predestined nature of these processes freeze this movement, or minimize it into certain recognizable and predictable phases that appear form a linear path toward adulthood. (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 10; Wyn & White 1997, 94-99.)

Traditionally, transition from youth to adulthood has been seen to consist of three phases. Firstly, transition from economic dependency to financial independence, and as education has become more and more important, transition from education to work. Secondly, transition from childhood home to marital home, and thirdly, from child's role to parenthood. Although the timing of these phases has changed significantly

throughout history and across different cultures, these have formed the framework of understanding the processes of becoming adult. (Oinonen 2001, 110.)

Aapola and Ketokivi write how studying young peoples' life events like educational transitions empirically have a very central meaning for understanding adulthood, as they have been traditionally considered to, step by step, transform young person into an adult (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 8). Rachel Thomson with her colleagues criticize this approach by claiming that while these transitions are likely to have biographical resonance, this has led to researchers privileging social categories over subjective experiences. Recent recognition of fragmentation in these transitions has increased interest in more biographical approach. (2002, 338.)

Although the research project can be placed within the context of transitional studies, it has been necessary to take critical conceptual distance from that field. This was one of the reasons I decided to apply *Grounded Theory* principles to my own research. However, as transitions of different kinds have become customary framework in trying to understand the processes of growing up, it is challenging to come up with challenging conceptualizations.

Finnish youth researchers Sinikka Aapola and Kaisa Ketokivi offer a simple solution to this: it is possible to observe the life events that have traditionally been named as transitions same time acknowledging the concepts limitations in describing these events. (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 10.) The stand taken in this particular research allows shifting the focus from observing these events *per se*, to how young people negotiate with the cultural conceptions concerning adulthood. But, as noted earlier, in the beginning I did not have this perspective in mind, when I started the analyzing process.

## Gender Matters

The initial reason for choosing namely women as interviewees was mostly related to the economic and temporal resources available for the comparative research between France and Finland, although there are specific features related to highly educated women's employment trajectories, which make the choice justified also on social scientific grounds.

The recent article by Osmo Kivinen and Jouni Nurmi points out many crucial topics related to Finnish highly educated women's employment trajectories. Kivinen and Nurmi have studied the employment of recently graduated highly educated women and men in Finland and in eight comparison countries (2009). Their central claim is that in education opportunities men and women in Finland are pretty much equal, but not so much when it comes to the opportunities open in working life. The issues are briefly presented here to illustrate the prevailing gender-based challenges faced by young Finnish highly educated women after graduation.

The representative data was based on a survey data collected for project *Reflex* in 2005 ([www.reflexproject.org](http://www.reflexproject.org)), observing the working life experiences of men and women graduated five years earlier from tertiary education across Europe. Of the countries included in Kivinen and Nurmi's study Germany, Switzerland, Netherlands, and Norway have a dual-model higher education system divided into university and polytechnic education somewhat similar to Finnish model<sup>4</sup>. Some of Kivinen and Nurmi's comparisons included also France, Spain, England, and Italy, where there is a shorter academic degree provided in addition to master's degree.

In the European data, both men and women had been equally successful in their studies, had been equally active in student organizations and gathered equal amount of relevant working experience. Nevertheless, on the labour market the gender differences started to develop right after graduation: in all countries of comparison, except in England, the working career started generally more easily for men than for women. For example, in the Finnish data the risk for experiencing unemployment in the beginning of the working career was for women twice as big as for men, when in the whole data the risk was in average 1.5 times. (Kivinen & Nurmi 2009, 151.)

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<sup>4</sup> The present system is specific to Finland in that the two tertiary sectors are fundamentally different. The polytechnic institutions prepare their students for practical work, while the mission of universities is more academic and has a theoretical and research orientation.

In Finland being outside the labour market was strongly gender-related: women had stayed at home 4-5 times as often as men, most often to take care of children. Surprisingly, in Finland the proportion of women outside labour force was the biggest of all the countries of comparison, 13%. For example, in Norway the proportion was only 4%, although majority of highly educated people in Norway have children. Somehow the Norwegian women had been able to combine work and family, whereas the Finns had stayed at home with the children. This was not a question of flexible working hours, since part-time work was as common in both countries. (Kivinen & Nurmi 2009, 152.) Still, it has to be noted that in Finland, as in other Nordic countries, the relative share of women in the workforce continues to be extremely high.

Also, according to the survey data, highly educated Finnish young women seemed to have weaker chances to advance on their career than young men with the same education level, as women more seldom occupied higher positions of professional hierarchy, and were more often in working positions that did not correspond their education. In all the countries, men were more often in leading professional positions, but Finland's 2.7 times advantage for men was, to quote to the writers, "in it's own league". Also managerial positions were male-dominated. Measured by the employment status reached by men and women, the gender discrimination in Finnish working life was in Kivinen & Nurmi's words, notable in Western-European standards.

Five years after graduation, highly educated Finnish men also earned in average 20% more than women. The difference in average income was only partly explicable by men being employed more often in full-time work, higher positions, and on private sector. Gender's relation to the level of income was strong even after controlling all the possible factors affecting the salary. (Kivinen & Nurmi 2009, 153-154.)

Kivinen and Nurmi's regression analyses make visible some of the ways how gender can affect highly educated women's employment trajectories. The gender-related theme occurring constantly in the interviews was the difficulties of young female graduates face in trying to find permanent jobs. Most often the trouble was seen to be potential employers' suspicions of applicant's intentions to start a family and take



parental leave in an early phase of her career. Indeed, as the studying times have lengthened and women tend to enter the working life well in to their 30's, the timing of entering the labour market and starting a family often coincides, a social problem which's solution is still most often left to be find by individuals.

## The Respondents

To ensure a necessary level of anonymity, only some general features about the eleven young women interviewed can be shared. I use pseudonyms when presenting quotes from the interviews. The following table provides some background information on the respondents:

Respondent	Age	Major	Years at Uni	Gap Years
Henna	24	Sociology	6	–
Veera	25	Internat. Rel.	7	–
Anna	30	Social Psychol.	7	4
Milla	23	Social Policy	4	2
Suvi	24	Social Work	5	1
Anu	28	French	6	4
Lotta	26	English Transl.	7	1
Nelli	24	French	6	–
Tea	25	Art Education	6	1
Elli	26	Philosophy	6	–
Katja	26	Finnish	5	3

Table 1. Background information on the respondents

The interviewees, female students aged between 23 and 30 years (in 2008) representing different disciplines at the University of Tampere, were found using various student organizations' e-mailing lists, Internet communities popular among university students, and via snowballing among circles of friends. We chose to interview people studying different disciplines to get as much variation to the small sample as possible. This was relatively easy because of the *free minor subject policy* of the University of Tampere.

Because of this somewhat exceptional policy every informant had a unique combination of subjects in their degree, although their majors tended to be situated within Humanities and Social Sciences. One more prerequisite for the informants was that they had to be close to graduation, either already writing their master's thesis at the time of the interview, or about to start the project soon. Our research invitation and asking around seemed to awake the interest of our target group, since we managed to get all eleven informants required on planned schedule with relative ease.

The respondents spoke quite fluent English and seemed to feel comfortable expressing themselves with the language. It may have been the use of foreign language in the interviews which attracted informants who either studied languages, had been living abroad (either working or as an exchange student), or for some other reason were exceptionally competent and willing to express themselves in English.

Nine interviewees had been staying abroad for longer periods of time, for instance taking part in different study-related exchange programs, or working abroad in between their high school and university studies. It is fairly common in Finland to include some international experience into the secondary or tertiary education degree, and especially the educated age-group born in the late 70's and 80's has been generally considered to be internationally very mobile (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 14).

The interviewees were all near to their graduation, some planning their master's thesis and some already giving it the finishing touches, almost ready to step into the full-time professional working life. Their studying times varied between four to seven years, the average being five years. Thus, they all had advanced relatively fast with their studies, the average time for graduating from university (for the whole

undergraduate and postgraduate degree) in Finland being six and a half years (Statistics Finland, 2007).

Until recently it has been quite common and fairly accepted in Finland to take one or more years off, so-called gap years, after graduating from high school (Kaukonen 2009)<sup>5</sup>. Seven of the respondents had been using this possibility. These years had been used for getting some time off from studying and thinking about what to do with the future, gaining working experience and studying for the often challenging university entrance exams. Four interviewees hadn't had any gap between high school and university studies, but they had been able to take some time within their studies to reflect upon their degree, some eventually changing their major or minor subjects.

It hadn't been a straight route from leaving high school to the point where the informants were near to completing their university degree. Some occasional side-steps had been taken. Katja Komonen writes about the contemporary transformations of stable, linear educational routes into fragmented, episodic and experimental studying paths, characterized by different periods of transitions and fractions (Komonen 2001, 72).

The importance of having some time to ponder upon what direction to take, either before entering university or during one's studies became evident in the course of the interviews, as some serious thinking had been needed to come up with what one *really wanted to do* after graduation. According to Aapola and Ketokivi, young

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<sup>5</sup> Finnish Ministry of Education, anticipating the Baby Boomers' pension wave, and thus worried about the long studying times of Finnish students, has implemented policies that favour new high school graduates in accessing university education in order to diminish gap years and get students to full-time working life sooner. The policies have included i.e. giving extra points to newly graduates in applying to university. In addition, there is on-going discussion about getting rid of the entrance exams altogether, which would bring the Finnish university education closer to the Central European model (in use i.e. in France and Italy), where everybody can get in, but qualification procedures take place in the end of each academic year.

peoples' expectations towards work have increased, and many are looking for work where they could make use of their personal abilities and interests. (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 14.)

Instead of being “just” university students, all the interviewees had already some working experience, most of them having worked on the side of studies, some since graduating from high school. Working, tax-paying students define the university system in Finland: studying takes several years, and Finnish students are among “the oldest” in international comparison between OECD countries. Studying among the 20 to 29-year-olds is the most common in Finland among all OECD countries. 15% of the 30 to 39-year-old Finns are still studying. What has to be noted, though, is that studying is often combined with part-time or periodical full-time work. The older the student, more likely she or he works alongside studies (Kaukonen, Ritva 2009).

Working is necessary to cover the high costs of living in Finland, of which the universal student financial aid<sup>6</sup> in most cases covers just a part of the housing outcomes. Government does guarantee everyone a relatively low-interest study loan, but not so many seem willing to take the loan, not even a small one. It is quite clear that academic education can no longer guarantee employment, and by no means it can be seen as a route to riches. When the future seems uncertain and there is no promise of steady income after graduation, even a small debt might feel to risky.

The initial research plan was to limit the interviews to only single, childless young women, but we ended up having one respondent who had recently married and one with a little baby. Both of them gave us valuable insight to how one can organize her

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<sup>6</sup> Finnish students in higher education are entitled to a government-provided student benefit (student financial aid) that helps to cover part of the living costs. In 2009 the study grant was 298 euros and the housing supplement maximum 200 euros monthly.

<http://www.kela.fi/in/internet/english.nsf/NET/081001132858IL>

life in a less institutionalized biographical order<sup>7</sup>. “Single” in this context means non-married, since some of the respondents we’re in a stable relationship, some of them cohabiting, and some didn’t have a companion at the moment. It seems our sample consists of, at least explicitly, only heterosexual young women, although it is possible that our pre-structured interview questions pushed the interviewees towards giving heteronormative<sup>8</sup> answers, for instance when they were posed ready-formulated questions about marriage and having children.

The respondents originated from different areas in Finland and had different socio-economical backgrounds, though their families of origin can be described as mainly lower-middle (parents not highly educated, in blue-collar working positions) and middle-class families (one or both parents with a higher education degree, white-collar professions). Thus, although there is some relevance at least within certain fields of study in Finland between parents’ educational background and children’s educational choices (i.e. Tolonen 2005), this kind of correlation wasn’t evident in our sample.

### Peer Research – A Special Researcher Position

As the two of us who conducted the interviews were very near our target group, both age- and position-wise<sup>9</sup>, it was relatively easy to find interviewees and awake their interest towards the research. This also resulted in a very special atmosphere during the interview sessions that reminded more of having a laid-back conversation among friends, than an interview situation for academic purposes.

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7 The order with the most normative power still being: studies first, then marriage and then children.

8 falling to the common conception where heterosexuality is considered as normal sexual orientation.

9 Researcher Mary, age 30, doing her PhD research and me, age 25, conducting my master’s thesis at the University of Tampere.

Even though most of the interviews were conducted at the university facilities, in the semi-formal space of researcher Mary's office, there was a lot of laughter, us having tea, often chatting long after the recorder had been turned off. Even though during the actual interviews I might have occasionally felt a little awkward, being mostly silent or having occasionally been mistaken for an English translator, in the pre- and post-interview conversations the three-person dynamics created lively discussion about first- and second-hand youth transition experiences.

I feel that this worked in our advantage in a way that our informants seemed ready to share even very personal information about all aspects of their lives in an atmosphere of mutual trust and shared experiences<sup>10</sup>. Nevertheless, it has to be noted that what we ended up with were still *told, not lived experiences*. We had the structure for the interviews at hand, so that every informant was asked the same questions, but we were not strictly confined to it if the conversation went to other direction or off-topic from time to time.

We stayed in touch with the interviewees also after the data collection period, for some of them wanted to add something to what they had said in the interview via e-mail, and also we happened to bump into some of them every once in a while in different circumstances at the university. This is probably not the most traditional researcher-informant setting, but as said before, this probably worked solely in our advantage. How the fact that the researcher herself is so close to the topic affects the analysis is a different matter, but yet again after the data collection phase it felt more like a rare privilege than a disadvantage.

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10 In this sense it felt we could quickly get past the "wall of happiness" referred i.e. by Finnish researcher Matti Kortteinen in his influential ethnographic research within Finnish metal industry workers (Kortteinen 1992). We felt that this wall, created by interviewees to their protection in the pervasive situation, preventing interviewees to say anything of true significance, was in most cases easily penetrated, as even very personal issues were shared during the interviews.

A research-setting like this wouldn't probably even be possible otherwise as a peer research. Most likely the questions asked and the information given would differ greatly from ours, if the researcher would have been for instance an older male researcher, no matter how much theoretical or conceptual insight he would have to the transition experiences of young academic women.

Also the fact that there have been two researchers working together with the Finnish part of the research can be seen as a major advantage. This means that peer review for checking ideas and practices has been available in every phase of the research.

### The Interviews

Nine of the interviews were conducted at the university, and two, that I wasn't present at, at informants' home. Most of what was said was recorded and the recordings varied from 45 to 90 minutes in length. In average they were about one hour long, and were transcribed into 233 pages of text for analysis.

Researcher Mary's comparative study strives to depict and interpret the respondents' transition to adulthood from all the aspects, so called "key markers"<sup>11</sup> commonly related to the youth transition to adulthood within the field of sociological youth transition studies. This is to say, the interviews covered a wide range of topics like studies, working life, economic situation and social relationships of the respondents. There were four central themes in the interview structure: The university system, the labour market, living arrangements and entering adulthood. What is notable, these themes were observed from three different perspectives.

Firstly, each interview started with respondent's evaluation of her own present and near-future socio-economic situation in relation to the themes above; value of the university education; evaluation of her chances on the labour market; her living arrangements; and entering adulthood. This was followed by interviewees'

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11 For instance, Harry Blatterer names these the "classic markers of adulthood": family, stable relationships, work, and independent living (Blatterer 2009: 15-17).



assessment of her peer's (i.e. friends and acquaintances) current life situation, in relation to the same issues. In the third part, the respondents were asked to share their views on their parents' socio-economic situation and transition to adulthood when they were around respondents' age, regarding the same issues. Lastly, the interviewees were asked about their possible generation experience, whether they felt they belong to a particular generation or not, and if yes, why so.

This interview structure produced enormous amount of information, as it wasn't confined solely to the respondents' experiences, but extended to their peers and parents as well, which created a wider perspective to the interviewees social circumstances.

## 2.2. Setting the Focus: Transition to Working Life

After all the interviews had been conducted, I had this huge information resource in front of me. What I did not have was a clear vision how to use it. The most reasonable starting point thus seemed to be adopting a data-driven approach, where I could allow themes to emerge from the interviews. According to my preliminary observations it seemed that the questions related to the sphere of work were the most strongly intertwined with other dimensions of achieving adulthood. Not only has the entering and stable establishment on the labour market been one of the classical key markers in the sociological studies of transition to adulthood, but according to the interviews it also seemed in many cases to be the key process, either facilitating or inhibiting other processes (i.e. getting married, family formation).

The sphere of work stood apart in a way that entering full-time employment and getting a "proper", non-side-job, possibly even a permanent position, seemed for some to be a prerequisite for other transition processes to actualize. In the data, many interviewees clearly prioritized career to everything else (marriage, starting a family, buying an apartment), although there were the two aforementioned interviewees who had either married or had a child before graduating and starting in professional life.

Judging by my preliminary analysis, experiencing the transition from being a university student into being graduated and an academic professional on the labour market seemed to offer the richest source of research material. Thus, I narrowed my

research data down to the questions that were somehow work-related. I also wanted to find out how the interviewees' notions of work and their academic studies intersected. The theme of intersection could not be avoided because of the close interconnectedness between the different aspects of life in the transition.

In the following paragraphs, I will first present my methodological choices and continue by going through the parts of the interviews that I concentrated in. Finally, I will present some observations according to the preliminary qualitative content analysis of the interviews.

### Towards Analysis and Theoretical Framework

As noted earlier, I have used certain elements of *Grounded Theory* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as my theoretical starting point. In *Grounded Theory* the collection of data, analysis and coming up with the theory are closely tied to each other. What it means in the context of this research, is that theory is derived from the data, instead of data being analyzed with a certain hypothesis in mind.

This approach has been widely in use during the past couple of decades, to the extent that it is sometimes used only to give the research scientific legitimacy without really using the approach with proper qualification. Nevertheless, while the "proper use" of *Grounded Theory* is under constant negotiation (Glaser, 1978, 2001; Bryman 2001, 391, 397), I am using some of the core ideas related to the approach that I find useful, such as *coding*, and most importantly, the point that *theoretical ideas are allowed to emerge from the data*.

This kind of approach has been found useful also by Finnish youth researcher Anna Sell, who has studied a group of urban Finnish youth and the changing meanings they give to work, unemployment and education in their lives. She advanced via detailed processing of interview data to finding categories and, finally, coming up with the theoretical framework (2007, 3-18.) I am going to return to her findings in the theory chapter.

Coding is a central process and practice in the approach. It requires that the data is broken down to components which are named according to researcher's

interpretations of the data (Glaser 1978 55-82; Charmaz 2000, 515; see also Bryman 2001, 391). Basically, coding helps in labeling and organizing the data. Also, different levels of coding with different levels of abstraction are implied, from which eventually follows emerging of concepts and categories. Concepts are the result of coding, whereas categories are at a higher level of abstraction, subsuming several concepts (Bryman, 392). During the whole analysis process, coding has been in a constant state of revision.

Bryman describes the coding practices according to influential developers of *Grounded Theory*, Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin (1990, 1991, 1997), distinguishing the practices into three types:

*Open coding* is the process of breaking down the data, conceptualizing and categorizing it. It is the process that creates concepts, which are later turned into categories. In *axial coding* the data is put back together in new ways after open coding. This is done by making connections between categories. When doing *Selective coding* a core category is selected, systematically relating it to the other categories and trying to validate those relations and work with the categories that need further development. The core category is the central issue around which all the other categories pivot, i.e. “the storyline”. (see Glaser 2001, 199-203; Bryman 2001, 392.)

The coding processes described above have resulted in a core category of *uncertainty* and a set of sub categories and that I have used in approaching the theoretical framework and the storyline of the research. This kind of approach suits my strongly data-driven approach.

Obviously I have had some background knowledge, vague hypothetical assumptions, and also first-hand experience on youth transition, and young academic women on the Finnish labour market. I cannot deny that a “theory-neutral” observation of the data is quite impossible, and *Grounded Theory* has for a good reason been criticized for its requirement that researchers put aside their awareness of relevant concepts and theories until the end of the analysis process (Bryman 2001, 395).

Still, when I started working with my data, I tried to put the concepts, theories and literature aside for a while and look at my data from a fresh perspective. However, as

soon as the open coding phase was done, the concepts and category formation started to build strongly upon existing conceptualizations and theoretical writing, which can be seen later on in the sixth chapter.

### Qualitative Content Analysis

The practical methodological basis of the research lies in the tradition of qualitative content analysis, which can be seen to offer probably the most sensible way of organizing the vast amount of research data collected. Glaser criticizes this kind of mix of *Grounded Theory* and qualitative data analysis, but as I haven't been able to start from a clean table, with a data completely my own, using this kind of combination is a reasonable solution.

Here qualitative content analysis has been used in a very systematic manner presented by for instance Bill Gillham in his methodological guide book *Research Interview*. Basically, as Gillham puts it, this method is being used to organize the content of the interviews that is of substance, which is done by first identifying the substantive "key points" of the interviews and putting them into categories to order the data for further analysis (Gillham 2000, 59).

The method, which originated in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century United States as an essentially quantitative technique (for analyzing the balance of newspaper content by simply counting frequencies and proportions of so called "serious" content), is here used in a less "count" style. Instead of counting simply formatted descriptive categories, I've tried to construct categories that can bring together the different *meanings* expressed by the interviewees. When doing this kind of meaningful content analysis a relatively high degree of inference is required to make interpretations about latent meanings in the research data. (Gillham 2000, 68-69.) The key to understanding the research approach crystallizes here: as Charmaz's constructivist approach to *Grounded Theory* suggests, the categories, concepts, and theoretical level of analysis rise from the researcher's interaction within the field and the questions about the data. (Charmaz 2000, 522; see Bryman 2001, 397.)

Simply put, researcher's inference is needed in order to arrive at meaningful categories that can both cover all the substantive content of the interviews

(exhaustiveness) and in the same time being distinctive enough for one category to include only certain kind of statements (exclusiveness) (Gillham, 2000, 60). The category construction following these two principles forms the basis for my preliminary analysis of the interviews. In the next paragraphs I am going to illustrate the process of categorization and preliminary analysis.

### Classifying and Categorizing

When conducting the analysis, I followed a systematic method of ordering the data. Firstly, there were the 223 pages of transcribed interviews that needed to be organized. I started by listening to the interview recordings and reading the transcripts over and over again, underlining and colour coding the content that seemed of significance to me, i.e. the statements that were somehow related to education and working life. At this point, I also made notes, already trying to find connections between the interviews, repeated and common themes, and on the other hand differences and variation between the interviews.

Secondly, I derived a set of categories for the responses to each labour market-related question and gave them headings that would display the range of the responses. I then had to combine some of the categories, for some of them were not useful after all. Then, with my list of categories I checked the statements that I had underlined in the beginning and checked if I could fit them into the categories. Thirdly, I entered the categories on an analysis grid, which I had made for each important question. Instead of simply just ticking the boxes on the grid, I also entered actual statements to them, which I found useful when writing up the preliminary results of analysis.

After this phase I continued with qualitative content analysis software *Atlas.ti*, which I found useful after I had the preliminary categories derived. With the program it was easy and quick to code all the interviews according to my set of categories, and check which themes were the most prevalent. This process helped me to perceive the core category, the story line going through the interviews.

## Notions on Methodology

The theoretical and methodological approach chosen requires breaking down the interview data to “discrete chunks” and forcing the pieces to fit the categories derived. It is justified to say that this results in a loss of narrativity, which was strongly present in the interviews where young women told about their lives. At the beginning of the research I made it easier for myself to conduct the analysis by fragmenting the data into coded themes, concepts and categories, trying to construct a theoretical framework upon them. In the course of the process, I have had to think about other options in presenting the experiences of the interviewees. For this purpose, small chunks of coded data don’t do justice. That is why I have strived to maintain at least some of the narrativity of the interviews.

As I am observing the transitional processes both empirically and also discursively, combining different methodological equipment has been necessary. For to be able to maintain narrativity and to grasp the varying meanings and interpretations of the respondents, I have had to adopt some elements of discourse analytical approach.

Besides paying attention to the varying meanings and interpretations that the respondents give to their experiences, I have been *sensitive to common cultural ways of speaking about youth’s relation to education and work, and normative perceptions constructed within them*. I have paid attention to not only what but also how something has been said. The common themes or threads woven together that can be followed throughout the research report have required finding meanings “between the lines”, and involving more interpretation than just empirical observation and ordering of the data.

### 3. Analysis: From University to the World of Work

In this part the analysis processes can be followed with illustrative examples from the interviews. The aim is to find out how the respondents experience their transition from university to working life by observing their answers to a set of questions concerning studies and work. The questions tackle the interviewees' notions on education, the world of work, the beginning of their working career, the perceived challenges in their transition from university to the labour market, and career pressure. In addition, there are two questions related to gender and combining work and family, and finally, a question about the interviewees' future scenarios.

#### 3.1 Education Matters

When studying the transition from university education to working life it is crucial to take into consideration some points related to the interviewees' academic education. There seems to be something specific in namely highly educated young people's transitions. Sinikka Aapola links attending higher education with the discussion of lengthened youth. She sees that it has become a new norm within the life course of especially middle-class youth, where studying and personal interests are prioritized over transition to working life and starting a family. (Aapola 2005, 278; Ketokivi 2005, 101.)

A rather reasonable starting point to trying to understand the respondents' relation to education is their reasons for choosing academic education over other options, and the prospects university education is seen to offer to them.

##### Why University?

There were several reasons for choosing university education. To begin with a couple of examples, Veera (25) had seen it as the easiest route to take after high school, as she had been able to get straight in with her excellent high school diplomas. For her university had played some extra time to figure out what to do with her life. Nelli (24), for her part, had wanted to gain knowledge and try out "*the whole student lifestyle thing*".

However, the single most important reason for the interviewees to choose university education had been a strong personal interest in certain subject, which could only be studied within university. In this sense university education was seen as a route to achieve personal self-development or specific career dreams.

For some interviewees family background, parents' or siblings example or encouragement, had been a significant motivation, to the extent that for some of them university education had seemed like "*the only logical option, really*". Finnish youth researcher Tarja Tolonen has studied the educational routes of young people coming from different family backgrounds, and noticed a correspondence between family background and educational choices. She refers to Pierre Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* as a choice that seems and feels so natural that it isn't at all questioned. According to Tolonen, especially for young people coming from academic families, going to university often seems like a natural choice. (Tolonen 2005, 39-40.)

None of the respondents had experienced any actual pressure from their parents to pursue academic education, but one respondent admitted that she didn't want to end up with a lower education than her highly educated parents. Elli (26), had instead felt her parents influencing her choice:

I: Well, I always knew I would go to university, sort of. I think I was pretty ambitious, or it has always been important for me to...get good grades (laughs) in school, and things like this, and my family has also always been saying that yes, you are going to university. Actually, that's maybe the reason I didn't go and pursue the (---) right away, because they didn't think it was a real career /R: (laughs)/ so

R: So they wanted something more traditional?

I: Yes, my mother always said, that I should maybe be a teacher or something, maybe that's one reason why I decided to apply to Education, but I really didn't feel that it was for me.

A couple of respondents said that since their earlier school history had been successful, going to university had seemed as an easy and logical step for them, and there had also been a push towards that direction from school. When asked about why



university education has grown in popularity in Finland, Veera (25) explained how high education level has been idealized since her childhood, and academic education is still culturally loaded with promises that, in her opinion, are nowadays hard to keep as more and more young people are attending higher education:

I: Mmm. I, I think part of that is that still, at least when I was young, there was this, you had this big speech in the schools that if you educate yourself, the more you educate yourself, the better salary you have, the better job you have, the happier you are. You know, all that. And of course, it's not quite true, you know. You may end up with a shitty job, with really meager salary, even after you did your Phd., sorry! (laughs)

R: (laughs) It is true!

It has to be noted that not all the respondents came from a highly educated family, but for those who did, choosing the academic route had been very clear from an early age. Others had carefully pondered their personal interests or were pushed towards university by their schoolteachers, but also some of them said that university education had been highly appreciated in their families. Whatever the case, choosing university education had been highly encouraged by the respondents' social surroundings, and many connected it with achieving certain social status and appreciation, although they personally would not have considered it especially prestigious.

### University and Employment Prospects

Although many respondents mentioned the *diploma inflation*, which is sinking the value of higher academic degrees as ever-growing percentage of age group now has a master's degree, the interviewees were still fairly optimistic about their future employment prospects made possible by their education. First of all, they were certain that they would be able to find some work, though they had mentally prepared themselves for periods out of and between jobs. The key issue seemed to be whether they would find work with equivalence to their field and level of education.

This topic is later tackled in greater detail and depth, but it has to be noted here that the interviewees had a highly expressive orientation towards work (compare

Goldthorpe 1968), where work content is of great importance when weighing career options. They viewed work as a sphere of self-realization instead just a means to achieve good income. They seemed to have carefully chosen a field of study that they could feel truly their own, and were hoping that they would eventually find work that would offer a job description suitable just for them.

Despite the generally optimistic attitudes towards finding work with their degree, all the interviewees suspected challenges in the beginning of their working careers. They mentioned the tough competition over suitable positions among ever-increasing number of qualified applicants, rapidly changing labour force demand in an unstable economic situation, and the precarious nature of today's employment conditions.

The respondents anticipated their transition from education to working life to be a slow, gradual process, where they would probably first end up "*nearer to their nightmare than their dream job*", and then step by step move closer to their career goals as they gained more working experience.

Many respondents speculated that finding work would probably be a lot simpler with a degree from polytechnic education, which was seen as more specific and thus allowing clearer career paths. Personally they still preferred having more options open, which they felt was provided by university education:

I: They (students in polytechnic education) just, they know directly that they will find a job, but for us it wasn't so like, "yeah, money, money, money", because we're not so sure about our future after. So, I'm just, maybe also partly because I didn't know exactly what I wanted after high school, so it was the easiest way, because if I would've gone to ammattikorkeakoulu to study Economics, it would've been like that's what I will know then, but here I can choose what I want to know and what I want to learn, so, it's more free.

Nelli (24)

There are great differences between different academic disciplines as well, and the interviewees who were planning to work as teachers, social workers or journalists, for example, had obviously clearer picture in mind about their employment prospects

than the ones with more general education, which doesn't give qualifications to any specific profession.

All in all, university was seen to offer the best or the only possible route to the kind of work that the respondents wanted to find after graduation, academic professional work. The belief in the employment prospects was still fairly strong, although many factors were seen to threaten the value of university degrees. To challenge the idea of university education's market value, Veera (25) speaks her mind:

I: ...university's not supposed to find jobs for people, it's supposed to educate people...

R: But, like, the degree, like having the degree, it doesn't really make a difference...

I: Mmm, I wouldn't say quite that. I think it does help if you study, and it does help if you, especially if you sort of, ammm...you know, if you just don't study any minor that comes in your way, but you sort of plan it a little bit. So I think that may help, a lot.

Veera viewed university as a service, which's purpose is to educate, not guarantee people jobs. Still she saw that if one plans her degree wisely, the education can help a lot in finding work. In this sense her quotation is depictive of the respondent's views on university's role and promises.

### University: Freedom of Choice and Planning of Studies

The majority of university education in Finland is not necessarily highly specialized to begin with, but thanks to the free minor policy of The University of Tampere, the interviewees had been able to design highly personalized degrees in order to find their own niche on the ever-specializing professional labour market. Taking advantage of the *freedom of choice* offered by their university the interviewees had been able to switch majors and design customized minor subject palettes according to both their own interests and assumed labour market demands. Several interviewees, Veera among them, had been perfecting their academic degrees to better suit both:

I: ...After I finished my bachelor's degree I decided that I, I think that International Relations is gonna be sort of more useful for me. And anyway, I was doing it as my long minor.

R: Ok, so...

I: And I was interested in it, so I just switched. So, now my major, at the moment, is International Relations, yeah.

R: And you enjoy that better...

I: Yeah. Yeah, and it also...yeah. For the, yeah, exactly, labour-wise, I think later on, it's gonna be more useful for me.

But first, finding *one's own thing* hadn't been easy. To begin with, seven of the eleven interviewees had taken one or several gap years before entering the university, working either abroad or in Finland, and playing some time trying to think *what they really wanted to do with their lives*:

R: And, did you then go straight after high school to uni, or?

I: No, I had a year off...Aah...I didn't even go to the entrance exams after, so, one year...

R: You worked, or...?

I: I was unemployed (laughs) and I was in France for four months, so I was working, actually in (---), so that was like...yeah...And then I studied for my entrance exams.

R: Oh yeah, and then after that you found out that you wanted to study French.

I: Yeah, yeah.

Suvi (25)

Three had actually tried out polytechnic education before deciding to pursue an academic degree. Of the four who had gone straight in to university after secondary education, two had changed majors, and the other two had found their future

professions within the field of their minor subjects. Altogether three interviewees had changed majors, and many had found their “true vocation” and the most potential future career prospects within their minor subjects.

The respondents were praising the *flexibility* and *freedom of choice* offered by their university. Besides giving them plenty of options and the possibility to try out different fields in the course of their studies, they thought it gave them the possibility to gain desired international experience effortlessly by allowing enough time for completing the degree (recommended five to maximum of seven years at the time of the interviews).

All this allowed a relatively *flexible lifestyle*, where studies, part-time work, internships, exchange programs, occasional traveling and other free-time activities could be combined. In the rhythm of life more intense and laid-back periods alternated. Understandably, all the respondents were quite satisfied with the cost-free Finnish university system. What they felt should be improved, though, was the student guidance, as some of them felt that they had been left all alone with important questions concerning their curricula and career planning.

All the respondents appreciated highly the freedom they had been given, but three of them felt that they lacked the self-discipline the flexible system requires. One of them said that for her the university offered even a little bit *too much freedom*. As another respondent, a Philosophy major, put it, it *allowed too much floating*. She was already hurrying up to graduate, since she felt working life (as a freelancer, though) would bring a little bit of welcomed *structure* and clear goals to her daily life. Another respondent, a translator, wished that there would have been more integration to working life within her major, since now close to graduation she felt that there should have been more possibilities to hands-on practicing. Despite having some practical experience, she felt that the gap between theoretical studies and working life practices was for her a bit too wide.

## Hurry to Work

As relaxed as the student lifestyle might sound, all but one respondent were already in a hurry to graduate and start full-time working life. Besides the aforementioned *longing for structure*, they had various reasons for this: especially the ones who had studied near to seven years felt they had been hanging around at the university long enough already, or they wanted to feel “*really sustaining themselves*”, independent from their parents’ (no matter how occasional) financial support, or the “system”<sup>12</sup>. This was also verbalized as a will to move forward with one’s life *to be able to feel more adult*.

Many mentioned how they were eager to finally get to work on their own field, to find a job that they would enjoy doing after so many side jobs just to earn the living. Stepping fully into the working life was seen to offer greater potential for true *self-realization* than student life.

Also, two respondents felt that their *adult status* was in a way *pending* as long as they were still students, despite the fact that they were already partly in working life. Another one of them wanted to earn a proper salary and move out from a shared apartment, and another one felt that her lifestyle was otherwise “adult” having just married to a man who was already in working life, and felt she wanted to fully contribute financially to the “well-being” of the two of them as well.

Nelli (24), the one *not* in a hurry to dive fully into the world of work explains why:

R: And, are you in a hurry to finish your studies and enter working life?

I: No, noo! I’m fine the way it is now, because I have some work, and some free time, and then, interesting studies, and I like doing my gradu (master’s thesis) also, because it’s an interesting subject for me, so, I’m in no hurry! (both laugh) It’s my sixth year, so maybe in seven years I’ll be ready.

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12 Universal student grant provided by the state.

R: But if you can like have a job at the same time, and all that it's...and if you enjoy studying, then why not?

I: Yes, and I enjoy the fact that I can take a holiday of two weeks whenever I want and travel, yeah, well, I wouldn't take a holiday if I want to travel, so, if I would work like from eight to four everyday, that wouldn't be possible, so now I'm enjoying that opportunity as well.

Although enjoying her current situation and wanting to make the most out of university life, she was still planning to graduate the following year. Thus, none of the interviewees were deliberately postponing their graduation and entry to the labour market, as the common discourses on lengthening youth and delayed adulthood (i.e. Blatterer 2009) suspect.

Instead, the interviewees appeared as planners, who had been optimizing their studies and future career prospects by designing unique degrees according to their personal interests and also, to some extent, to assumed labour market demand in order to carve their own niche onto the highly specialized and constantly changing professional labour market. In choosing university in the first place, they had listened to the encouragement of their schoolteachers, followed their family members' examples, or their own passion for certain fields of study. In many cases all these had played their part. In any case, the respondents felt quite confident and optimistic about finding work after their graduation, although they were prepared to wait patiently for a truly satisfying job offer to come their way.

## 4. Analysis: The World of Work

The following paragraphs illustrate the interviewees' relation to work. When asked about how they viewed "*the world of work*" some interviewees ended up pondering on the meanings of work to them, whereas others understood the concept referring to the current labour market situation in Finland. Both how the interviewees view the labour market and what kinds of meanings they attach to work are central for observing their expectations and orientations towards working life.

### 4.1. The Meanings of Work: Commitment and Expressive Work Orientation

To begin with, the respondents were all willing to work, although the importance they placed on work seemed to vary to some extent. On one hand they saw work as an important way for self-realization, but then on the other, they questioned its role in their lives by saying that it has had a too central role in Finnish culture, and it *shouldn't be everything you've got*:

I: Amm...What comes to my mind is that it's (work) too central in Finland in peoples' lives, and it's like essential for you. I know people who just work and work and work and it's, if you loose your job, it's like you loose all. And I don't like to have that...I...I know that I'm very work-concentrated, and I would like to be less. Because, it's very important for people, but I would like that you'd have something else in your life, it's not just work. /R: Mmm./ Have to be something else.

Milla (23)

For Milla, family and other social relationships were still more important than work. Nevertheless, when asked how they saw their lives in the next five to ten years, they all pictured themselves "working in some way or form". Some also emphasized how they were already very eager to finally get to work after "so many years of studying".



## Committed to Work

What comes to the meanings the respondents gave for work, in strict contrast to an instrumental work orientation (Goldthorpe & al. 1968) where work is only seen as means to pay the living costs, they all seemed to have adopted a *highly expressive orientation towards work*. In expressive work orientation work is seen an important sphere in individual's life, both defining and expressing one's identity.

The following two examples demonstrate how the interviewees are in search for interesting work that they can feel committed doing, work that wouldn't even feel as work:

I: ...for me it's quite natural to do a lot of things. You know, for example as the voluntary work. And I don't consider it as work, really. You know, it's just something I do.

R: Something you enjoy doing...

I: Yeah. Yeah, but I guess that's work in a way as well. I guess work could be called something like, an activity that I'm committed to doing.

Veera (25)

Veera was hoping to find work that she would feel as committed to as to the volunteer work she had been devoting a lot of her free time. Although exact ideas of the future job still seemed somewhat blurred to the interviewees, the respondents seemed to have internalized the *strong moral commitment characteristic for the service relationship of professional, administrative, and managerial, "service class" work* (Goldthorpe 1982).

The idea of the service class, adopted by John Goldthorpe, originates from Karl Renner's *Dienstklasse*. It comprises three main elements: employees in public, i.e. governmental service; employees in private economic service; and employees in social services. These employees operate in their work tasks and roles with a distinctive degree of autonomy and are accorded with conditions of employment with distinctive level and kind of rewards compared to other grades of employees, most notably wageworkers. The service relationship of the service class is practically based

on delegated authority and/or responsibility for specialist functions: it involves an important measure of trust. The employees' performance will greatly depend on the degree of their moral commitment to their employer organization. (Goldthorpe 1982, 167-169.)

The respondents seemed to think that they would eventually end up in higher-grade white-collar working life positions, instead of manual or physical work. Commitment is a key in understanding the nature of qualified professional work (Goldthorpe 1982). Thus, rather than being solely an indicator of need for self-realization, the expressions of commitment tell also about internalized strategies for achieving preferable employment positions.

The challenge seemed to lie in how to start to make a living out of the kind of work that the respondents had in mind. Veera, for instance, was well aware that the competition for paid work within the NGOs, and other institutions that she was interested in, is tough, as she continued by telling how there's a lot of competition for job on her preferred field. She was aware that in the beginning of her working career she might just get internships or short-time projects here and there with not much pay, but yet again, salary for her, as for most of the respondents, was not that important. As Anna (30) put it:

I: ... Well, I've always wanted to do work, but of course I would like to have an interesting job. Cause I have done so many kinds of works that I haven't really wanted to do, I've just had to get money (laughs), so that's why I'm starting to hope that I would graduate and get some real job that I would really like to do.

R: Yeah, something you enjoy, not just something you're doing cause you have to

I: That's more important thing to me than salary.

Finding work she could enjoy was for her "*more important than salary*". In both of these two quotes work as a channel for self-fulfillment is present: work becomes an activity which one feels committed doing when it fits one's personal interests. Putting this much emphasis on work makes it challenging to find that perfect job. This was

mentioned numerous times as one of the most difficult things in the transition from university to working life:

R: What do you see as the most difficult issue in your transition from university to working life?

I: ...Finding a job I want to do, I guess... Within some themes I actually have something to say about... With like having a sort of job description that I enjoy within a working community that I enjoy... it's probably gonna take some time before I find it, but I think after all...

R: You are hopeful?

I: Yeah, yeah.

Veera (25)

### Personal Ambitions and Career Pressure

Questions about the respondents' aspirations towards "a successful professional career" and possible experiences of career pressure seemed at first glance to evoke little but general disinterest. Firstly, they stated that they would not take any external pressure, although they themselves admitted to put some pressure on themselves in order to fulfill their personal career aspirations. Only one interviewee admitted feeling some external career pressure resulting from the experienced competitiveness of the professional labour market. Otherwise all the respondents who felt any kind of career pressure experienced only internal pressure, saying that *they only compete with themselves* or "*put the pressure on them*", for instance, having some goals they wanted to achieve, or hoping to see themselves in certain professional position. A successful career wasn't a goal for them as such, for them it seemed to mean finding a job that would be meaningful and suitable for them, within a suitable work environment and working community:

R: And, do you feel pressure to develop or lead a successful working career?

I: No, not really. Amm, I mean, I guess I put some pressure on myself but that's mostly cause I would hate to have, I would hate to end up in such a job that I would sort of have to justify myself every morning, that "yes, you do

have to go there, because you need to pay the rent, or whatever”. You know, I hate...

R: For practical reasons...

I: Yeah. So, in the field I'm interested in, there's quite a lot of competition for the jobs. So basically, of course there's pressure that I can actually get to do the kind of work I want to do, but that's all put by me. I don't feel the pressure by the society, or...

R: Yeah, or your family...

I: My family or my peers, or whatever, you know.

Veera (25)

A couple interviewees said that they were “ambitious”, and therefore putting pressure on themselves. One said that she is not a career-oriented person; instead family and friends were always number one for her. For example, Milla didn't want to think herself as so career oriented, but then again admitted having “*certain images of herself in working life*” that required professional ambition:

R: And do you feel some pressure to lead and develop a successful professional career?

I: A little yeah.

R: Aa...Where from?

I: Maybe from myself, I don't know. Not my parents, no. /R: (laughs)/ They're not like that, maybe it's from myself. I usually say like, no, no, no, nothing like that, but then I know that I have those images about myself and what I wanna do, and what I should do and something...

Milla (23)

All in all, most of the interviewees quite straightforwardly said that they didn't experience any kind of career pressure, not from the society, their family or peers. However, they felt pressure coming from within *them*.

Thus, individualistic values (here in the form of competing with oneself) that were often criticized in the course of the interviews were strongly present in these answers:

R: Yes, and you say you feel a bit of pressure, so, do you feel, where it comes from? Is it like the family or society in general?

I: Society in general, because, I'm not, I don't support the fact that people should be like competing with each other but I get the pressure a bit from the society that I should be always better and better, but I don't feel it like that because I only compete with myself, not with the society or the pressure that it gives me, so, that's why I said I'm only a bit stressed, I'm not stressed.

R: Yeah, it comes from you /I: Yes/ not like from somebody else.

I: Yes.

Nelli (24)

Despite the respondents' capability to see the influence of external structural factors on their lives, there was a strong emphasis and belief in their personal agency quite typical for the time (Blatterer 2009). One moment the interviewees were judging the overly individualistic cultural atmosphere, where individuals are held increasingly responsible for socially produced crises, and the next they were telling how it's up to one's personal motivation and effort to succeed in finding work. Lotta (26) was especially eager to "get working" and emphasized the importance of motivation in finding work. She said that *she* had never had any trouble finding work, and in her opinion "*it's a question of looking and being active*":

I: I feel anxious, actually to get working, I've been studying for many years now, so, I look forward to starting work. I'm just a bit afraid of what I have to be doing, that if I find my own line of business, work for my own line of business, but otherwise I'm looking forward to...

R: All right, so you feel quite confident about starting your working life?

I: Yes, I've never had any problems with

R: Yeah, like, finding work, you think

I: I think also finding work is a question of searching, like people who want to work will be able to work, it's a question of looking and being active.

Yet again, although certain to find some work, finding work from her own field worried her, and she was afraid of what she might end up doing, since she told she had already been sending her CVs to several places without any job offers yet. The emphasis put on individual agency, and autonomy in selecting and adjusting the career pressure can be seen to reflect the features characteristic for high-end white-collar professional work, or service class employment, as Goldthorpe (1982) puts it.

## 4.2. The Unstable World of Work

Having an expressive orientation and strong moral commitment towards work posed a challenge to the respondents, since finding the suitable job is not that easy, especially in the current labour market turbulence. Next the interviewees views on what kind of labour market situation they expected to face after their graduation are presented.

They seemed to be well aware of general labour market trends in Finland, and gave up-to-date analysis of the situation, for instance referring to recent research results presented in the media. Generally, the labour market was seen changing constantly in unpredictable ways. This structural instability, related with a growing number of educated young people, especially young women, getting only short-term contracts, was seen to make it difficult if one wanted to find a permanent position and for example settle down and start a family.

Nevertheless, the instability wasn't seen in unambiguously negative terms. For example, the following quote by Henna (24) shows how it could be welcomed as *offering* some sort of *flexibility*:

I: ...personally, I would be horrified by the idea that I would go to a job and stay there for twenty years, in the same place, doing the same thing. So I don't mind the fact that it changes, and that I'll only be somewhere for a few years and then I'll go somewhere else. But then again, it's easy for me to say, cause I don't have children and I don't have mortgage and, you know, I can go from one place to another, but later on, probably it will be a problem...

Thus, personally, in her current life situation she was able to make use of the instability. Thus, working life did not appear to her as precarious. Actually, she felt terrified of having to work in a same job for a long time, and took distance to the common cultural ideal of working full-time in a secure permanent position.

Instead of landing a steady and secure position right after graduation, she wanted to first gather working experience from different types of jobs and various employers (see also Laaksonen 2001, 88). She did realize that later on, in a different life situation, the instability of the labour market might turn against her. She acknowledged that having to move around after low-paid short-term contracts without being entitled to social benefits, as health care services or maternity leave, supported by the employer, would be problematic if she would like to have a family and to buy an apartment later on.

Suvi (24) compared the current world of work to the labour market situation faced by her parents and grandparents. In her opinion, they didn't have to face as rapidly changing situations as the young people graduating today, where one has to be prepared to be unemployed from time to time, not necessarily being able to get, not to mention maintain, a permanent position. Even a higher university degree doesn't guarantee finding work:

I: Work, Aah... You mean, now I think it's kind of, it's much different than it was for my parents and my grandparents, it's (...) It's hard to get a permanent job, and even though you would have qualifications... You might be unemployed time and again, and... it changes very quickly like, what degree you should have...

Compared to the previous interviewee she felt differently about the instability of the labour market, as she saw permanent position more preferable than short-term contracts, although in the course of the interview she also revealed that personally she might not want to have a permanent post right after graduation. Still, in her opinion not only getting a job is challenging, but the constant *fear of losing one's job* also causes people to *work under a lot of pressure*. In her opinion, succeeding in working life is thus not only a matter of individual's capability as a worker, but external factors as well:

I...it also seems it's hard to keep a job when you get it, and I think people have more pressure now to like have a... They have to work a lot under stress.

R: "Pressure," you mean like from firms, and like

I: Firms, and... I think also that if you don't have a permanent job it's causing you pressure.

R: Yeah...

I: Because you never know, and even though you'd be a really good worker you might lose your job because of other reasons, so it's not like before, like you get a reward if you're a good worker, but now, it's not, not like that.

Suvi (24)

Two other respondents were also aware of the difficulties faced by young academics entering the labour market: the growing number of layoffs and scarcity of permanent jobs. Although both of them had chosen a field (Education) where they were quite confident to find work, the general employment situation appeared to them as somewhat puzzling. Tea (25) said that whereas having a "practical" education makes it easier to get jobs, people with more theoretical or general university degrees have to "really use their imagination" to figure out where "they could offer their knowledge" after graduation:

I: Well, I think it's funny that people who graduate from universities, I have many friends, who are from (department name) ...out of work, and it's really difficult to get work, but I think it depends really much about what you study

/R: Mhm/ Because, if you study like (a practical field), it's really practical things, and I think it's easier to get jobs from that kind of... And the (theoretical) field is really large, but it's still like, I think you have to be really, like, try hard to different kinds of places, and use your imagination where you could offer your knowledge.

### Uncertainty arises

The theme of *uncertainty*, related to *unpredictability*, *instability*, and *insecurity*, appeared altogether 32 times in the data, making it the single most prominent theme arising from the interviews, *the core category* that seemed to intersect all the other



central themes. Experienced uncertainty seemed to define not only the sphere of work, but the whole social and physical environment of the interviewees. Besides labour market and employment prospects, life itself was seen unpredictable, as one could *never know what will happen next*, and thus the respondents felt insecure towards their near future.

Some interviewees mentioned the “unknown factor” as the most difficult thing in their or their peers’ transition from university to working life. The phase right after graduation, during which the interviewees would be searching for jobs was described as *the unknown*, which could take them *closer to their nightmare* before getting what they actually wanted, a job that they would like and feel they are doing a good job in. Interviewees openly admitted that this *period of uncertainty* was something they were a bit scared of, or at least worried about:

I: I’m a bit afraid of the idea that once I graduate I should get a job. What if I don’t, and what if I run out of money and what if...It does worry me a little bit.

Henna (24)

Some saw looking at all the options causing downright panic, rather than exhilaration. Nelli said that in addition to the flexibility of student life, she found sort of security from studying at the university:

I: Amm, if I don’t find the work, then like the unknown, because this is now safe, when you start a new year, you know what you will do. You have this “nössö” work (wussy) and...(laughs) ten you just go to lectures and that, but if I change, if I graduate, then I don’t know what will happen, so that’s the, that’s a big change, but then again, when the work normalizes, when I get a work and really start that life, then change will be over and then I start just a new phase.

Thus, instead of enjoying the freedom from studying after graduation, and having opportunities open, she was looking forward to the moment when she would have found herself a job, being able to start a new life phase, where work and life situation would *normalize*.

## Gender-related Uncertainties

The uncertainty seemed to affect respondents' social relationships in profound ways. The questions related to gender, to how to combine work and family, and to how being a woman might affect the interviewees' transition and future prospects, seemed to bring up the most uncertainty. The biggest question for the interviewees seemed to concern combining working life and possible family plans: *When would it be a good time to have children*, since staying at home right after graduation could harm their future employment prospects, and while making the career it could be very hard to arrange, both financially and time-wise. Anna (30) explained the paradoxical situation faced by many young female graduates:

I: Because, if you have it (the family) right away after your graduation, it's not good for getting a job, if you have stayed home for years.

R: Oh, yeah, the employers, you mean?

I: Yeah, I think it's not very convincing, if you have just studied and been at home with the kids.

R: And then after, if you just start work, it's difficult also.

I: yeah, if you start working immediately you might be too old to have children, so! (laughs) Yeah.

R: It's funny that you say that because it's the law in Finland, that it's allowed if you have children that you take this two years maternity leave...

I: Yes, but if you don't have a permanent job, then you can't have a maternity leave from anything.

Regardless of one's actual plans to have a family, many interviewees suspected that as young women they might have difficulties in getting a permanent job, since the potential employers would in any case suspect that they are *“going to get pregnant*

soon”, or even ask about the matter directly in job interviews<sup>13</sup>. This would affect them, regardless of their plans, and several interviewees could give examples of this kind of gender-based discrimination in recruiting on their preferred field. They thought they might face same kinds of situations, but hoped that after all being a woman wouldn't affect *them* getting jobs:

I: Mmm...It can complicate in working life, because when you have to take the maternity.../ R: Maternity leave/ leave, yes, but I hope it won't affect me getting a job (laughs), it shouldn't.

Anu (28)

Or, they said that they would make it clear to the employers that they were single, because they knew it would benefit them in recruiting:

I: I wouldn't think it would be a problem for me personally. But if I would be in a relationship, if I would've been in a relationship with someone for two or three years, or even more...And then I would graduate and would apply for a job...Even though they are not allowed to ask if I'm in a relationship or not...If it would come out that I have someone at home...I would have

R: So if you're just single...It's much easier.

I: It's much easier. Yes. I think it is. So if I was single I would probably say it out loud. Cause I know that it would benefit me.

Henna (24)

Generally, everyone thought that being a woman could complicate their future choices and prospects, especially in combining career and family plans. According to Sinikka Aapola, the perceptions of ideal biography and life course are often gendered in a way that women and men face different expectations in relation to age. These perceptions are always connected to social institutions, like family-life (Aapola 2005,

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13 According to Finnish equality legislation the potential employer is not allowed to ask about applicants' family plans in job interview.

258). For women, achieving adulthood has been strongly connected to motherhood, which means that young women have to negotiate with this cultural conception, whether they are planning to start a family or not.

Many interviewees talked about men having better chances of getting permanent positions and to advance on their career faster than women, and gave plenty of examples of gender-based discrimination faced by their female family members, friends and acquaintances. Still, many had not given these matters yet a lot of thought, trusting instead that things would just sort themselves out somehow:

I: Especially now, when I'm like 30, and I'll graduate, and then I would like to get a job and I would also have children at some point, and as we know, women can't have children like about after 40, so...I don't know...

R: It's kind of complicating things a bit...

I: Yeah...Cause you'd have to make the career same time that you want to start the family, so...yeah...I know, probably it would be or will be, at some point complicated also, but I don't know, I just, I just have to see how things will go.

Anna (30)

It has to be noted that the respondents connected the question about womanhood solely to working life, except for one praising comment about childbearing by the one interviewee who had had her first child. In her case, combining studies and taking care of the baby had actually worked out pretty well, as she had been able to share the child-caring responsibilities with the father of the child. She had broken the general cultural norm of first finishing with the studies and then starting the family, and was satisfied with her choice:

I: Yeah, student life is actually easier to combine with a small child than working life, I suspect. At least many jobs, you have to be there whereas studies you can somehow organize and, you know, do the exam next month if you can't do it this month. So

R: It's more flexible

I: Flexible, yes.

Lotta (26)

As solutions to the family and work problem the interviewees thought that they could share parental leaves with their partner, ask for child-caring help from their relatives, or even try to find a visionary employer that would be ready to invest them so that managing the both lives would be possible. Some emphasized how the responsibility of the matter should be shared instead of letting individual women to take the burden.

### Blurred Future

The uncertainty was also strongly present in the answers to the question about how the interviewees saw their lives in five or ten years. The importance of work became clear: working “in some way or form ” defined everyone’s future plans. Still, only a couple of interviewees could give some detailed future plans, and even for them it wasn’t exactly clear where they would end up working, or if they would start a family, for example. Most didn’t know exactly what they are going to be. Veera told that it’s a matter of opportunities and coincidences:

I: I think it’s a bit the same thing, like, you know, like sometimes people ask like, “okay, in ten years, do you think you’ll get married”, how can I know, I don’t even know if I’m gonna meet this person, you know...And, I can’t plan to meet this person

R: Of course

I: So I can’t plan to get married, and I think with the work life it’s a bit similar, it quite often depends what kind of jobs will be open, and what kind of opportunities will come my way, it’s also a lot about just like coincidences, so I don’t know that am...I can’t see like who I am going to be...

R: Yeah, of course it’s so difficult, it’s so abstract

I: Also, I don’t want to get panicked so I don’t want to think about it too much.

The experienced unpredictability of everything, and how it seemed to be causing overwhelming uncertainty within the respondents is best demonstrated in the questions concerning future plans. In the end of the interviews, the respondents we're asked about how they view their life in the next five to ten years. This was considered as a "*scary question!*", especially by those who hadn't such a clear picture of their future plans yet in mind. Several interviewees made it clear that they did not know exactly what they are going to be or do in the near future, and that they don't even want to think about it too much beforehand, since they've learned that "*plans don't really work*":

I: I don't know... Well, I will probably be working in some way or form. Not studying anymore. I don't know anything else. I think plans don't work. I've had plans before and then year afterwards I found myself in places I had never imagined! So it doesn't work, like you can't, I can't plan.

R: So you just let it come to you?

I: Yeah.

Elli (26)

Many interviewees had adopted this approach towards the transition, and towards life in general. They emphasized that it is impossible, or at least useless, to make any long-span plans, since they had learned that "*plans never work because something unexpected always happens*". The explanation for this was that life situations tend to change so rapidly that it's hard to predict anything long beforehand. Also, it was seen that *coincidences* play a big part in finding work, so building careful scenarios was not seen very useful.

The respondents said that they did have some ideas and expectations about themselves and their future, but they *didn't dare to plan*. They felt that they could only *let life sort itself out*, and they could only try their best to stay positive and happy, and optimistic about the future.

## Slow and Gradual Transition

As the result of all the instability and unpredictability of the labour market, and the all-embracing uncertainty, the interviewees saw the beginning of their working life as a “slow and gradual transition” from first being out of work and searching for jobs right after graduation and then doing internships or short-time projects, towards more fulfilling career opportunities, as they would keep on searching for their own place on the labour market, gathering experience along the way:

R: Yeah, you know, when you think about working life, for example, or about your own integration in working life, you know, how do you view that?

I: My own integration will be hard.

R: You think?

I: Yes, because...as I don't have any experience of my own like (field)...and, I actually, because I'm a (Humanities student), it's hard to like aah...explain to some companies what I can do and what... are my like strong...(capabilities)...And even though I know I'm capable of doing many kinds of work, it will be really really hard to like explain that even though I'm not amm...kauppatieteiden maisteri (a master of Economics), or something like that, I really have knowledge and I...yeah, it's going to be hard! (laughs) But the...(internship) will help...

Nelli (24)

At the time of the interviews, all respondents already had some working experience, but experience from their own field was still quite limited. Nonetheless, most of the interviewees had managed to gain at least some relevant working experience that would help them in finding employment from their field. Still, all respondents had prepared themselves not to have their hopes too high for landing their dream job right after graduation. There seemed to be a great distance between the interviewees current situation and their career goals, although the goals were simply set to find work that they would enjoy doing. Almost everyone explained how it would *take time and patience* to find one's place on the labour market. Thus, the transition was seen as a slow, gradual process, and accepted as such:

I: I'm pretty sure that it will take time, a quite long time that I'd...get to a (job) that I'd actually like to work for for a longer time, but aa...yeah..But it's not a problem that I would work in (places) that I don't like for a few years or few months here and there just to get experience, and then hopefully, gradually get somewhere nicer...Somewhere I'd actually like to work

R: yeah, it doesn't have to be like straight...

I: Yeah, a dream job! (Laughs) I don't think that's gonna happen, no.

Henna (24)

### 4.3. Flexible Student Life versus Rigid Routines of Work

Besides in finding a job that they could feel committed to the respondents suspected transitional challenges in *having to give up the freedom and flexibility* related to student life. The freedom of student life allowed planning a relatively flexible schedule with possibility to skip lessons when needed, and to travel and party even during the academic semester. Henna (24) describes student lifestyle at its most relaxed:

I:...waking up at 11 o'clock on Monday and going to a lecture from 12 to 14 and then going to have lunch for an hour and a half and then drinking a bit of coffee and going reading a textbook for a few hours and then going to someone's house /R: Yeah/ and then drinking a few beers and then going home. I mean /R: The student lifestyle/

I: Yeah, the flexible lifestyle.

Thus, adapting to the daily routines of working life was seen as something that would require getting used to. She goes on about her friends' transition:

I: For them, moving to Helsinki meant that they would have to get up at 8 o'clock and then go to work at nine, and they stay at their workplace until 4 or 5 and they come home and they do the groceries.



Many respondents thought that for them losing the freedom would be the most challenging thing aspect in their education-to-work transition. Nevertheless, for two of them this was actually a welcomed change, as they felt they were lacking self-discipline and having thus “a little bit too much freedom” at the university. For the others the freedom was something that they would miss:

I: ...It (the hardest thing) will be the working hours, because in the university it's so free to choose when you want to...do your work, and you can skip lessons...it's more free, and then you have to adapt to working hours, five days a week and eight hours a day.

Anu (28)

For giving up “*eight hours a day, five days a week*”, that much of her valuable time to work, the respondents expected to be rewarded with more than just the salary. Besides the salary for covering the living costs, they expected work to offer in return interesting challenges and collegial friendships.

### Work Sets Boundaries

Somewhat surprisingly, several interviewees were referring to working from 8.00 am to 4.00 pm, eight hours a day, five days a week, which are the most conventional (office) working hours in Finland. Thus, they were not expecting to find work with more flexible working hours or for instance arrangements often associated with current white-collar information or creative work, like as working from distance, even though their education would have made it possible to apply to others than traditional office jobs:

I: Maybe it's like, it's so, it's a kind of different way of living, because I have mainly studied, I haven't so much experience from work life. So, maybe...it's a...That you have to work from eight to four, or something like this...

Suvi (24)

The interviewees could be divided into two groups according to this topic. They seemed to have two different orientations, as those who mentioned the other transitional challenge (finding meaningful work) didn't mention the other:

I: ...I think once I find a job, I can then work, working is not the problem, finding the work is.

Lotta (26)

Nevertheless, there seemed to be a striking contrast between the *flexible university student lifestyle* and the *strict schedules and rigid daily routines of working life* in the respondents' speech:

I: ...It may also be the rhythm of life, that right now it's quite flexible and, I study when I want to, so I can organize my time...When I go to work I have to go there, I have to do some things, I can't decide myself whether I do it or not.

Milla (23)

They seemed to think that they would not have much authority over their schedule and tasks in working life, which most likely has to do with their relatively low expectations towards the beginning of their working careers. They were prepared to start from the bottom, where one's control over her work is very limited. Still, it is rather puzzling how rigid and traditional working life appears to the respondents, especially with *flexibility* being the mantra of today's world of labour. In this sense it seems that the interviewees felt flexibility was required from them, but they did not expect their working conditions to be flexible according to their needs.

### Academic Freedom

It is also interesting how all the respondents appreciated the academic freedom the Finnish university system allows, but three of them said that it requires a lot of self-discipline. In this sense they felt the strict routines would somehow make life simpler for them. For instance, one respondent who had had an exceptionally winding study path, felt the freedom of student life doesn't give enough *structure* to her everyday life, and she starts to now feel ready to move on to working life:

I: I was unhappy when I still hadn't made the decision that I'm going to quit my studies here and start working, because it was so aimless, so it's more satisfying to have some goals. I think.

Elli (26)

Flexibility is still a key concept when trying to make sense of the interviewees' transition experiences. The respondents seemed to value it highly, and for instance, even though a permanent position was something many still seemed to dream about, they emphasized how they would still want to keep their options open for doing other things.

### Employee's Virtues: Adaptability and Flexibility

According to the interviews, the most important virtues for a newly graduated searching for the "dream job" are surprisingly rather conventional *patience and realistic expectations*. Patience kept appearing in almost every interview. All the interviewees were prepared to have to wait, in most cases for several years, for a truly desirable job opportunity to arise. Despite everyone already having experience in working life, stepping from the university to professional, full-time working life was suspected to be difficult:

I: I hope I could get a job in a few months, but I think I might have to take like, go back to (the side job) for a while, or...be unemployed, cause I know the...it's very hard to get a dream job or something on your own field right away. So I really wanna get it, but I know I have to be patient and not to get depressed right away, and

R: But you feel hopeful to get it anyway...

I: Yeah, I think it depends on me, and who do I know, and everything. So, I trust I will get something. At some point (both laugh)

Milla (23)

There was no question about whether to strive for the dream job or not. In the beginning it might seem distant, but not an impossible goal. In order to get nearer to their dream *patience* is needed, and one should not "*get depressed*" right away,

although one might have to continue in their current side job, or even be unemployed for some time. Even though the respondents acknowledged the growing number of layoffs and generally worsening economic situation<sup>14</sup> in Finland, they were still confident to find at least *some* work while waiting for better employment opportunities.

Besides patience, there was a strong emphasis on facing the harsh reality of the labour market with *realistic expectations*. One should not set her goals unreasonably high, and adapt to the situation. This kind of approach seemed to ease the potential stress caused by the transition:

I: it (the transition) will not be easy, and I'm aware that it will take me several years to find my place, so I'm not so stressed about it, because I know it will not be like the first place that I get, or the third even.

Nelli (24)

On the other hand, the same interviewee told that this was not necessarily a good approach, referring to a recent study<sup>15</sup> which' results indicate that it is important to find relevant employment right after graduation, as it might harm future career possibilities to accept a job not relevant for one's future career goals (Sainio 2008). She reflected this information to her own situation, and considered not to accept just any jobs, and not staying at her current side job after graduation, even if there wouldn't be anything else available, in order not to harm her career plans. In this sense, she experienced a slight paradox between her own approach (being patient) and the research results.

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14 At the time of the first interviews, the Economic situation in Finland was still described in media and by the interviewees with terms like "decline" or "slump", but during the Autumn/Winter 2008 the terminology developed via "recession" to "Economic crisis".

15 Juha Sainio (2008): "*Kitkaa ja kasautuvia vaikeksia*", *akateemisten työuran alkuvaikeuksia kartoittava seurantatutkimus*.

Many interviewees knew, that on their preferred field the only way for young graduates to get their foot in, is to compete over low-paid internships:

I: I'll probably be doing quite a few internships, because that's unfortunately the way it goes. The same in like, like the (name of an institution), you have to.../ R: Three months there, and/ yeah, six months there and maybe a year there, and all the while you'll get half the salary that normal people do, even though you do the same work. So, it's the same thing with NGOs quite often, unfortunately. Amm, I think I'll probably do a lot of project works in the beginning...

R: Like short-term.../I: Yeah./ things...

I: Yeah. So I...Yeah. I think that maybe a bit stressful, but on the other hand, I know it, it's nothing new.

Veera (25)

With her experience, the Veera knew what to expect, and had prepared herself for the “bit stressful” situation. On the other hand, shorter projects were not considered to be all bad, because they were seen as a way to gain different experience and find out what kind of work one really wants to do and is good at, while gradually shifting into “longer and longer projects”. (See also Laaksonen 2001, 88.) Accepting the situation where one has to advance gradually was the dominant approach of the interviewees towards employment-related transitional challenges.

Also mobility, willing or non-willing, was something that was mentioned in two interviews as one thing the interviewees might have to face after graduation, especially if one would like to have a permanent position instead of just short-term jobs. As Katja (26) explained:

I: I think I will first have to do some substitution teaching, that's the reality of it, I don't think there are lot of openings for permanent teachers now, at least not in this area. So, I don't know if I have to, you know, go hunt jobs from somewhere, Lapland, or something (laughs), to get virka (a permanent post), but there are always teachers going to maternity leave or taking gap years or something, so I think there will be work.

There was readiness for geographical mobility among the respondents, as there were eight mentions of either moving abroad for a while or changing the place of residency in Finland after graduation. Many were planning to move to Helsinki, as the employment prospects there were considered significantly better than in regional center Tampere. But, revocability of plans seemed to be important, as *many wanted to try out living abroad, after graduation, but only for a while*, or somewhere else in Finland, and if it wouldn't work out, then move back to Tampere.

Being patient, accepting mobility, short-term contracts, and not so favourable working terms and conditions can be translated into worker adaptability and flexibility that were seen as requirements from contemporary ideal employee. The respondents seemed to have incorporated these virtues to the extent that they seemed as natural, as their own ideals. For highly educated and competent academic graduates, the respondents seemed almost strangely humble.

## 5. Discussion on the Preliminary Analysis

According to the analysis, the underlying theme of the data could be summarized in the following: *only uncertainty is certain*. By going through the interviews it becomes obvious how the interviewees, despite being very close to their entry to the labour market, are still experiencing uncertainty in relation to practically every aspect of their future working life: what kinds of options are open for them on the labour market, how to find an ideal job, when and how to start a family and how will it work with combining family and work. It is almost unimaginable what happens after leaving the university:

R: ...Does it frighten you a bit, like this, big step, like suddenly you finish the master's thesis and then?

I: Yes, of course! Because I don't, I cannot imagine what will happen! (both laugh). Something fun, I hope! Yeah.

Nelli (24)

Although not every interviewee was uncertain about all the aspects, every one of them brought up the *instability of the labour market*<sup>16</sup> and their social environment in general, and how it makes *difficult to have long-span life plans*. According to the interviews, the biggest question in transition, surrounded by a thick fog of uncertainty, crystallizes into *how to find work*. And *not just any work*, but work one can truly feel committed to. As the labour market was seen as something very unstable, this question awaked uncertainty, as no one could predict exactly what kinds of opportunities would be open for them after graduation.

Another big challenge connected to this, which many interviewees didn't even want to think about yet, was how to eventually combine work and family. Despite the fact that the interviewees seemed to prioritize work instead of starting a family in their current life situation, it is the potential employers' attitudes in recruiting that count in

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<sup>16</sup> rapidly changing in unpredictable ways

getting work in the first place. Although at their current life situation the flexibility of short-term contracts was more or less welcomed, in the long-span more permanent employment solutions were on everybody's wish list.

The instability was not unambiguously seen either as a good or a bad thing (it could allow flexibility and gathering different experiences, but also cause stress about income and combining work and family), but every interviewee must deal, or *negotiate* with it somehow, to have some kind of strategy to cope with the *unpredictability*:

I: ...What I've learned now in the administration side, when young people graduate now, they will have to learn another career at some point of their life, because the working life nowadays is so fast changing and you have to like...sopeutua...(adapt) really rapidly to new things, that you cannot predict your life. The way that, for example older people could. Nowadays you have to accept the fact of changing environment and all that. So, I'm not so stressed, because I know I can learn quickly and...like

R: Like if you have adaptability, it's easier then.

I: Yeah, and people should have that because nowadays it's not so stable anymore, anything, so...

Nelli (24)

Many comparisons to the parents' generation were made throughout the interviews. The parents were seen to have had more secure career paths and biographies, but also more limited opportunities. Today's labour market was described as *competitive*. Having a higher university degree wouldn't guarantee finding work, which wasn't seen to be the case when the interviewees' parents were entering the labour market.

In the beginning of their working careers the interviewees were expecting to get only short-term contracts or project work, and to face *demands on adaptability and*



*mobility*<sup>17</sup>. Instead of just stepping into the working life, the interviewees expected their transition to be a *hard process*. They worried the most about finding a job that would suit them and on the other hand, about how they could adapt to the routines of working life after the freedom they have enjoyed while studying. One would have to be prepared to wait, and even be unemployed from time to time, while *searching for their place on the labour market*.

What the interviewees then personally expected from working life was to eventually, after gaining experience from short-term jobs, internships or different projects, be able to find a job description which would suit just them, a job that would offer interesting challenges, that they would enjoy doing, where they would feel that they are doing a good job, within a good working community. These defined the ideal job for the interviewees, and were considered more important than just the salary, although being able to support oneself was seen important as well:

I: ... voluntary work, I've done quite a lot of it, but I hope in the future I can actually live on it, you know. I, yeah. I, know that you would work that, I'm interested in, rather than getting a lot of money for something I don't really care about, so...

R: Yeah, that's really an important thing...

I: Yeah...

Veera (25)

It wouldn't have to be a permanent position right away, short-term contracts and project work were seen as ways to gather experience before trying to reach the "dream job". Nevertheless, many acknowledged that later on, when possibly settling

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<sup>17</sup> Three interviewees were planning to move to the capital, and one to her home town for reasons other than work, but a couple suspected that they might have to move to "somewhere countryside" or as far as "somewhere in Lapland", where there would be shortage of workforce to get permanent positions from their field.

down and starting a family, a permanent position is required for being able to take maternity leave and being entitled to other social benefits, not to mention an improvement in the level of income.

For some it was scary to think about their future, and they told they didn't want to plan their lives too much beforehand. According to them they "had learned from their experience" that plans don't work. The interviewees tried to distance themselves from the uncertainty by saying that they "try not to think about things before they have to":

I: Yeah, I'm not really stressed, or panicked, about the future, I think it's no use to build scenarios why things wouldn't work, it will just come, when it comes.

Elli (26)

At times, this led to almost *fatalistic thinking*. While not daring to make long-span life plans, often mentioned strategy to cope with the uncertainty was just trying one's best to stay positive:

I: I have some expectations, but I've learned that you cannot plan...it, so I'm just hoping that I'm happy (...) So as long as you're happy, it's...yeah...Of course I have the same expectations as everybody, I would like to have job and a place to live...and all that, as well as I can plan it, but, I don't dare to plan it so much. So, I'm happy to be happy.

Nelli (24)

Despite many interviewees' unwillingness to plan their lives, some basic themes, or desires arose from this question. The two most important things appearing in these answers are work and family. In five years time, everybody thought to have finished with studying and saw themselves *working in some way or form*. Three or four interviewees were not yet sure about having children, but to the others it seemed clear.

Two interviewees pictured themselves living in Helsinki, where they would have moved in search for better job opportunities and/or to follow their friends, whereas four mentioned the possibility of working abroad. Nevertheless, no one saw herself

staying abroad for good. Instead, working in a foreign country was seen only as a temporary phase before returning to Finland.

## 5.1. Coping with the Uncertainty

The following themes, or emergent conceptualizations, that kept appearing in the interviews can be seen as a repertoire of *coping methods*, that the interviewees had adopted for dealing with the feelings of uncertainty and anxiety that the transitional phase brought about.

### Flexibility

The most prevalent coping method can be named as *flexibility*. In this context it means individual's ability to adapt quickly to constant change on the labour market and life in general. Being flexible is not only an externally addressed requirement for the respondents, but it's also something that they seemed to value themselves, by keeping their future plans open or revocable, being geographically mobile, wishing to have project or short-term jobs at least in the beginning of their working careers, and adjusting their curricula according to not only to their own interests but assumed labour market demands as well.

One expression of flexibility was the interviewees' readiness to first do work they don't enjoy, because they saw it only temporary. Having patience and realistic career expectations can also be seen as a way of adapting into an uncertain societal situation, and to help in bearing with the unpredictability:

I: ...I'll hopefully move on to nicer thing later on, so I'll probably be able to adjust to a job that I don't like, cause I know that I'm not gonna be there forever.

Henna (24)

One central observation that can be derived from the interviews is the lack of comments on consuming. The respondents didn't express a desire to acquire material property, i.e cars, apartments or houses. A couple of respondents maybe wanted to have their own house in the future, but others seemed to have given up the traditional

Finnish cultural ideal of having an own house. For most of the respondents, having a home of some sort, a place to live, was enough. It was more immaterial things that the interviewees had in mind when thinking about their future.

This can be interpreted as a coping method as non-attachment to material property in an uncertain situation. If one is expected, and in most of the cases, willing to have a flexible lifestyle, it is no use to have material burden on one's back, tying one to a certain geographical place:

I: I don't know if I will be working in Finland, or if I will be working in the same place, for very long. Like, maybe I will, but I just don't know about it, I can't say anything about it at this point. So, I guess, if I would suddenly win in a lottery and use the money in buying a flat, I would have to rent it out for quite a while. Because, you know...

R: There's no point in having a flat, if you plan to live abroad...

I: Yeah. If I live somewhere else myself.

Veera (25)

### Presentism/ Fatalism

The second coping method is present-centeredness, or *presentism*. It crystallizes in the obvious unwillingness or inability of the respondents to make long-span life plans. They can be seen to live in a sort of *extended present* (Leccardi 2006). According to interviewees own experiences, planning one's life beforehand does not work, because it is no use preparing for a certain situation, as the labour market and social environment constantly change rapidly and unpredictably. Thus, future is better to be left open, and things just have to be taken as they come:

I: ...I think plans don't work. I've had plans before and then year afterwards I found myself in places I had never imagined! So it doesn't work, you can't, or I can't plan.

Elli (26)

The comments on not being able to make life plans beforehand, and just following the flow of things, echoed at times almost fatalistically. This inability to plan was emphasized in every interview, except for one respondent, who had set herself certain traditional goals regarding future: marriage, children and an own home. Still, setting goals or having dreams can be seen different from planning (Leccardi 2006). The respondents seemed to trust both in faith and in pure coincidence in defining their life course, which diminish their individual agency in shaping their life events.

### Belief in Individual Agency

At times the respondents seemed to cherish a contradictory belief in individual's agency to define one's life. Despite their deep understanding of external structural factors affecting individuals' lives, many seemed to trust that with sufficient motivation one could "*find a good job*" and also combine work and family. They believed they would be able to manage these challenges "*as others have*". Being active in searching for work, and trying hard enough would guarantee at least some work, though not necessarily work from one's preferred field:

I...people who want to work will be able to work, it's a question of looking and being active. Lotta (26)

Also individual's ability to build good connections, to network: "*who one knows*", was seen important. For example, there were some stories in the data about peers who had done very well without higher education, using only their unique personality and social skills.

### Seeking Stability

In strict contrast with the flexibility approach, there was another coping method that I have named as *stability*. Some respondents were clearly searching for structure and stability, and were trying to make choices that would bring these to their lives. For some, university was seen to offer a little bit too much freedom, and they were hurrying up to graduate, waiting for work to bring structure and clear goals to their lives. The wish to have more study guidance and counseling can also be seen to reflect this.

While some interviewees strived to maintain their lifestyle as flexible as possible keeping all their options open, some had secured themselves clear and concrete career paths either choosing a field of study which gives certain professional qualification (teacher, reporter, social worker), or having a *Plan B* completely outside the field of their current university degree.

For example, Elli had already gotten qualifications for two professions in addition to her current studies at the university, which she was planning to leave soon. If she wouldn't be able to find work on the other field, she could try the other, and also, as a freelancer, work on the both fields simultaneously. Katja (26), for her part, had the option to continue in her current side job after studies if her primary plan wouldn't work out:

I: Yeah, I feel quite confident, and I have a, you know, back up plans also, I have been working in a supermarket for a very long time and I've, you know...

A: You've been promoted?

I: Yeah, I've been promoted, or something like that, and have a little bit more responsibilities there that is also one route in which to work. In the future.

Nevertheless, the flexibility and stability approaches to uncertainty did not divide the respondents into separate groups. Instead it seemed that the uncertainty was negotiated by applying both methods according to situation.

## 5.2. Negotiations

From the previous coping methods, the following ways of negotiating uncertainty can be derived:

*Flexibility – Stability*

*Agency – Fatalism*

It seems that the respondents constructed their biographical narratives according to these axis, while their position along them changed according to different questions.

Firstly, some of them were praising flexibility within the university or working life, whereas others longed for structure and routine into their daily lives. For some, the freedom to make important life choices independently was very important, whereas others felt they were constantly facing difficulties in making big decisions concerning their life. In some sense, the uncertainty did not necessary represent a negative thing, as having things open left room for dreaming and spontaneity.

The agency – fatalism dimension has the potential to form a whole life orientation. However, the perceptions of individual ability to influence life situations and future trajectories varied. One moment individual agency was emphasized, and the other it seemed to diminish completely in front of life's unpredictable turns. To give an example, sufficient motivation and right kind of attitude were seen as key elements to success, and in the other end of the line, life was told to be completely left in the hands of faith or chance, a life orientation where individual's control over her life seemed non-existent.

Due to the shifting positions that the respondent took along these axis, I find the term negotiate appropriate. At first glance, they seemed to cherish flexibility and stability, agency and fatalism all simultaneously, but it makes more sense to see the transition with its crucial life events as processes, which require constant negotiation about choosing an appropriate orientation in the light of fast-evolving events.

## 6. Towards Theoretical Framework: From Education to Working Life in Times of Uncertainty

In this chapter the theoretical dimension is approached by discussing what has emerged from the data in the light of relevant conceptualizations and theories concerning youth transition in early 21st century affluent Western consumer societies. I will also make use of recent social scientific research on academic newly graduates on the Finnish labour market. The concepts and theories are used to help to make deeper sense of the findings, and place them into a wider societal and cultural context.

To summarize the themes of the previous chapter, finding an interesting job was main priority for the interviewees in their current life situation, and seen also as the biggest challenge. Many of them anticipated a stressful period after graduation, during which they would have to face serious uncertainty about their future. Another big challenge would be the sudden change of lifestyle that the transition to full-time work would bring about: university life was seen in the same time as safe and flexible, whereas working life would require taking bigger responsibility and adapting to strict schedules and working hours. Although the respondents appreciated the freedom of the student lifestyle, some of them welcomed the change the transition would bring about as they thought working life would give structure to their everyday life.

The underlying story line of the interviews revolves around the all-embracing uncertainty. Experienced *instability* and *precariousness* of working life caused *unpredictability*, *uncertainty* or *insecurity* among the respondents. Questions like: *What will I become after graduation? What am I actually good at? What do I really enjoy doing? What kind of work can I find? How will I manage to combine work and family?* seemed the most puzzling to them, causing worriedness and even anxiety. Many of them brought up the mental problems that an increasing number of young people experience in this social climate.

Also the school shootings of Jokela and Kauhajoki were discussed, as the Kauhajoki shootings had just taken place before the interviewing period started. These tragedies were seen symptomatic of contemporary societal conditions, where people are constantly bombarded with the individualistic mentality of survival of the fittest and



left alone with their problems. The contemporary conditions were constantly mirrored against the agrarian Finnish society and its perceived social cohesion, solidarity, and communal spirit.

To draw some of the central issues together, the respondents seemed to experience their transition from university to working life as an endeavour defined by *uncertainty*. It concerned practically every aspect of their lives when they thought about their near future, though the biggest uncertainties seemed to be work-related:

R: And where do you think all this uncertainty comes from, or is it just something that is kind of overwhelming life, or?

I: I don't know, it feels like an atmosphere of the world almost.

R: And uncertain in what direction, like compared to work or life in general?

I: Well, I think especially in...career sense...Ask again, I don't know!

Elli (26)

Having children seemed also to many of them a distant thought, since first they wished to find a stable position somewhere, or at least an access to steady income. They couldn't be sure what they *would be or do* in five or ten years to come, but they seemed to have a lot of ideas, hopes, and dreams for their future.

Despite having dreams about their future, they all said that they *couldn't really make plans*, since things didn't seem to go according to plans in a rapidly changing social environment. From this they had already experience, as their paths had been more or less winding since they had left secondary education and started to search their way towards working life.

The framework of dealing with uncertainty guided me to the literary review, during which I stumbled upon empirical research concerning highly educated young peoples' transitional experiences from Australia (Blatterer 2009) and Italy (Leccardi 2006), where the informants described their life situations and orientations in very similar terms with the Finnish interviewees. Later on, the writings regarding uncertainty led me to the theories on individualism and risk society (Baumann 2001; Beck 1992;

Beck-Gernsheim 2002), and ideas on how these perspectives affect life-course and individual biographies.

Carmen Leccardi states that uncertainty seems to be a constitutive dimension of contemporary *Zeitgeist*, bringing with it “temporariness, the irrationality of making long-term plans, the need to be ready to review set goals in the light of evolving events” (2006, 22). Harry Blatterer, an Australian sociologist who has studied contemporary adulthood as lived experience both theoretically and by conducting in-depth interviews with a group of Australian youth, has despite the great geographical distance between Australian and Finnish societies encountered corresponding experiences among his respondents.

Blatterer has identified the perceptions, experiences, and attitudes regarding adulthood of twelve young urban Australians in order to gain insights into contemporary processes of coming of age (Blatterer 2009). Most of his interviewees were university students, and they resemble in many ways the Finnish sample, both what comes to their educational background, and what they said about growing up in today’s world.

Blatterer states that “*an awareness of uncertainty, of the unpredictability of the future, and a consequent lack of ability to plan for the long term*” defined the life courses of his interviewees. According to him, this touches a great number of young people in early 21<sup>st</sup> century affluent Western consumer societies<sup>18</sup>. These young people are not so much young people in marginalized or less favourable positions, as actually highly educated, especially academic young people, who just because of their education should be in an optimal position regarding life-chances in societies that emphasize the meaning of education and knowledge. (Blatterer 2009, 6.) This is not to say that these phenomena would not touch other groups of young people as well,

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18 Blatterer refers mainly to Australia, the United States, and United Kingdom, all sharing a liberal-democratic tradition, but his theorizations are well suited for other OECD countries, and also more affluent parts of so called developing societies as well (Blatterer 2009, 6).

but rather to emphasize, how there seems to be something specific about the educational transitions and biographical experiences of academic young people.

The situation in Australia, described by Blatterer, seems not so different from Finland: university education does not secure good career prospects and affluence any more, during their studies many students are living below the poverty line, and majority of students work part-time, many in several jobs in order to support themselves. A lot of time is invested in studying, and still after graduation many have to face periods of unemployment and general difficulties in finding work from their field and education level. Unemployment of highly educated young people, unimaginable some decades ago, has become reality. (Blatterer 2009, 84.)

With all this in mind, Blatterer has tried to find out how today's new adults face the indeterminacy of their futures in what he calls "*the times of uncertainty*" (see also Leccardi 2006.) He has strived to find out how is it possible for them to establish a *coherent biographical narrative* in times of structural insecurities and an individualistic values that posit the individual increasingly self-responsible" of their successes and failures. (Blatterer 2009, 83.) His findings have been useful for articulating the central findings of this research, and are later discussed in more detail.

## 6.1. The Precarious World of Work

Uncertainty seemed to be most deeply intertwined with the precariousness of today's working life. The reason for this can be seen to lie in the structural and institutional shifts that have shaken the basis of working life, and not only in Finland, during the last fifteen to twenty years (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 14; Sell 2007,4; Sainio 2008). To name a few key developments, work has gone through processes of deregulation that have led to its "flexibilization": employment forms with little regulated security are growing, and continuous long-term employment in one organization or even in one career cannot be expected any more (i.e. Sennett 1998, Beck 2000, Bauman 2001). These changes have made the conditions of work unstable, pushing workforce to develop means for coping with the rapid turns of the labour market.

Young people form the core group of flexible workforce for whom the flexibilization of work often means uncertainty about future, and financial dependence on society's

and parents' support (Laaksonen 2001, 86-88). Youth unemployment levels tend to be higher than within working population in average, and young people work more often with fixed-term and part-time contracts (Järvinen 2001, 62.) Thus, Especially young women's fixed-term and part-time work has increased, as they still tend to work within fields (i.e. public and service sectors) where these forms of work have become most common (Laaksonen 2001, 86-88).

### Academic Employment Transitions

The aforementioned developments have changed also the academic employment transitions. Academic unemployment unthinkable two decades ago is now reality. Finnish researcher Juha Sainio has analyzed questionnaire data on academic unemployment and the instability of the beginning of young academics' working careers in Finland. According to his report from 2008, the unemployment percentage of the Finnish academically educated has traditionally been very low. This has resulted in thinking that there wouldn't been any significant problems in their employment transitions.

However, according to Sainio's extensive data, nearly every one of the informants, who consisted of more than a half of students graduated from different Finnish universities in 2001, had faced some trouble in the beginning of their career. This was the case despite reasonably favourable economic situation of the time, and almost regardless of their field of study. Although only three percent of the informants were unemployed at the time of the questionnaire, five years after their graduation, thirty percent of them had been unemployed some time during the five year period.

Statistically, academic unemployment has been on the increase in Finland since 2003. It is usually, but not solely, concentrated into the time period immediately after graduation, and is a problem especially for so called *generalists*, whose degree doesn't give any specific professional qualification. Sainio's report reveals how both periods out of work as well as accepting work that doesn't correspond with one's education in the beginning of the working career have a negative effect on one's employment prospects in the future. Several studies have shown that the first employment experiences after graduation play a significant role in shaping the future

career (Sainio 2008, 5, 22, 31; Müller, Walter & Gangl, Markus 2003, 1; Couppié & Mansuy 2003, 64).

Although unemployment *per se* might not actually be the most acute problem for the academic graduates, Sainio emphasizes that attention should be directed towards the *quality* of employment. Partly due to the *education expansion*<sup>19</sup> and the following *diploma inflation* the number of highly educated young people competing over jobs has been increasing heavily, which increases the risk of having to accept under qualified work.

On today's labour markets, individual success doesn't depend only on personal educational and other resources. Still, education is probably the most central individual resource on entering the working life. Qualifications affect the possibilities of finding work, periods of being unemployed and the time to achieve a relatively stable professional position.

However, individual's education level, among other resources, will be compared to the level of resources within the age group at large. The risen level of education in European countries, Finland included, tends to devaluate qualifications that have previously guaranteed access to employment. Especially female education participation rates have risen strongly (see i.e. Müller & Wolbers 2003, 39). Due to the massive expansion of tertiary education in recent decades, even acquiring extensive educational qualifications does not guarantee a smooth transition into the labour market, which was still the case when the interviewees' parents experienced their transition. Although today's young people enter the working life with generally higher educational qualifications than their parents, there are more risks and uncertainty regarding their labour market position.

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19 The number of highly educated young people has increased notably, which has partly to do for instance with the polytechnic institutions being able to give tertiary diplomas since year 2003.

Sainio sketches a scenario of diploma inflation as a chain-reaction where the highly educated are soon being employed into lower positions than their level of education, thus occupying the positions of the less-educated, who in their turn have to move to jobs previously reserved for the people with the lowest educational qualifications. (Sainio 2008, 7; Laaksonen 2001, 89.)

Nevertheless, it has to be emphasized, that according to statistical observations, in Finland education still improves chances of finding work (Tuppurainen 2009, 15). Also, young people's *faith in education continues to stay strong* (Myllyniemi 2009, 106-108).

In the competitive climate, there is a strong pressure towards employees to be increasingly flexible if they want to adapt to ever-changing conditions. In order to be successful in contemporary world of work one must adopt the new working life virtues: flexibility, proactivity, and mobility (see Beck & Beck Gernsheim 1995, 6).

Some writers state that today's young adults have adopted these virtues so thoroughly, that long-term careers in one organization are not only increasingly impossible, but also commonly undesirable (i.e. Blatterer 2009, 62). For instance, Blatterer depicts how flexibility has become a way of life, and a central contemporary existential orientation in regards to adulthood. This means that although commitment to one's work contents is strong, deep commitment to single employer is considered too constraining. Also, adopting flexibility more or less consciously as a life orientation signifies the individual's capacity to thrive in plural social environments and the ability to cope with changes within them. (ibid. 2009, 114.)

Anna Sell has studied the ways in which a group of young, urban and educated Finns give meanings to education, work and unemployment in their lives. She states that in contrast to common cultural attitudes, young people don't necessarily see unemployment as a personal failure in life. Instead, they have found different ways to weave periods of employment and unemployment together with personal projects and hobbies into a coherent lifestyle. (Sell 2007, 3-18.) Her argument is, that for these young people careers, going to work, studying and unemployment no longer form individual life situations that affect their reality in a conventional way.

As periods of unemployment had become the norm among her respondents, who constantly switched from one short-term job to another, the importance of a steady career in defining one's identity or social status within their community had waned. Work, free time, earning and spending were moulded together into a significant totality, which helped to accept short-term unemployment and to even view it as enjoyable. (ibid., 3-18.)

It has to be noted that Sell's group of respondents consists of Helsinki-based young people, who share together the education or strong interest in creative (as in artistic, or musical) activities of different kinds. Their approach to work seems different from our respondents', who didn't even consider unemployment as a serious option. Rather they viewed it as something they might face right in the beginning of their career, or then they emphasized how they are ready to do at least some work until they would find something better from their own field. Of course Sell's and our respondents are in a different life situation, since our respondents hadn't yet graduated and weren't yet in the situation where they might need to reconsider their approach.

Our respondents seemed to have adopted the new ideal employee's virtues to some extent, as many of them said that in today's working life one has to have flexibility, adaptability and ability to learn quickly, as well as to be ready to move geographically in search for career opportunities. Many of them felt that they possessed these abilities. Some of them told that they were actually afraid of getting stuck in one job for the rest of their working life, instead they wanted to actively seek different work experience. They also welcomed the ever-growing alternative forms of work. These could be for example part-time work while raising their children, or short-term project work to gain work experience especially in the beginning of the career.

The requirement for flexibility, within both contemporary work and employees, seemed to be recognized among the respondents, and not completely without critical undertones. Still, flexibility was welcomed as long as one could get by financially, and feel relatively confident about future work prospects. Nevertheless, many of them seemed to be dreaming of a steady position at some point, in order to be able to support oneself and possibly start a family. In this sense it can be said that the respondents were seeking a satisfying balance between flexibility and stability.

## Gradual Transition

To describe the relationship between education and work among the respondents, it seems that the idea of a clear-cut transition where one first graduates and then steps into the world of work is simply not valid. Rather their transition should be seen a slow and gradual process, which has already started before or in the beginning of their studies.

The gradual transition to working life happens generally somewhere between the age of 15 to 29. This depends on current social and economic conditions, since the employment participation in this age group is very sensitive to structural changes. Young people tend to adjust their labour force participation according to current conditions by finding alternative functions during economic downturns, such as starting new study programs, complementing their previous degrees, or postponing graduation (i.e. Hämäläinen 2002, Tuppurainen 2009, 9.) In the case of our interviewees, it seems that they were carefully constructing their personalized degrees, gathering work experience on the side until they would feel ready to face the challenges of contemporary professional working life. The whole five to seven or eight-year period of studying at the university involved different working-life experimentations.

Thus, studies and work were not sequential but intertwining, to the extent that learning was seen to continue constantly after graduation:

I: ...I think you'll learn when you work, and your education provides for you the background and the knowledge that you need, and then you will learn also more, you continue learning at work, so...so you don't need to be perfect when you start working.

R: Yeah, it's just like a process of learning and /I: Mmm./ yeah...

I: Life-long learning is the word these days, isn't it?

Lotta (26)

For many of the respondents work had been at first occasional or seasonal, or part-time side jobs in order to finance studying, and gradually, when they had advanced in



their studies they had been able to move into positions closer to their own field or level of study. Internship period usually had had a significant integrating role. This became evident also when interviewing the respondents who hadn't yet done their internship, as they had clearly more questions open about their future career prospects. The ones, who had done their interning already, had been offered on several occasions a chance to continue as a paid employee. On one hand this is an ideal situation, but on the other the periods of working had postponed graduation, since couple of respondents felt that they hadn't been able to fully concentrate in writing their master's thesis.

To summarize, this gradual transition seems to be about finding a balance between studies and work. It is viewed both financially necessary and beneficial for cumulating working-life experience to work alongside studies, but work shouldn't slow down the studies. Henna (24) explains why this kind of equation makes sense, despite the occasional balancing trouble:

I: ---I think it's better...That we have, when people graduate from university they're a bit older and they have more experience. If I had a firm or a company, and I would employ people, I wouldn't want 23-year-olds, who haven't done anything but studied their whole lives and they don't have no life experience. I'd rather take a 30-year-old who has worked and lived abroad and done different things and been with different people, who I would know would be good for my company cause they would have more experience in other things than just studying.

With this logic, the Finnish Ministry of Education's efforts to push people to universities, and to graduate as fast as possible seems rather unwise. In a situation where employers wish to hire applicants who are both highly educated and professionally experienced, and preferably not much older than 25, it is logical to try to gather simultaneously as much study credits and working experience as possible. Especially so, as it is commonly assumed that as long as one is a university student close to graduation, it is easy to find work, but as soon as one graduates and starts to look for seriously for more steady employment, all doors are suddenly closing.

## Work That Matters

What made the education-to-work transition such a specific challenge for the academic graduates was their constant search for “*my thing*”, by which they were trying their best to secure satisfying future career prospects. Not having to do something that one doesn’t enjoy, or something that is against one’s values was considered as a guiding principle. Work was accepted to intertwine with one’s personal interests and free time, so it is not unimportant what one does for living, where, and with whom.

Work content is not important only for the academic graduates, since according to the extensive *Finnish Youth Barometer 2007*, it was the single most important thing within the sphere of work for 54 percent of the respondents (Myllyniemi 2007). This supports for instance Annika Westberg’s (2004) and Riitta Tuohinen’s (1996, 84-86) findings, according to which work content was very important to their young informants.

Tuohinen found a change in the conceptions of “normal” way of working between the youth of the time (1996) and their parents’ generation. She states that young people of the late 1990s didn’t share anymore the *Protestant work ethos*, emphasizing work as an individual’s responsibility, with the older Finnish generations. Instead they looked forward to making a personal connection with their work, but could on the other hand be quite relaxed about and experimental in trying to fit their personal interests and ambitions together with it. (Tuohinen 1990, 1996; also: Tuppurainen 2009; Sell 2007.)

Shortly put, it seems that Finnish young people have left behind the *Protestant work ethos*, that emphasizes individual’s *responsibility to work*. They seem to have replaced it with a new ethos where personal interests intertwine with work, which plays a big part in identity formation. Work is seen as a significant sphere of self-realization and expression. This can be seen especially typical for academic graduates with aspirations towards high-end white-collar professional positions.

To illustrate the respondents’ highly expressive work orientation, an opposing orientation is presented. In the late 1960s, John Goldthorpe with his colleagues

conducted a large-scale study of British industrial workers' orientations, attitudes, aspirations and expectations towards work (Goldthorpe 1968). They found a particular *orientation* towards employment among their group of informants, named as "affluent workers", that they considered part of the new British working class of the time. According to their extensive research, their informants' orientation towards work was strictly instrumental (ibid. 38-42.)

The primary meaning of work for them was a means to an end or ends external to the work. Work was simply seen as means to acquiring an income necessary to support valued (consumerist) way of life of which work itself wasn't an integral part (Goldthorpe 1968, 38). Work was seen as *labour*: "expenditure of effort made for extrinsic rather than intrinsic rewards". Involvement was calculative, and maintained only for so long as the economic return for effort was seen the best available. Affect involvement was neutral or mild, and ego-involvement of workers in their jobs weak. Job did neither form a part in their central life interests nor was a source of emotionally significant experiences or social relationships: it was not a source of self-realization. Life was sharply divided into work and free time. (ibid. 39.)

Goldthorpe's informants' instrumental work orientation is in strict contrast with our respondents' highly expressive and committed orientation towards work, where work was seen as a an important part of individuals' identity formation, that also intertwines with one's personal interests and free time activities. On many occasions, the respondents talked about their need to feel strongly committed to what they would be doing for living. In John Goldthorpe's later writing on the rise of the "service class" the work orientation of high-end white-collar employees is seen characterized namely by this: *strong moral commitment to work* (Goldthorpe 1982). What the interviewees themselves seem to view as their personal urge for self-realization, seems also as successful internalizing of service class work ethos, preparing them for their future work.

It is obvious that the societal conditions under which Goldthorpe wrote about the growing service class have dramatically changed, and thus the commitment that in Goldthorpe's case can be interpreted to be directed to great extent towards the

employer has increasingly shifted towards work contents, as steady careers within single organizations have become rare.

What has to be emphasized is that there is not just single general work orientation, but several. Tuohinen, for instance, calls the group of which valuations towards work are individualistic, derived from personal life situations, needs, and work's content, the generation that is *cool towards work*. The older generations' work orientation she connects with a strong Protestant work ethics. And then there are the young people for whom work's role is to provide income to facilitate consumerist lifestyle (Tuohinen 1990, 121-122.) Thus, work orientations seem to intersect employment classifications, generations, and lifestyle choices.

What can be said then, at least, is that there is something specific in academic young people's transitional processes. Their strong moral commitment to their work places huge importance to finding just the right kind of work, and their long and tedious academic educational efforts are seen to better their chances in this. It is interesting how our respondents actually attached the experience of uncertainty to their academic education. They, for instance, compared themselves to the peers who had chosen polytechnic or vocational education, and suspected that these young people have might have clearer, more secure career paths, and also better chances for good income after graduation:

I: ...my friends in (---), who went mostly to polytechnic, I think they just had in mind to get a well-paid position, and easily, because the polytechnic doesn't last so long, and they had kind of a straight way to some work.

R: Yeah, they have like these studies and then they can find a job.

I: Yeah, really easily, I think.

Nelli (24)

But, in their opinion they also have more limited choices and chances for advancing on their career, and they were suspected of adopting a more instrumental work orientation compared to university students.

Many respondents suspected, that the transition is easier for their peers who had chosen education that gives specific professional qualifications, but in the long-term they themselves preferred having more options open. This was made possible by university education. By choosing university education they thought to have good chances to self-realization via work.

Distance to the consumerist lifestyle was clearly taken, as commodities like cars and houses were not considered very necessary. Rather than consumerist lifestyle, the respondents seemed to share a more ecologically aware life orientation, where immaterial achievements and life content come before material possessions. This fits well together with expressive work orientation, which emphasizes work's meaning for self-realization rather than accumulating material wealth.

## 6.2. Making Choices

Expressive work orientation requires carefully considered educational choices. The importance and difficulty of making “wise” educational choices that would provide entrance into a desired working life position is obvious. The fast changing structural conditions of labour market make it impossible to predict the outcomes of these decisions. One might think to have chosen a promising line of study only to find out after graduation that employment demand has already changed in favour of some other degree (Tuppurainen 2009, 18).

*The time of uncertainty*, referred by Blatterer, doesn't only point to the collective uncertainty in front of the incalculable risks of the contemporary world. It refers very strongly to individual uncertainty in front of these risks. (i.e. Beck 1992.) In industrialized consumer societies, we are living a phase of advanced individualism, which has not only brought individuals more control over their life choices, but also more responsibility to manage their lives, as Kevin McDonald calls, as “entrepreneurs of the self” (McDonald 1999). Aapola describes the recent developments in Finnish political climate as ever-increasing neo-liberalism, that values economic competition and individualistic ideology (Aapola 2005, 257).

The rise of the individualism has according to Zygmunt Bauman led into a situation where everyone now *must* be individual (Bauman 2005, 16). In an individualized

society, structural demands and so-called systemic factors usually remain obscure for individuals, as people are considered self-accountable for choosing the right course of action in their lives. Thus, social crises can appear as individual failures or character flaws (Blatterer 2009 7, 30.). However, *systemic factors* like individual's socioeconomic background, abilities, educational and professional forms of accreditation, changing labour market situations, policy decisions, and global economic conditions limit individuals' "biographical designs" (ibid., 48).

According to Blatterer, life has started to resemble "an unending selection and decision-making process", where the realization of choices is seen to depend on individual decisions and action, and thus appear unlimited. As a consequence, all choices can theoretically be revocable, and the very profusion of options, together with the "needs structures" of capitalist societies, keeps individuals in a state of constant dissatisfaction with the choices they have made. (Blatterer 2009, 32-33.)

Katja (26) shares her experience on making life choices:

I: What has been hard for me is, you know, choose. You have to choose your career and what you want to be and who you want to be with, and it's not always easy, you know. And then, what if you have chosen wrongly, so

R: But you can always change

I: Yes, yes

R: Or do you feel that if you choose something, you might be a bit stuck?

I: well, not stuck, but I think I have changed my plans already so often, first the tourism, and then here, and now I'm not quite so sure about the teaching, but I'm quite sure about the teaching (laughs), it's, I'd like to be more sure, it would be easier.

R: So, sometimes you still hesitate a bit?

I: Yes, yes...But I think it's my character (laughs)

As demonstrated by the previous quote, the respondents had found it challenging to make different life choices, and to stick to them. In addition, the quote here illustrates

the subjectivization of these difficulties, as the respondent thinks that hesitating is especially characteristic to her.

In 1996 Mackay named time's young adults as "*The options generation*" (Mackay 1996), who have to deal with a situation where options seem limitless. The definition seems still valid today. Ulrich Beck and Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim have stated that these days we're not only more able to choose, we're obliged to do so, whether it's actually possible or not (i.e. Beck 1992, Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 2002).

Zygmunt Bauman wrote in 1995, that peoples' "search for a centre that holds" is made difficult by an "overabundance of options" (Bauman 1995). On the other hand, the perception of limitless options might help alleviate existential anxiety. Still, many individuals feel the need to narrow their options down somehow in order to make the world more controllable and comprehensible.

Elli, who had had an exceptionally eventful study path with many sudden turns, thought that the limitless-appearing options cause constant dissatisfaction, as one constantly receives new information on what she could be or do:

I: The world is so open, there's the Internet and you can just go to Google and you can see what people everywhere in the world are doing and then those become your options too. I think the more we know, the more desires we have, probably.

R: Yeah, that's true, and then it's difficult of course to reach it.

I: Mm...It's almost impossible to reach all the desires that are created when we learn that people over there are doing these things ---

She had found it challenging to stick to the choices she had made. However, she had successfully completed two academic degrees before the one that she was doing at the moment of the interview. Although she now seemed to have made up her mind about her career, there was still a hint of hesitation whether this would be the right choice or not.

### 6.3. The Dimensions of Uncertainty

Temporally the all-embracing uncertainty encourages present-centeredness, or future-openness, since planning for the unpredictable future seems pointless. Maintaining a feeling of freedom of choice means having to keep one's options open. This requires open time horizons. (Blatterer 2009, 33, 109-110.)

Leccardi calls what follows the *extended present* (Leccardi), Blatterer uses the term *presentism*, by which he refers to young people tending to concentrate on the here and now because planning for the future is just too difficult in a social environment of constant change. This encourages acquiring an attitude preparing to have few expectations beyond the present. What follows is an open-ended future, where individuals actively construct future as indeterminate (ibid. 2006, 25, 73-74, 104.) This construction of an indeterminate future became evident in the course of the interviews, in the respondents' unwillingness to plan their future, and their dominant strategy to just *see how things will go*.

Blatterer considers this future-openness as part of a life orientation he calls *New fatalism*, adopted by great number of today's young adults. In contrast to fatalism as lack of individual agency, in new fatalism, rather than giving the future over to metaphysical forces, the self becomes the idol. In Blatterer's words, it is "fatalism based on individuals' own competencies to deal with whatever life brings, to marshal the self against all odds". (Blatterer 2009, 104-105.)

Nursing a fatalistic faith in boundless individual agency, keeping the future open-ended, and commitments until "further notice" can be seen as efforts to answer to the uncertainties of the contemporary life course. A future that can be constructed beyond an intermediate stretch of time sets too much constraint on perceived biographical agency. The construction of an open future makes sense as it allows maintaining a feeling of control over one's life. (Blatterer 2009, 34.) Blatterer's hypothesis is that in this mental landscape "settling down" is not only undesirable but also increasingly impossible for today's young adults, and uncertainty is considered perfectly normal.

However, when it comes to the Finnish interviews, these claims seem to be only partly valid. It seems indeed that the respondents' time horizons are left open, but still



they seemed to dream about stability: of having a family or at least a stable relationship, a place to call their home, and eventually, a permanent position some day, if possible. Some of them clearly longed for more structure into their daily life, which they were hoping to find within the assumed routines of working life.

When it comes to perception of individual agency, the respondents did seem to think that they were to great extent responsible for their possible successes and failures, although they on several occasions criticized the overly individualistic values of contemporary Finnish society (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 16), and longed for the perceived social cohesion and solidarity of the past agrarian society.

They seemed to have developed means to cope with the uncertainty, cherishing the belief in their own agency, and keeping their future open, but rather than considered perfectly normal, the unstable basis that they have to build their lives upon seemed to worry them. Also, from time to time in the course of the interviews, it appeared that rather than adopting solely features attached to *New fatalism*, faith, coincidences, and luck were still present. Paradoxically, both faith and pure coincidence seemed to play their part in shaping the respondents' life course.

Although they were well aware of external societal factors affecting their life trajectories, features of individualistic ethos could be recognized from the respondents' speech. There was, for instance, a strong belief in the importance of individual's own motivation in finding career opportunities. The strong belief in individual choice helps to retain young peoples' reliance in their agency. Blatterer refers to several researches showing how many young people are largely optimistic about the future. According to individualistic ethos, everything is possible, if one just puts her mind to it (Blatterer 2009, 75, 101-110).

## 7. Biographies in Transition

This chapter opens up a new perspective to the earlier discussion on transition and uncertainty. In times of uncertainty, also biographies are in transition. According to Blatterer, the importance of *biography* lies in the relationship between long-range life planning and identity: self-identification relies on individuals' projections of their biographical narrative into the future (Blatterer 2009, 37). The ability to plan for the long term has been considered necessary to individual's self-placement in the world, self-projection into the future, and stable self-identification (ibid. 45).

A commonly used metaphor for biography is a *pathway*. Sinikka Aapola and Kaisa Ketokivi have also used it in their anthology on Finnish youth in search for adulthood (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005). According to them, pathway depicts well the different routes young people take on this journey: short cuts, detours, well-tramped ways or almost unpenetrable thickets. The writers emphasize how in the contemporary society the question of biography is not about navigating onto some existing linear course, instead everyone has to construct one's own in a situation where meanings of adulthood have blurred (i.e. Hoikkala 1993), and no one seems to be certain about what it actually is that they are looking for.

Aapola writes how it is difficult for young people to permanently achieve such benchmarks, which have traditionally seen signifying adulthood. Study paths have become longer, short-term jobs and youth unemployment have increased, and the average age for starting a family has grown when compared to the respondent's parents' age group. All this has created a need to problematize old ways of thinking about adulthood. The idea of adulthood as a life phase where individual has settled down, and no big changes happen in her life anymore has been questioned. However, it seems that outdated conceptions still have significant normative power.

### Standard Biography – Standard Adulthood

Traditionally an institutionalized life course, a set of norms organizing the individual's lifetime progression within social space has more or less defined individual biographies (Blatterer 2009, 36; see also Buchmann 1989: 15). Age norms have segmented life course into discrete units, as age as an organizational criterion

has structured life via its temporalization (see Buchmann 1989) On the level of individual experience, highly institutionalized life course has allowed long-term projection of aspirations, as what is possible to achieve and what not is more or less explicitly structured (Blatterer, 37; Buchmann 1989: 40-41).

Blatterer points out some fundamental shifts in life course compared to his interviewees' parents' Baby boomer generation. He calls the time period when they experienced their transition into adulthood, between the end of the Second World War and the oil crisis of the early 1970s, "*the Golden Age*", quoting the historian Eric Hobsbawm (see Hobsbawm 1995). He states that the affluence and economic stability of this time period has been the most conducive to the institutionalization of a particular model of adulthood, that became lived experience for a majority, as Blatterer calls it, "*standard adulthood*". (Blatterer 2009, 13.)

According to him, there can be seen a certain standard life-course with a pattern of habits and expectations unique to the period of the postwar boom. He claims that becoming adult during the *Golden Age* was a matter of following a life course that resembled "a march through the institutions of marriage, parenthood, and work" (Blatterer 2009, 13-14). The fulfillment of *classic markers of adulthood*, a set of practical accomplishments (family, stable relationships, work, independent living) together with certain repertoires of behaviour guaranteed the social recognition for adult status. These markers of adulthood were relatively fixed, achievable, and supported by a strong value consensus, with almost faultless synthesis of ideal and reality.

The emphasis on fulltime employment together with strong welfare-state regulation allowed this convergence of objective possibilities and and subjective trajectories. The standard adulthood gained normative power, and became the ideal-typical arrangement of life. Especially in the United States and United Kingdom it relied heavily on a taken-for-granted gendered division of labour as the basis for social reproduction and integration. Early marriage became the norm, and nuclear, single-income family, with male breadwinner and female caregiver was the ultimate reproductive unit. (Blatterer 2009, 38-39.) Education and work were separate and sequential. In standard biography individuals' opportunities seemed clear, but limited.

Blatterer states, that standard adulthood is still considered “the ultimate benchmark for adult maturity”, despite the obvious rupture between old standards of adulthood and new social conditions. (Ibid. 15-16,114.) Aapola and Ketokivi shed some light on this thought by referring to Berger & Luckmann’s concept of institutionalization (1966): the classic markers of adulthood have been institutionalized in the sense that they have been internalized in peoples’ minds as general yardsticks to reflect one’s own life to. The same idea can be captured with the concept of cultural age order: in certain cultural environments, there are certain normative perceptions about how life should ideally go. Breaking this cultural order, doing things in “wrong order”, draws negative attention, or at least suspicion, and young people learn already at young age to reflect their choices carefully in relation to these norms. (Aapola and Ketokivi 2005, 19.)

The model of standard adulthood is ideotypical, and it is certainly not applicable to interviewees’ parents’ transition as such. To give a couple of examples, according to respondents, many parents had for instance spent time traveling before settling down, and had been cohabiting before marriage. Thus, their life course hadn’t really been like the “march through the institutions of marriage, parenthood, and work” depicted by Blatterer. However, this doesn’t diminish its normative power as an ideal, which became obvious in the ways how the interviewees negotiated their transitional processes in relation to the key markers and institutions of standard adulthood.

### Choice Biography – Emerging Forms of Adulthood

Under contemporary social conditions institutions can no longer offer temporal securities, which makes long-term projection of biographies difficult. There are claims that the standard biography is losing significance, and standard life course transitions are blurring. In Blatterer’s view uncertainty is becoming normalized, and thus redefinition of social norms concerning adulthood is needed (ibid. 7-8, 43-45). He claims that marriage, parenthood, work, independent living, “entry points to standard adulthood”, are losing their empirical salience, though retaining normativity on an ideational level, whereas the idea of life-long learning is transforming education into a constant activity (ibid. 59).

According to Ulrich Beck, there has been a shift in contemporary highly individualized societies from standard to *choice biography*, which means that instead of relying on institutionalized standard biographies, they must be constructed personally (Blatterer 2009, 47; Beck 1992, 135).

Now individuals' options seem almost limitless, but choosing becomes problematic. Anthony Giddens, who has studied the relationship between self and social structure in late modern society suggests that individuals engage themselves on a "project of the self" with "fateful moments" that demand individual to consider the consequences of certain choices and assess the risks involved in these choices. (Giddens 1991, 113.)

All these changes provide individuals greater flexibility, but also cause insecurities for those who search for existential security in life course. In other words, the choice biography offers individuals opportunities without security. (Blatterer 2009, 44-45.) This is also reflected in Furlong's and Cartmel's term *risk biography* (Furlong & Cartmel 1997).

In choice biography, instead of having a *possibility* to choose, individuals have to do so, and to choose "the best" from profusion of options, regarding education, work, living environment, lifestyle, partners, family... This difficulty of choosing is also expressed in the interviews:

R: So if you compare life easiness, for example, back then when your parents were young?

I: I think that the challenges were different, maybe now the challenge is this huge uncertainty... Too many options

R: Back then there wasn't all this uncertainty

I: Yes, so sort of the world made some decisions for you, so it was easier to make decisions, I'm sure they had their own difficulties.

Elli (26)

When the respondents were asked to compare their transitional phase to the time when their parents' entered working life, many of them told that according to what

they had been told, things were more simple then, and their parents didn't have to face a period of uncertainty after they had finished their education. All of them had been able to find work that fit at least relatively well together with their level and field of education. In the agrarian Finnish society, the path to adulthood was indeed in many ways more straightforward than now. Aapola writes, that young people moved towards adulthood along more defined, gendered and class-based routes. For instance, parents, family and church set more strict boundaries and constraints to young people's life choices than today (see Aapola & Kaarninen 2003; Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 17). The growth of the middle-class has had an enormous effect in changing this setting.

Recent structural pressures can be seen to have initiated and catalyzed processes of cultural changes, as the tension between old norms and current practices begins to crumble the normative basis for adulthood (Blatterer 2009, 43-63). Value researchers have found a change in value orientations across generations, a shift from emphasizing stability towards personal growth and self-realization. Blatterer depicts how transience and fluidity of emerging forms of adulthood have come to replace stability and certainty of the standard adulthood. Key feature of the emerging forms of adulthood is the trend to conceive life and "self" as a subject to individual creativity, as a project. In working life this has marked a shift from instrumental work orientation towards increasingly expressive orientation.

Blatterer attaches to new adulthood the embracing of plurality of values and orientations, flexibility, openness to change, risk-taking attitude, and present-centeredness (2009, 77). As personal growth becomes an action-orienting value, making once-and-for-all decisions about life doesn't make much sense. *The liminality, a state of being neither here nor there, traditionally attributed to youth is becoming a quality of contemporary adulthood, making the liminality a permanent, defining feature of new adulthood.* (ibid. 75-76, 106.) This means that adulthood can no longer maintain its status as a final destination and is being replaced by youth as a value.

One can be adult and youthful for instance by being mature but not settled. Aspects of youth, associated with "youthfulness" have come to compete with standard adulthood,

without having challenged adulthood as such. *Youthfulness has become an important factor in redefinition of adulthood.* (Ibid. 73-74.)

## 7.1. Existential Transitions

The Finnish interviewees can be seen to have adopted elements from both standard and new models of adulthood. Couple of them openly stated that they want to rebel against the normative standards for adulthood, and was seeking alternative ways to organize their lives, but most of them wished to fulfill the classic markers of adulthood some day, in some way or form. Still, what comes to adulthood *per se*, they all defined adulthood as *being responsible* for one's own actions, and being able to take some responsibility of others as well. (See also Westberg 2004, 42-45.) As they felt that they take pretty much responsibility over their lives, they *felt* mostly adult.

In contrast to standard adulthood defined by Blatterer, this definition is not dependant on the external, *classic markers of adulthood*. Instead, this is rather a subjective experience, which both depends on and shows in one's responsible actions. Nevertheless, even though all the respondents defined adulthood in this way, some of them felt that their adult status was still pending, because they were not yet fully in working life and thus couldn't yet take complete responsibility of supporting themselves financially. Thus, graduating and entering the working life in its full-time sense was still significant to some respondents' identification as adults (see also Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 278-280, 291).

Sinikka Aapola and Kaisa Ketokivi state that the external material markers of adulthood haven't really changed completely or lost all their significance. Nevertheless, personal internal and mental criteria for adulthood have come to compete with them. Achieving just the classic markers is not enough any more: one has to *feel* adult and be mentally mature and responsible as well (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 20.)

Annika Westberg, who has done research on Swedish young people's conceptions of adulthood, states that personal experiences defining adulthood, like development of individual's responsibility, identity formation and clarifying one's goals have become increasingly important. She calls these new dimensions of adulthood *existential*

*transitions*, and explains that they are at least as significant to young people as the external criteria. For instance, the most important criterion for adulthood for 72 percent of her respondents was *being responsible*. (Westberg 2004, 42-45.) This goes hand in hand with the responses within our interviewees, who all said that adulthood means just that.

Although in an individualized society individual's mental world gains more emphasis, work haven't lost its significance in people's lives, quite the contrary. In capitalist societies the "achievement principle" is the central evaluative factor, which puts emphasis on work. It works as the prime standard for social and self esteem, leading to social recognition based on performance and productivity. Work brings about adult status, which brings about social recognition and thus individual integrity (Blatterer 2009, 56-57; also Honneth 1996.)

### Social Recognition of Flexibility

From his social theoretical viewpoint Blatterer sees society as an institutionalized recognition order, drawing his conceptual background from Hegel's views, further developed by Honneth in his writings on individuals' struggle for recognition (Honneth 1996). Blatterer sees recognition as the medium of social integration that transforms social norms and values into subjective identities. In this order, achieving adult status brings individuals recognition and social respect from other members of society. Individual's self-identification hinges on this validation by others. (Blatterer 2009, 51, 54, 57.)

Thus, adulthood can be seen as an intersubjectively formed social category, circumscribed by historically and culturally specific practices and expectations, achievements, and competencies (Blatterer 2009, 10). According to Blatterer, it has for long been neglected as such, as it has been an "invisible" concept, taken for granted norm, same way like whiteness, or heterosexuality (2009, 2, 51). It has lacked content, as it has been seen mainly as childhood's "other" and adolescence's destination (*ibid.* 10).

The concept's emergence in public consciousness and everyday vocabulary happened only during the Second World War, when it came to signify something concrete to



aim for, “a life stage that held the promise of fulfilled wishes and achieved aspirations” (Blatterer 2009, 12). In practice, adulthood has meant socially recognized, “full” personhood, achieving full membership in the social system (ibid. 58).

Blatterer views achieving adult status as a dynamic, intersubjective process of social recognition, and although adulthood’s meanings are ambiguous or contingent (2009, 2), the recognition of adults as full members of society is common for both standard and new forms of adulthood. The difference between these lies in the changes on what basis adult recognition is constituted. These changes can be depicted as *a shift from the social recognition of stability to the social recognition of flexibility*. Veera (25) brings this up in relation to work:

I: I think the way people like see work as well, like what they want from it, is changing.

R: Like what do they want, for example?

I: Like, for example, a lot of people seem to like to have flexibility over security.

Even though many young people would prefer flexibility to security, or stability in their lives, it doesn’t mean that the common criteria for social recognition would have changed yet. This can be seen in the persistency of the discourse on delayed adulthood, tackled in the following chapter.

## 7.2. Redefining Adulthood

Sinikka Aapola and Kaisa Ketokivi write in an anthology on searching for adulthood how prevailing social and historical context is defined by deep-going social transformations within social institutions formulating individuals’ life course. They acknowledge young people of today living in a quickly changing social world, where the experiences of previous generations provide little help in search for adulthood. (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 284.)

Despite the visibility of these transformations, the common discourse on delayed adulthood is persistent. The acclaimed phenomenon is often referred as “prolongation of the period of youth”, argued by how young people stay in education longer, “postpone” starting families, and have difficulties in establishing themselves on the labour market, and consequently in achieving financial independence (Ibid., 284).

### Classic Markers in Transition

Statistical observation makes it clear that these classic markers of adulthood are indeed in transition. The median age of entry into the fulltime labour market has risen, young people tend to stay in education for longer and work in temporary jobs before entering the fulltime labour market (i.e. Blatterer 2009, 39). These factors are helpful in trying to understand the transitional processes of growing up on a macro-level. Nevertheless, in order to understand these processes on a micro-level, it might be fruitful to search alternatives for the discourse prevalent not only within popular media but social sciences as well.

### “Delayed” Adulthood?

This *delayed adulthood/prolonged youth* discourse can be seen as a way of making sense of the social trends related to the alleged problems of contemporary young adulthood: prolonged stay in or episodic returns to the parental home, “delayed” or forfeited marriage and family formation, drifting from one temporary job to another, having only short-term goals, different lifestyle experiments and unconventional living arrangements. Blatterer names this the *Delayed adulthood thesis* (2009).

Marketing professionals have eagerly taken advantage of this discourse; coming up with numerous labels for potential new target groups, and for instance the term *young adults* has become a part of everyday vocabulary in recent years. Blatterer criticizes the idea of a new life stage separating the adolescence from adulthood, with conceptualizations like “Emerging adulthood” by Jeffrey J. Arnett and “early adulthood” by Frank F. Furstenberg, which try to make sense of the demographic changes behind the aforementioned developments. In Blatterer’s view adulthood itself is in transformation (see Blatterer 2009, 21).

Surprisingly many social scientists have accommodated the delayed adulthood thesis without enough questioning. According to Blatterer the twentieth-century North American (Parsonian) notions of adolescence as a period of “structured irresponsibility” are paradigmatic of Western cultures’ perceptions of adolescents. This line of thought is alive and well in claims of young people hesitating to “embrace adulthood”. (Blatterer 2009, 19-20.)

This kind of approach is very individualistic, arguing that achieving adulthood is about individuals’ ability to seek and find existing, clear and linear paths, whereas Aapola and Ketokivi suggest that multi-dimensional, socially molded processes and structures affect the possibilities and future horizons that open up for young people in the first place (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 7.)

### New Forms of Adulthood?

In Blatterer’s view, adulthood can be seen as a social recognition order, and within this order young people, as rational actors, seek recognition in ways that seem possible and most suitable for them. Young people are naturally willing to achieve social recognition brought about by adulthood, but in the same time they have to negotiate its terms (Aapola & Ketokivi 2005, 7). According to Blatterer, there is a rupture between old standards of adulthood and new social conditions, by which he refers to the criteria for recognition concerning adulthood lagging behind social practice. There appears to be a normative lag between the adulthood of the parents’ generation and the one(s) of today’s youth.

The traditional standard model presented earlier persists as an ideal, and thus personal orientations and practices that would be suitable for the contemporary conditions are not acknowledged. Thus this normative lag leads to a recognition deficit, which becomes evident in a general misunderstanding of young peoples’ means of social integration. Also, young peoples’ feelings towards the standard model of adulthood might be ambivalent. They might recognize the model as ideal, but might be doubtful about how they are succeeding in its realization. (Blatterer 2009, 113.)

As adulthood with its classic markers has been the ultimate goal, youth has been considered as a liminal stage. A young person has traditionally been seen to be in-

between, neither here nor there, neither a child nor adult. Thus youth has been seen as a state of incompleteness. (Blatterer 2009, 74.) In recent years there have been discussion about the expansion of youth. This phenomenon is not synonymous with prolonged adolescence or delayed adulthood. *Characteristics traditionally attached to youth have become part of new adulthood.* Youthfulness as a life orientation has expanded not only into the realm of adulthood but into childhood as well, as today's children seem to adopt characteristics of youth at ever-younger age.

Nevertheless, reaching adult status is still connected with achieving *full personhood* in the eyes of society. It makes *adulthood still a worthwhile goal.* This discredits the discourses of today's youths' rejectance of adulthood. *Young people can be seen redefining the content of adulthood, as the model of standard adulthood has become impossible to realize, despite its normative significance.*

Blatterer's conclusion is, that *instead of lingering between adolescence and adulthood as commonly alleged, today's young people just simply define adulthood on their own terms, and are rather being stuck between the outdated ideas of standard adulthood adopted by the vast majority of their parents' generation, which maintains its normative power, and emerging new forms of adulthood that are more fit for contemporary social conditions but lacking social recognition* (Blatterer 2009, 57,114.)

### Adulthood as a Mirage

On the level of individual experience, the Finnish respondents seemed in a way to be left lingering between the *desire for security, conformity, predictability, and material security* (Blatterer 2009, 100) of their parents' generation and the embracing the flexibility of emerging adulthoods. They seem to have adopted ideas from both models of adulthood, wishing for security and stability, freedom of choice and flexibility in the same time.

Adulthood is in transition, and seems to constantly escape from sight. For example Westberg noticed that the meaning of each external transition, be it demographic (achieving the legal adulthood, living independently), family-related (partnership, having a child) or financial (graduating and achieving financial independence) was

considered more significant within the respondents who hadn't yet experienced the transition:

R: And do you feel like an adult?

I: Yes, but if I had a job and, when I have my job and my own apartment and maybe a family, then I will feel it more.

R: So now you feel like more in between, or...

I: Yes, but I think it..."the adult" is more in your head, but for me it's right now in the situation. I feel like that. I should have certain things to feel more adult.

Anu (28)

When the transition had taken place, its meaning dissolved (Westberg 2004, 42-45.) Also, the traditional markers have become less permanent, since one can lose them for example following from unemployment or divorce. All this comes to the conclusion that individuals have to constantly negotiate and renegotiate their relation to adulthood as adulthood can be achieved or lost time and again.

In early 21<sup>st</sup> century consumer societies the transition to adulthood has become increasingly heterogeneous. Young people seek their ways individually, but their chances and choices still remain structured (Thomas & al. 2002, 335-339). My central argument is, that today an increasing number of young people living in these societies, especially the ones chosen the academic educational route, have to find their way along winding paths, as societal structures and institutions shake, resulting in increasingly uncertain labour market trajectories and social relationships.

## 8 Conclusions

This chapter summarizes the diverse themes brought up in the previous chapters, presents the central research results, and the concluding remarks.

To start, it is questionable if transition is an appropriate term to describe the process that the respondents were going through to begin with. I suggest that rather than transition, it is to be considered as an important life phase as such, not just a liminal state between adolescence and adulthood. During this life phase the respondents are expected to make important decisions concerning education, work, partnership, and family. Both their subjective experiences on being an adult and their social recognition as such still very much depend on these decisions.

The core category, the storyline of the research is the all-embracing uncertainty that defined the respondents' life situations. I suggest that uncertainty characterizes the social conditions under which they were constructing their relation to working life, and their relation to adulthood.

Uncertainty has various dimensions, influencing the respondents' lives in different ways. Firstly, unpredictability of life brings about a temporal shift compared to standard adulthood – open time horizons, present-centeredness, future-openness, and inability or unwillingness to plan one's life.

Secondly, the instability of societal structures causes institutions to lie on a shaky basis, thus they can't offer individuals temporal security, i.e. long-time careers, as they could before. Precariousness has got a hold on spheres of working life that aren't precarious by nature. For example, on female-dominated public services sector in Finland short-term contracts have become typical in recent years, although there is no essential basis for this. On many fields where a lot of women are working, short-term contracts are now common, leaving many unwillingly without proper job security, appropriate salary, and work-related social benefits.

Besides these very concrete downsides of precariousness, on the level of individual experience it might cause existential insecurity, anxiousness and trouble with identity formation as biographical trajectories become increasingly blurred.

Although the respondents had already internalized work-related values typical of high-end white-collar professional employees, they were still uncertain about how to find work, what kind of employer they could work for, what their work contents could be like, or how they would time their career and starting a family.

They were optimistic towards finding work after graduation, but they had prepared themselves mentally for having to accept under qualified work at least in the beginning of their career, as the competition over jobs was seen to be tough. Nevertheless, as they had adopted a highly expressive work orientation, their need to feel committed with what they would be doing was clearly expressed. Despite the concerns regarding diploma inflation, their education investment in lengthy university education was seen to provide the best route to a personally fulfilling career.

As many big questions were open to the respondents, they had had to develop coping methods, life orientations fit for the uncertain world. I have derived from the data several ways of dealing with uncertainties that can be summarized into the dimensions *flexibility – stability* and *agency – fatalism*. I suggest, that the respondents negotiated the uncertainties regarding their life situations between and along these dimensions, applying the strategies varyingly, according to the situation. This negotiation was not so much conscious, as it on more or less unconscious level reflects cultural ideals and discourses related to education, work, family, youth, and adulthood.

In a very simplifying manner it could be said, that the respondents appreciation towards both flexibility (university studies, work flexibility) and stability (permanent position, the routines of working life) indicates that they were in a way lingering between the ideals of standard biography and standard adulthood of their parents' generation, and the new emerging forms of adulthood that are increasingly constructed upon flexibility and mobility, and characteristics traditionally associated with youth.

The negotiation between individual agency and fatalism can be seen on one hand as reflecting contemporary over-individualistic values, where everything is seen achievable as long as one has the right mindset and in the other end, complete

paralyzing in front of the overwhelming unpredictability of contemporary life. On the other hand, fatalism can be understood as Harry Blatterer suggests, *New fatalism*, where competent individuals enjoy *extended present* and spontaneously throw themselves into the challenges and adventures provided by the unpredictability, without even wanting to plan their lives ahead.

This kind of life orientation did not seem dominant among the respondents. The uncertainty was not considered so much perfectly normal, as worrisome. However, the respondents did express attempts to mentally adjust to uncertainty in a *New fatalism* fashion, by saying for instance, that they can *just try to stay positive and happy, and see what life will bring*. It has to be noted, that despite living in a state of uncertainty, the respondents said that they were relatively satisfied with their lives.

As they experienced their future career path to be unpredictable, they didn't see the point of making irrevocable decisions that would possibly inhibit them from adapting to unexpected events. This kind of attitude has for its part fueled the discourse on university students prolonging their youth, while clinging onto the safety net provided by university. I suggest that actually what is going on in the data is, that the concept of adulthood is being redefined. Being a student does not equal being adolescent, since the respondents feel that adulthood is mainly being responsible for one's actions, more so than fulfilling some external criteria, as the classic markers of adulthood.

## 8.1. Negotiating Uncertainty

The respondents' life situations seemed to evoke somewhat contradictory life orientations. All the interviewees had to negotiate with the uncertainty somehow, and most visible these negotiations became in the respondents' search for both stability and flexibility and in their simultaneous belief in individual agency, faith, and pure coincidence. In contrast to Leccardi's findings, where her informants had adopted different orientations to deal with the uncertainty, having built either different guidelines, throwing themselves in the hands of faith, or just trusting their luck (2006, 22-23) the Finnish respondents were using different orientations according to different aspects of their lives, constantly negotiating with their uncertain situation.



Most of them seemed to have chosen a “hybrid” model, including both ideals of flexibility, mobility, and temporariness to their notions of adulthood and work orientation, but without having completely rejected the standard adulthood with its classic markers. For them, work “*in some way or form*” was still central to being adult, both for gaining independence by being able to support and to express oneself. But, in order to achieve this kind of job, where self-realization is possible, one has to be able to adapt to rapid changes and to learn new abilities quickly. To be successful, one has to be flexible and mobile, and these ideals the respondents seemed to have internalized.

What is notable, though, is their desire to live abroad only temporarily. I would interpret this as keeping future trajectories revocable. It is safer to think that there is always a possibility to return, instead of deciding to leave something behind for good.

This can be seen as one example of the respondents installing dimensions of stability and flexibility into their biographical designs.

What they thought to be useful characteristics for a contemporary employee competing over jobs, was having adaptability to ever-changing situations, which many of the respondents felt that they had. One indicator for this was their life satisfaction: they were quite happy with their life situation, despite having to cope with uncertainty.

## 8.2. Concluding Remarks

This research has been an effort to grasp some aspects of the turbulent conditions under which today’s young academics graduate and start to seek establishment on the labour market and through that, their way to social recognition as adults.

To conclude the research, a comment from Tea is presented to demonstrate how different, even contradictory approaches can be molded together in the respondents’ speech. First Tea makes clear her values and ideal transition, including traveling the world with her boyfriend and finding alternatives to the standard adulthood model. She, for example, considers adopting instead of having biological children, but then in

the end admits that as things tend to change very quickly, next year her situation might be completely different than the scenario now imagined:

I: I'm kind of ...fighting against it, that when you're almost 30 you have to start to think about that " I have to own a house, and then I have to own a car, and then I have to have two kids, and a dog", I don't wanna that kind of things, at least not at the moment, cause, more I would like to live for myself and just be free, and then later on, I'll check what happens, but I don't want to hurry with the family. But also, I think the work is not that important. That it's of course nice to have some kind of experience, that when I go abroad for a year or two, then when I come back, I could probably have a good place to work.

R: Yeah, yeah, like live for yourself

I: Yeah

R: So your boyfriend is doing the same kind of...And, later on, maybe, you would like to have children if it happens

I: Yeah, yeah

R: Or do you plan to not have kids at all?

I: No, I think we're going to have kids, but later. (laughs) After traveling, and seeing the world.

R: Yeah, like you live first for yourself and after you can think about the rest

I: But you never know what happens (laughs), next year I'm here with a kid!

What I am hoping for, is that bringing up these experiences can for their part promote deeper understanding of the transitional experiences, and the ways in which highly educated young people can construct their biographies in a social climate of uncertainty, negotiating between individual agency, circumstance, and social structures.

Regarding further research, I see possibilities in deepening both the analysis on negotiating the *Flexibility – Stability* and *Agency – Fatalism* dimensions, and their connections to the theoretical discussions presented within this research.

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