



# 'It hasn't Been the Best Year, but here I am': Young Adults Interpreting their Agency in Relation to the Self-Governing Discourse, Social Relations and Life Contexts

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## Abstract

The aim of this article is to explore with a longitudinal research approach how young adults narrate their life course and build their agency in relation to societal expectations with the support of their social relations and societal awareness. The article leans on the ethnography-based life historical interview data produced in 2017–2020 with a small group of Finnish young adults who are regarded as having a migrant or special education background. The discursive–narrative analysis shows that the interviewees make sense of themselves and their agency within the individualised self-governing discourse, especially when narrating the future. They also, however, distance themselves from that discourse by attaching themselves to social and religious relations and societal inequalities, especially when narrating the present and the past. Based on the analysis, I claim that recognising their own position in the school system and in wider society helped the interviewees understand obstacles along the way and be understanding towards themselves and others.

**Keywords** Young adults · Agency · Self-governing · Longitudinal research · Life history research · Narrative research

## Introduction

Sociological and youth research over the decades have clearly shown that the educational, and further the labour market paths, of young people differ according to their societal position, and the guidance towards these paths derive from stereotyped assumptions related to a certain position (e.g. Willis 1977; Youdell 2006b; Gordon et al. 2008; Kalalahti et al. 2020). At the same time, debates on the need to explore and explain the question of youth individualisation—meaning the weakening of

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structural elements, traditions and identity categories in the life course of younger generations—have been initiated widely and are ongoing (see, for example, Baker 2019; Cahill and Cook 2019; Leccardi 2014; Simmons et al. 2014). Current policy alignments concerning and framing the lives of young adults essentially emphasise the objectives of self-governing, freedom of choice and individual's employability (see Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020; Nikunen 2021). These societal discourses of individualisation and self-governing frame the context and expectations that are directed towards contemporary young adults regarding their agency. To name a few, contradictions between the demands of individual abilities and responsibilities in the educational system and labour market, the reality of high youth unemployment of today and injustices directed towards racialised or disabled people, are the reference points into which young adults of this study reflect their own expectations concerning their future.

The article leans on the ethnography-based life historical interview data produced in 2017–2020 with a small group of Finnish young adults and focuses on how they interpret their agency within a longitudinal interview narration towards their life experiences and future expectations.<sup>1</sup> I explore the formation of agency within societal structures and discourses and see agency as discursively and relationally constituted (Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Butler 1999; Youdell 2006a; Toiviainen 2022). Life historical and narrative approaches are well acknowledged among youth studies in analysing how young adults make sense of their agency (e.g. Andersen et al. 2020; Cahill and Cook 2019; Aaltonen 2013; Henderson et al. 2007). However, it is still so that short-term research funding often restricts the options to follow longitudinally the lives of the same research participants over the years and thus manage to gain access to analyse the manifold and changing narration on oneself and on agency. This article realises the potential of longitudinal research to shed light on temporal aspects of the young adults' societal agency-building as they have been interviewed annually and their interviews can be analysed drawing also on the ethnographic field notes produced in the period they went to upper secondary school.

The initial ethnography on which the life historical study is based was conducted in one vocational and one general upper secondary school in the Helsinki Metropolitan Area during the school year while these young adults were studying in the schools in question.<sup>2</sup> The ethnographic study was contextualised through the earlier research-based notion that the students regarded as having a migrant background or special educational needs face a statistically greater risk of following a 'non-normative educational path', with its twists and prolongations, and of becoming early leavers of education and training or, later, unemployed (e.g. Kirjavainen et al. 2016; Kilpi-Jakonen 2011; see also Kalalahti et al. 2020; Jamal Aldeen 2019). However, the results of our ethnographic study showed that most of the young people we met and interviewed aimed at either a study place in higher education or a job. The study also brought out that the young people drew strongly

<sup>1</sup> The ongoing ethnography-based life-historical study is called *Diverse paths to adulthood. Life-historical study on young adults entering higher education and employment (DILE)*.

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on the individualised vocabulary of education policy, leaning on the self-governing discourse by emphasising one's own choice and responsibility (Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020; see also Davies and Bansel 2007; Taylor et al. 1997, 92), stating that to get support they would need, one had to be active and ask for help by oneself (Niemi and Laaksonen 2020).

On the basis of these findings, I became curious about more thoroughly investigating the young adults' narration of their life course and educational paths after they graduated from upper secondary school. I was interested both in topics and themes which they highlighted in the interviews and how they did it, but also what I aimed at analysing was how the interviewees in their narration drew on wider societal discourses and how they positioned themselves into particular contexts in which they inhabit, such as schools, workplaces and Finnish society more generally (see, for example, Kohler Riessman 2008; Blomberg and Börjesson 2013). Although the starting point in the study was the analysis of the life course of young adults regarded as having a migrant background or special educational needs, these categorisations are not the focus of this paper. Instead, I will elaborate excerpts from their longitudinal interview narration, which illuminate how various aspects of intersecting differences relate to their life experiences.

The research questions of the article are: 1) *How do the interviewees narrate their life course in relation to the self-governing discourse and their social relations and life contexts?* and 2) *How do they interpret their agency in the longitudinal interview narration towards their life experiences and future expectations?* I will discuss how young adults learn to engage in and negotiate with societal expectations, understand them and eventually also resist them through the support of their social relations and societal awareness. The methodological thread of the article also examines what an ethnography-based life historical approach may bring into the research on young adults' life course. The article has the following structure: I will next discuss the theoretical and analytical concepts. Then I will open up my methodological choices and the data and analysis. After that, I will present the results of the data analysis and, in the end, discuss my focal results.

## **On Agency-Building in the Frame of the Self-Governing Discourse**

Ikonen and Nikunen (2019) write that neoliberal governance encourages individuals to conduct responsible self-management, and this societal atmosphere frames the narration of the young adults whom I have interviewed. Self-governing works in my analysis as a theoretical tool (see, for example, Rose 1999; Davies and Bansel 2007; Foucault 2008; 2009). It is also a societal discourse of the neoliberal education policy which emphasises individual abilities, entrepreneurship, flexibility and self-responsibility, and young adults make sense of their future plans and life experiences in relation to this discourse. The self-governing discourse includes a cultural narrative of competent and successful young person with highlighted responsibilities to shape their skills according to the market, and this is an ideal subject of the discourse (see Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020, 1147; Kauppila et al. 2020; Davies and Bansel 2007; Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2020, 4; Cahill and Cook 2019). In short,

it describes one who progresses independently and determinedly—sometimes ‘to the stars through difficulties’. However, educational transitions and paths of young adults with migrant or special education backgrounds are discussed in public as primarily fragile and challenging (see, for example, Kurki 2019; Te Riele 2006; Powell 2006). These dropout and risk talks are related to both the self-governing discourse and to the discourse on ‘the need for support’. The latter runs alongside the self-governing discourse and is directed particularly towards young adults with a migrant background, special educational needs or working-class background who are seen to be in ‘need for support’ (see also Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2020, 4). Although obviously concerning power-related social differences, both the self-governing discourse and the discourse on ‘the need for support’ are individual-centred and focus on either supporting, emancipating or changing people’s lives on an individual level (see Mirza and Meeto 2017; Niemi and Mietola 2017).

On the basis of my interest in analysing neoliberal self-governing in the field of youth studies, I became curious about Ahearn’s (2001) contribution to the concept of agency. She observes, among other things, responsibility as part of agency and states that ‘it is important to ask how people themselves conceive of their own actions and whether they attribute responsibility for events to individuals, to fate, to deities, or to other animate or inanimate forces’ (pp. 113.). In line with Ahearn’s ideas, I became interested in the research participants’ interpretations concerning their actions and responsibility in relation to these actions and other life events. As I see it, this interpretative work during the interview narration is similar to what Bamberg (e.g. 2011, 7) has called as ‘taking a reflective position vis-a-vis the self as character in past or fictitious time–space’.

Even though agency is extensively discussed in the research literature—not least within youth studies—and it is still a rather blurry concept, I chose to utilise it as an analytical tool when analysing longitudinal interview narration. My epistemological stance regarding agency is discursive, meaning that discourses are seen as systems of truth, producing and regulating knowledge in societal contexts (Foucault 1980, 112, 131; Hall, 2001, 72–73). Based on this, I consider agency as relational, defined and enabled by discursive and social practices, as well as by interpersonal reciprocity (see Toiviainen 2022). According to Honkasalo (2013), interdependence is a part of agency and attachments to other human beings and the world define one’s ‘freedom’ (see also Aaltonen 2013). Thus, my reading on agency in the interview narration is not based on the conventional notion of a self-knowing subject, nor do I consider agency as a property of any autonomous individual. Rather, I approach agency as constant participation in the discursive practices of certain social contexts and the (re)formulation of these practices (Butler 1999; Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Jamal Al-deen 2019; Youdell 2006a). I am interested in how young adults position themselves in relation to the self-governing discourse when interpreting their agency. Discursiveness implies that agency is a consequence of the ongoing constitution of the subject (Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 469), and my analysis focuses on how this agency is interpreted by the interviewees in their longitudinal interview narration.

When analysing the interviewees’ interpretations concerning their agency, I arrived at exploring agency from the point of view of the concept of a sense of agency (Gordon 2005; Gordon and Lahelma 2002), which I see as interlocking well

with Ahearn's view and as useful in the analysis. Briefly, a sense of agency means the subject's perceptions of their possibilities to make decisions or of the limitations to their decision-making, but also concern over their agency: to what extent am I allowed to decide on the various aspects of my life and am I able to realise my decisions (Gordon 2005, 114–115)? The sense of agency becomes close to the idea of the sense of autonomy—no matter how illusory it may be—, meaning the feeling that one can think, talk and act within the frames of the discourse (see Davies 2006).

## **Longitudinal, Life Historical Interviews and Discursive–Narrative Analysis**

The first interviews I analysed for this article took place during the ethnographic fieldwork while the interviewees were in their first or second year of upper secondary school (16–17 years old). The themes discussed were related to the students' educational paths from the beginning to the present, as well as to their future plans. We interviewed 67 students. I then searched for students who were interested in participating in my longitudinal research project and negotiated participation with five young women and five young men. Half of them graduated from vocational upper secondary school (Aida, Viola, Chris, Larry, Chien<sup>3</sup>), other half from general upper secondary school (Halima, Farah, Noor, Lennart, Eliot). The second interviews took place around the time of their graduation, and from then on, they were more open and started with the question 'Tell me about your current life'. I also raised some points that I found interesting from each of their former interviews and from my field notes (see Henderson et al. 2007). The third interview took place within a year of graduation when the research participants were 20 or 21 years old, and with some interviewees, I have already conducted the fourth interview. The data analysed for this article consist of 30 interviews and ethnographic field notes from one school year.

The research participants have certain similarities in their educational backgrounds, but they also carry with them various social dimensions of differences—social class, race/ ethnicity, dis/ability and gender—which intersect with each other (see Gordon et al. 2008; Phoenix 2011; Goodley 2014). All were born and went to school in Finland and held an upper secondary education certificate. Until recently, all interviewees had lived in their parental homes. Six of the participants (Aida, Farah, Halima, Noor, Chien, Eliot) are racialised as non-white and/or had a migrant background, which means that both of their parents have moved to Finland. Six (Viola, Chris, Larry, Lennart, Chien, Eliot) are categorised as having special educational needs. About half of their families have a rather low level of income and their parents have a low educational background and have encountered unemployment. The other half of the parents hold a general upper secondary or higher education certificate and work in middle-class jobs.

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<sup>3</sup> All names are pseudonyms.

Methodologically, the interviews were life historical and narrative. The research interest has been focused on the narration of the participants' life course in relation to the self-governing discourse and their social relations and life contexts. I have also taken into account the temporality of narration in the analysis. This means that when reading the interviews, I have aimed to grasp what kind of impact the interviewees' travelling in between different temporalities (past, present and future) has on their narration and how (differently) it is possible to talk about themselves in the past and in the imagined future (see Blomberg and Börjesson 2013; Emirbayer and Mische 1998). The interviews are ethnographically grounded, as the ethnographic fieldwork during the research participants' school time contextualises the longitudinal study (see Gordon and Lahelma 2002). One of the strengths of longitudinal research is the possibility of going back and reflecting on the topics you have discussed before with the interviewees (Henderson et al. 2007), and lived moments of the fieldwork are available for reflection from a temporal distance (Lahelma 2003).

My reading of the interviews was discursive–narrative. Drawing on Kohler Riessman's (2008, 10) argument, this has meant for me that through a close reading of people's stories, I have aimed to 'connect' biographical and societal aspects in the analysis. I have concentrated on the interviewees' sense-making of themselves and on the societal and other social elements that have seemed to enable or restrict their agency. I interpret the narration about oneself as an act of forming and reforming agency (Bamberg 2004, 358–359). In line with the concept of discursive agency, my reading concentrates on how young adults' constant participation in the discursive practices and the negotiation, (re)formulation and questioning of these practices enable them alternative ways to conceptualise themselves and their life course (Butler 1999; Coffey and Farrugia 2014; Jamal Al-deen 2019).

In practice, I have read and reread the interviews in several rounds with a distinct emphasis: The objective has been to make interpretations that are theoretically, methodologically and empirically grounded (see Gordon 2005, 121). The interviews were also analysed together with the transcript of the ethnographic field notes. I have not coded the data, but I have expanded the reading rounds with the theoretical concepts of agency and self-governing, and the analysis has developed accordingly—in dialogue with theoretical concepts (see Lappalainen 2009; Koski 2011). I utilised the following three analytical questions as tools in the concrete analysis, which was wrapped around narratives and episodes from the interviewees' narration and from the field (see also Niemi and Jahnukainen 2020, 1146; Lappalainen 2009): 1) *what* is told in the interviews (educational experiences, meaningful moments, everyday life, etc.); 2) *what kind of* narration is used (critical, understanding, thin, thick, etc.); and 3) *what kinds of societal discourses, cultural narratives and social relations the interviewees cite and make use of in their narration* (see, for example, Bamberg 2011, 16; Phoenix 2011; Tamboukou 2008) and how these seem to constitute the agency of the interviewees. In what follows, I aim to highlight the analytical ideas from the starting point of the agency concept and the self-governing discourse. These concepts work as theoretical threads with which I write the theoretically and empirically inspired analysis.

## The Self-Governing Discourse Structuring the Future Narration

When making sense of themselves in the interview narration, especially during the first interviews, the young adults seem to borrow vocabulary from the self-governing discourse I have discussed above. Chien, who studied a total of nine years of basic education in a special education group, made distinctions between himself and his schoolmates in upper secondary school, stating that his schoolmates were not interested in studying but in ‘hanging around during classes’. In line with the cultural narrative of the competent and successful student (see Juva and Vaahtera 2017), Chien repeatedly stated that it is ‘*up to you*’ to succeed in studies and that ‘*to get a good life, one needs to study more*’.

In Chien’s narration, the norm of the self-governing discourse—which is the independent agency—has to be analysed in relation to his educational path and experiences in studying in special education groups during basic education. It had been unclear for him why he was transferred to that group and what his needs of support were, and he claimed that sometimes they were given even too much help in the special education group. My interpretation is that, especially for Chien, cultural narratives of competent and responsible students who independently manage their way to success through any difficulties they encounter on the way were important when narrating his future (see Juva and Vaahtera 2017; Davies and Bansel 2007; Youdell 2006b). It appears important specifically in relation to his background in special education: He had experiences in studying in the group in which studying was strongly supported, and his space to act was restricted. Chien pointed out in the second interview:

*An adult got to act alone. You can’t get help all the time.*

I argue that, in Chien’s narration, his agency becomes constituted as independent, particularly because he makes sense of himself in relation to his past experiences about the boundedness of agency within the context of special education—in the margins of a normative educational path. For him, arguing for autonomy seemed to be an act of considering himself to be an able and well-performing person in his early adulthood.

In the narration of the present and the future, the other interviewees, like Chien, also drew on the self-governing discourse by describing themselves as independent, autonomous agents. This was especially true in the first interviews. In this narration concerning future expectations, the interviewees tended to narrate themselves as responsible for their own progress and the choices they had made and were about to make. I assume that the future became narrated in this way because the self-governing discourse is so prevailing in various societal sites—especially in educational contexts—and thus young people have become accustomed to the use of it in their narration. It is, for instance, the media and other public discussions that guide the discourse, and if one has not succeeded and managed to proceed (yet), one must somehow justify the situation (see Davies and Bansel 2007; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Lappalainen et al. 2010; Leccardi 2014, 47–48).



The next interview extract is from Farah's third interview, in which she constantly moved from her life experiences to the present and on to the future expectations by drawing on the self-governing discourse. We discussed her process of completing the matriculation examination, which is the final exam in a minimum of five different school subjects to complete general upper secondary school:

*Farah: Well, I retook English (matriculation examination). But in the autumn, I had to pass maths, but I didn't really study and that taught me that you won't achieve anything in this world unless you really work for it.*

*Interviewer: You've brought this up in these interviews before, that you've had these moments of revelation...*

*Farah: I always have...*

*Interviewer:...that you can pass some (exam) but you don't really learn from it and don't necessarily even pass it.*

*Farah: This is a journey on which we learn all the time and at the same time, I'm growing up and, well, my thoughts and worldview are changing all the time. Like, I don't know. But I just learnt that you have to study or you won't pass an exam, and that if you study, you pass.*

In the extract above, I reminded Farah of what she had told me in her previous interviews, and she responded by describing the story of learning and maturation and the importance of her independent work. Farah went through analytically and reflexively her studying, choices and the issues that troubled her choices. She described mistakes as episodes from which she learnt new things in her life and, hence, something that strengthened and supported her on her path. It seems that narrating in line with the self-governing discourse was important for her self-understanding. When narrating herself as strong and flexible, she constituted I of her story, which followed the cultural narrative of an ideal subject (Holmberg and Niemi 2019, 17; Bamberg 2004, 358–359; Mäkelä 2018; see also Coffey and Farrugia 2014, 465).

Even though leaning on the self-governing discourse can, on the one hand, strengthen agency, it also hides the structural factors that shape and bind the educational paths. Although Farah seemed to be aware of what she was doing, she did not have a clear picture of what failing an exam meant in relation to university admissions. She finalised her studies at a time when both the matriculation examination and higher education student admission were going through a massive reform and many details were new to students—and she, among other students, did not know how all the new systems work in practice. From the basis of the analysis of her first interviews and ethnographic field notes from upper secondary school, I assume that she would have benefitted from more comprehensive help and guidance in her studies than she was actually offered, and she seemed to seek information and progress her educational choices rather lonely (see also Kosunen et al. 2022). However, Farah's agency was constituted as strong as, despite the problems she had faced during her educational path, she oriented towards the future with curiosity and dealt with the challenges rather calmly.

My analysis shows that when the interviewees talk about their future expectations and reflect on their life experiences, the invitation to grasp the self-governing discourse stating that 'everything is possible if you try hard' is strongly available



to them. I am asking whether is it so because the future itself is seen as unpredictable—especially in these times of ‘the crisis of the future’ due to various global crises (see Leccardi 2014), such as climate change, wars and pandemics. By narrating the path that one can control and be responsible for, the young adults individualise responsibility for the future and take care of the continuance and coherence of their agency—no matter how illusory it will be (Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2020, 11). Is it even more tempting to rely on oneself in situations in which the past school path has not followed the normative path and one has experienced mistreatment at school, as in Chien’s case? Even though all of the interviewees attached themselves to the self-governing discourse (especially when narrating their future and themselves as the agents of it), they also seemed to recognise the toughness and insufficiency of the discourse and, as I will next discuss, they did not position themselves solidly in it.

### Here and Now: Interpretations of Agency when Facing Insecurity

Like Farah in the previous section, Aida also narrated herself as generally determined and independent during the first two interviews. However, at the time of her last interview, she was taking a gap year after graduation from vocational upper secondary school, had various short-term jobs with a zero-hours contract and had not decided on her next plans except for a family trip to the country of her parents’ birth. It came out in her narration that she was facing a period of life in which she was not sure about what she wanted to do or how to aspire to her interests:

*Aida: I’m the kind of (person) who doesn’t give up. If I want something, I’ll do it, no matter what. But now that’s gone a bit. It’s a bit hard to explain, but at the moment, I don’t have any strength. But I know it’ll come back that I want to do (different things in my life). Recently, I’ve had a kind of feeling that I don’t know what I want to do.*

*Interviewer: It can take time, and then you’ll (know what you want to do), at a particular moment. Maybe that trip will somehow open your eyes?*

*Aida: That’s why I’m going. That’s what is good at the moment. I can get to think a lot there. There’s no work, I don’t have to work there. I can think.*

At first glance, Aida’s narration about herself goes well with the self-governing discourse (*‘If I want something, I’ll do it’*), in which educational choice-making is portrayed as an independent choice for young adults and the responsibility to make a choice is emphasised (Arnesen et al. 2014; Lappalainen et al. 2010). Following this storyline, the responsibility for making successful choices and for possible failures to make choices remains that of the young adults themselves. However, during her interview, Aida recognised that at the present moment she cannot act as autonomously as she thinks that she has acted in the past. She constituted her agency in relation to the self-governing discourse, stating that ‘I am normally this independent and decisive, but *at the moment* I am a bit lost with how things will go’. When narrating her possible future, Aida did not find any other explaining or protective factors than herself and her reflection, and her present self seemed to be a bit insecure. Her solution to narrate the possible future was actually to stay in the present moment

and give time for herself to ‘*think a lot*’. In addition, it was already in her first interview when she claimed that one cannot change the past. My interpretation is that these two storylines enabled her neither to blame herself for past failures nor to plan determinately for the future, which at that time seemed too unpredictable.

Already during his first interview, Larry narrated coming across poor support practices at school, and these experiences repeated themselves in later interviews, too. He seemed to be aware of his support needs and the kinds of arrangements that would help him in the workplace, but he recounted that he had not received that kind of support that he would have benefitted from. Larry seemed to attach himself to the present and the near future in his narration (see Nikunen and Korvajärvi 2020, 10–11). He did not regret having made mistakes and did not articulate any long-term plans without being directly asked about them. Instead, he talked a great deal about his current, ongoing actions: looking for a new job, moving house, etc. His agency was strongly attached to the present moment, which he seemed to accept as his reality. Larry described this:

*I live by myself, by letting things slide. I don't. I lead a quite full life, that I don't have that kind of extra time or so. [...] (In the future), it would be nice to have a car, possibly. And the kind of work that one has the strength to do. For a long time. I don't have any kind of special plan.*

My interpretation is that by refusing to look further forward and lean on himself, but by living ‘here and now’, it was possible to create a certain safety which may disappear if one starts to plan too far into the future. Viola also talked about herself drawing on this storyline of ‘here and now’ when she stated:

*In a sense, I have no worries about the future. I go day by day and don't make plans any further than a year from today. I don't dare plan further. I go on calmly and just see what happens.*

According to the analysis, because of the perceived insecurity in Viola’s life, concentrating on the present and the near future seemed to be an important resource that supported her agency.

## **Societal Inequalities, Social Relations and Life Contexts Shaping the Narration on Agency**

During the longitudinal study, the interviewees’ narration towards themselves and towards their past life experiences has diversified. When making sense of their past ‘I’, especially in the interviews after their graduation from upper secondary education, they used gentler and societally more aware narration—in contrast to the self-governing discourse. The self is discussed in relation to societal structures, social relations and different life contexts in the narration by noting their limiting and enabling attachments (see Aaltonen 2013, 387). The interviewees reasoned through why certain things had happened in their lives, and the explanations did not only regard themselves. For some of the interviewees, it was religion that intertwined with the

societal structures and social relations: especially when they looked towards the past and claimed that they did not want to change anything that ‘was supposed to happen in the past’. Religion seemed to be a resource for them.

When I consecutively analysed, for example, both Aida’s and Farah’s interviews, I found that through narration, they seemed able to create space for alternative practices to interpret their agency (see De Fina and Georgakopoulou 2015, 3), not only individually and independently, but also as attached to social relations and resources they have. Despite the clear emphasis on individualisation in their interview talk, they both recognised that religious elements shaped their life experiences and this stretched the agency, making it more relational and even non-human centred (Ahearn 2001). Aida, for instance, stated:

*I’m the kind of, I just, everything that comes my way is intended for me and I can’t change it. I don’t even think about, like, changing something. I’m grateful for everything.*

When narrating her life course, in contrast to the emphasis on reflexivity, determination and having a critical mind in terms of one’s past experiences in the prevailing (‘Western’) discourse of learning and growing up (see, for example, Toivainen 2022), like many of the young adults, Aida narrated some of her past life episodes as events that she neither had influence over nor regretted. While narrating the past, many of the interviewees were rather forgiving, and they did not blame themselves for the issues they had gone through in the past, but they recognised the social attachments that framed their lives. In Aida’s, Farah’s and Halima’s narration, understanding and gentleness towards oneself seem to interlock with the communal and religious ways of thinking that they had, when the direction of one’s life is never seen as being (only) the responsibility of the individual but rather in the hands of God (see Ahearn 2001).

According to Honkasalo (2013), human beings participate in various activities but do not only act alone; interdependence is part of agency. Families, other social relations and religion were factors that seemed to shape the interviewees’ agencies and work as resources for them. However, categorisations related to certain religions, racialisation and special educational needs were also restrictive for some of them. Farah, for example, highlighted in her most recent interviews her experiences of racism and unequal societal positions of racialised persons, particularly Muslims, in Finnish society (see Kurki 2019; Peltola 2016, 28; Vehviläinen and Souto 2022). Experienced racism underlines how categorisations can limit agency and the understanding of oneself. When discussing her opportunities to influence the direction of the political climate and decision-making in Finland, Farah stated:

*If my kind of people were given more opportunities, for instance, to be decision-makers, if my kind of people were seen in parliament and in decision-making positions, then of course. But the fact is that in Finland, a native Finn will more often get that position than my... my kind of people. If things go in a better direction, then at the end of the day, I know that my religion will prove itself. (Now) I have to prove myself. If you are a good person and err...like you practice religion right. And, you know, that kind of picture comes up without*

*you trying to advertise Islam or so on [...]. But if my kind of people got more opportunities among decision-makers then they would know, they would definitely know. And changes will always come. Then, you'd have a voice; you'd have a louder voice than a normal citizen would have.*

Islamophobic, racist images, hate speech in the media and the reality that there are very few relatable people among decisions-makers had made Farah recognise societal inequality and more particularly the power-related barriers that shaped and defined her possibilities of taking action (see also Kurki et al. 2019). When narrating her role as ‘an example’ or ‘proof’ of a good Muslim, Farah recounted how the societal position of Islam and Muslim women in Finland limits her agency (see Kurki 2019; Jamal Al-deem 2019; Mirza and Meeto 2017; see also Helakorpi 2020). The analytical notions of her possible future opportunities and restrictions are central to Farah’s narration: how the social hierarchies of different religions and race/ ethnicities restrict her space to act. Farah carefully analysed the difficulty of being a Muslim woman in Finland when you have to constantly prove your being and your religion (cf. Peltola 2016, 27; see also Helakorpi 2020). At the same time, she dreams about a future in which ‘*at the end of the day, my religion will prove itself*’, by which she means that hopefully someday the restricted views presented in the public discussion will change and Muslims will have more opportunities to act and work in respected societal positions. The further I have gone in the chain of each young adults’ interviews, the more they raise the critical notions concerning racism and school- and work-related structural problems, and overall, their viewpoints have moved from individualised towards more societally aware perspectives.

As Tara Yosso (2005) has written, young people from racialised minority communities have certain navigational, aspirational and resistant resources, which derive from their diverse backgrounds and positions in primarily white societies (Yosso 2005). It has similarities with the narration of my interviewees, who have been categorised as having special educational needs, in how the practices of special needs education have restricted their educational choice-making but also offered them some navigational and resistant resources (see also Niemi and Miettola 2017). The educational paths of young adults categorised as having special educational needs generally include numerous negotiations and official meetings with professional adults in which the students have to bring up and talk about their ‘needs’, which differ from the expected norm of the student (see, for example, Honkasilta 2019, 15). This also occurred during the ethnographic fieldwork in the interviewees’ upper secondary schools. For Larry, having been categorised as a student with special educational needs has taught him how to navigate the web of support systems, and he did not avoid admitting his need for support or asking for help, as he explains in his last interview below concerning his previous work experience:

*Larry: It went wrong, so to speak. It went a bit worse. It didn't really work out there, guidance and so on. Like, their jobs didn't work out well.*

*Interviewer: What do you mean? Tell me more about that; it's interesting.*

*Larry: Well, it was that I'd been there just a short time and then the guy with whom I worked went on holiday, and then, because I'd only been there a short time, I didn't know anything about the unit properly. So then you're*

*left alone in that big unit. That doesn't really work, so it wasn't necessarily the best start [...] If I'd been going to work in a kiosk, then there would have been a certain period of time to learn the work tasks. It might have been a week or so when you're advised, hands-on. And you're advised every time. Even if you've done it three months, they still advise you. But (in his previous job) there, it was a week. After that, I was supposed to work by myself.*

*Interviewer: That's interesting. Actually, I think that we talked about it in the last interview, that your boss was aware of your special needs.*

*Larry: Yeah, yeah. They were informed; I had informed them myself. And I'd brought a statement from a medical doctor and other (papers) concerning the issue. That I have a kind of (a need) that may hinder it (the work).*

As evident in Larry's narration concerning his previous employer, not all opportunities are available to young adults 'like him', as the opportunity structures restricted by the education system and labour market form different frameworks for different young adults to make their choices (Dale and Parreira do Amaral 2015; Kalalahti et al. 2020). This links interestingly to both the self-governing discourse and the discourse on 'the need for support': It is about a student who is essentially in need of special support and, because of this, cannot be fully responsible for his choice-making (see Youdell 2006b; Niemi and Mietola 2017). Instead of blaming himself, Larry, in his narration, drew on a wider social explanation, the lack of support practices and the employer's failure to understand an employee who has special needs. The way he looked at the wider structures seemed to be a resource that he could utilise in making sense of his agency (see Yosso 2005) when understanding the act of becoming employed and not only as a question of young adults' own responsibility in taking care of their employability (see Nikunen 2021).

In relation to social relations, all the interviewees, particularly Aida, Chien, Farah, Levi, Noor and Viola, highlighted the importance of family in decision-making and in sharing their experiences of life overall. Chris' and Viola's families had a relatively low income and in his latest interview, Chris narrated how the changes in his family's living conditions had felt when his primary parent had lost her job and his friend had simultaneously experienced homelessness and temporarily lived at Chris':

*It took a pretty long time for my mum to get a new job and for a very long time I had to earn a living and support her, with my money, because she didn't get any benefits at that time or, she was in some waiting period or something, and it was also hard because you had to think about financial issues, that you couldn't spend your money on yourself, but you had to use it on your parent. But in a way, I did it gladly because she had looked after me for 20 years, so there wasn't anything strange in it [...] Yeah, in a way, (I have had) a very eventful year. It hasn't been the best year, but here I am. There were many hard experiences and it wasn't easy at the beginning; my friend moved in to live with us and all that. It wasn't that pleasant, but you had to help a friend in need.*

Although the young adults narrated their future primarily on the basis of their hopes and aspirations by disengaging themselves from social categorisations (social class, race/ ethnicity, special educational needs), as in Chris' most recent interview, it was obvious how family background and, like in this example, financial problems and responsibility for the economic well-being of one's family shape their agency (see Lahelma and Gordon 2008; Baker 2019). For Chris, these experiences clearly showed that, in contrast to what the self-governing discourse states, it is not always possible 'to own your decisions'. Viola also stated that '*it's just our bad financial situation that has taught me that I always have to think about how I spend my money*'. I argue that although not necessarily financial, the support and presence of the family, friends and other social relations and contexts seem to be central in these young adults' early adulthoods, especially when facing difficult times (see Lahelma and Gordon 2008). In the interviewees' narration, sense of communality appears to strengthen the feeling that one can orient towards the near future, and it becomes an important resource for supporting their agency (see Aaltonen 2013).

## Concluding Remarks

Considering the methodological point of view of longitudinal, life historical research, as the interviewees and I have become acquainted with each other better, the interview narrations have deepened and taken on new dimensions with each interview. It also seems that annual meetings have strengthened mutual confidence, which becomes evident in both the durations of the interviews, which have lengthened, and in the topics and ways to narrate that have become more personal, critical and numerous. I am aware that my position as a white able-bodied woman working at a university and the positions of these young interviewees are distinctively positioned in terms of power relations. For that reason, I tried to raise the questions concerning power relations between the researcher and the interviewee every time the topic somehow appeared during the interviews. I also argue that the longitudinal research process seems to enhance dialogicality and shape the interview situations to become more equal given that, in the longitudinal process, I as a researcher have also been exposed to various unexpected turns in relation to narration and the topics of conversation (Holmberg and Niemi 2019, 11; Renold et al. 2008; Kohler Riessman 2008). While I conducted this study, I have aimed to open spaces for young adults to narrate their lives and for me to stay mostly in the position of appreciative listener and interlocutor (see Renold et al. 2008). In this article, through careful analysis, my aim has been to bring out how the interviewees narrate their life course in relation to the self-governing discourse, social relations and life contexts, and how they interpret their agency in longitudinal interview narration in relation to their life experiences and future expectations.

I started the analysis from the notion that the young adults process their choices and understanding of themselves in relation to the dominant self-governing discourse, which evidently touches the spheres of their lives (see, for example, Bansel 2015; Souto-Manning 2014). In spite of the fact that the interviewees have encountered various kinds of societal inequality during their lives, they still first drew on

this individualising discourse to explain their experiences, events and life episodes (see Cahill and Cook 2019). However, after I meet the research participants several times, their approaches to their life circumstances and the way in which their agency emerges become more diverse. My notion is that the further we have gone in the chain of each young adults' interviews, the more they raise the critical notions concerning, for instance, racism and school- and work-related structural problems, and overall, their viewpoint moves from an individualised towards a more societally aware perspective (see also Aaltonen 2013). In addition to the familiarity with me as a researcher, this turn in narration seemed to happen because they had graduated and faced the insecurities and inequalities of working life or because they did not follow the so-called normative educational path, with its smooth transitions.

I claim that the interviewees, *firstly*, make sense of themselves within the self-governing discourse, especially when talking about the future. *Secondly*, they also distance themselves from that discourse by attaching themselves to social and religious relations (family, close friends, religion) and by recognising structure-level inequalities, especially when talking about the present and the past. My argument is that, on the one hand, leaning on the self-governing discourse, the interviewees can ostensibly foster their agency by relying on themselves when facing the insecurity of the future. On the other hand, this discourse hides the structural, societal aspects that possibly set obstacles in their way in society, which the interviewees have recognised, especially when narrating their past. I interpret this as the reason why they look at the past 'I' more gently and with more understanding, and as attached to their own societal position.

Based on the results that I have presented above, the most important conclusions of this article are that the interviewees break away from an individualised can-do narrative; yet positioning themselves in that narrative, they question it by narrating themselves and their lives so that they also take into account different societal practices and barriers that shape their agency (cf. Cahill and Cook 2019; Blomborg and Börjesson 2013). It seems that recognising their own position in the school system and in wider society helped them understand possible difficulties along the way and to consequently be more understanding towards themselves and others. I argue that in their narration, the research participants moved between individual and social dimensions when making sense of themselves and their agency (see also Baker 2019), and the social dimensions were especially visible when they narrated the past. The motion between individual and social dimensions enabled their agency in situations where their lives are circumscribed by various kinds of barriers—such as financial problems, racism or discrimination in the workplace or school. Considering agency and societal inequalities and categorisations either resourcing or restricting agency, it seems that some aspects—in the case of this study, disability, race/ ethnicity and religion—are troubled in some contexts but not in others. Consequently, this may *offer* resources that support agency in the form of consolidating awareness of one's societal position and rights to receive support/equal treatment *and restrict* agency through labelling and discrimination (Mirza and Meeto 2017; Niemi and Mietola 2017).

In relation to the general concern in public discussion but also in education policy concerning young people with migrant or special education backgrounds which I



referred to earlier in this article, it is noteworthy that the young adults in this study envisaged their future as bright and emphasised the significance of the different resources they had. All of them had a community—family, extended family, circle of friends or religious community—that somehow surrounded and supported them. I argue that the different dimensions of communality (family, friends, religion) and understanding of societal inequalities (racism, position of disabled people in the labour market) worked as resources and hence supported agency and helped these young adults avoid blaming themselves for setbacks (see Aaltonen 2013). To conclude, my analysis shows that discursive and relational agency also becomes defined by attachments to and dependence on others, as well as by the resources that these attachments enable.

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## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** The study was performed in accordance with the ethical standards as laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments or comparable ethical standards. The informed consent has been taken into account through the research process and the consent has been re-negotiated with the interviewees every time when the annual interviews have taken a place. The original ethnographic study was approved by the appropriate institutional research approval processes in which the informed consent and the approval to conduct research in the schools in question have been given appropriately.

**Conflict of Interest** The corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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