

A need to be recognised: On the importance of shared semantics for young adults while not in education or employment

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journals.sagepub.com/home/asj**Vesa Välimäki** 

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Sanna Aaltonen 

Department of Social Sciences, University of Eastern Finland, Kuopio, Finland

Päivi Honkatukia

Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere, Finland

Abstract

Young adults who are not in education or work are often depicted as deviating from the norm of gainful employment that is still widely shared across the Nordic countries. While it has been argued that young adults feel that they are being blamed for their NEET situation, this article seeks to identify the variety of interpretations they have of their situation and what kind of explanations can be proposed for the differences. Theoretically, perspectives from Axel Honneth's recognition theory are combined with Thomas Scheff's sociological work on shame to discuss the variations in the sentiments of young adults. Based on this framework, the article illuminates how young adults use the shared semantics available within their immediate circles to enable them to feel worthy of recognition despite their depicted deviation from the norm of gainful employment. Additionally, the article contributes to sociological debates on Honneth's recognition theory – especially its ambiguous concept of shared semantics – by making sense of the role of communities and institutions as providers of shared semantics. The findings are based on an abductive analysis of 35 in-depth interviews with young Finnish adults aged 18–29 who have been or are currently outside of education or employment.

Keywords

NEET, recognition, shared semantics, shame, unemployment

Corresponding Author:

Vesa Välimäki, Faculty of Social Sciences, Tampere University, Tampere 33014, Finland.

Email: vesa.valimaki@tuni.fi

Introduction

Young adults who share a non-normative position in relation to paid work and formal education have long been a major policy issue across the Nordic countries. According to the OECD (2022), NEET (young adults not in education, employment or training) percentages have mostly remained above 10% in Finland and Denmark and under 10% in Iceland, Norway and Sweden for the last 10 years. Since the economic downturn of 2007–2009, concern about the NEET situation has intensified, resulting in a significant shift in the Nordic policy on youth transitions to adulthood towards more active measures to get young adults back into education or employment. As a part of this European trend (Holte, 2018), several researchers have argued that, by emphasising the responsibility of young adults for the success of their transition to further education and working life, the Nordic youth transition policy has become more individualizing than before (Brunila and Lundahl, 2020; Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019). In their discursive analysis of European youth policy, Mertanen et al. (2020) have found a stronger focus on young adults' own skills than on structural explanations for their unemployment, which can increase the pressure on young adults to interpret their situation more as a personal disgrace than as a structural problem (see also Peterie et al., 2019). Despite the responsabilisation discourse, young adults' appreciation of gainful employment has remained constant in Finland (Hirvilammi et al., 2019; Pyöriä et al., 2017).

While it has been argued that youth activation policies can shift responsibility for personal futures to the shoulders of individuals, this article seeks to identify the variety of interpretations young adults have of their situation when out of work and education, and, as recent research has shown, not all blame themselves for their situation (Buffel et al., 2017; Clark et al., 2010; Heggebø and Elstad, 2018; Pultz, 2018; Sharone, 2013). Buffel et al. (2017) have proposed that if the unemployed can interpret their condition as being a result of structural factors (such as workplace closure), unemployment does not affect self-interpretations as negatively as when it is regarded as a personal shortcoming. This can also be the case during high regional unemployment, when it is easier for the unemployed to blame exterior forces for their redundancy (Clark et al., 2010; see also Heggebø and Elstad, 2018). More broadly, Sharone (2013) has pointed out that differences in structural conditions can lead to varying subjective responses to unemployment: while Israelis, for example, tend to blame the system, the structural constraints determining a job search are less visible to Americans, who are more prone to blame themselves. Pultz (2018), studying young adults' feelings of shame because of their unemployment, has found that some can alleviate it by assigning the stigma to other unemployed people and not identifying themselves as in the same category.

Overall, it seems that not being in education or employment affects people differently depending on how they interpret their situation. Hence, the research gap to which this article contributes is the issue of how this variation can be explained. From this perspective, this article asks: how do young adults interpret their situation when they are outside of education and employment? What kind of variation can be identified in their interpretations, and how can these differences be explained? To provide answers for these questions, this article utilises Axel Honneth's recognition theory and especially its concept of shared semantics. The latter is augmented by Thomas Scheff's sociological insights on shame, because Honneth's usage lacks a vision of how individuals come to adopt certain shared semantics. Thus, this article has a two-fold contribution. Firstly, it illuminates how not all young adults blame themselves for their NEET situation by clarifying the importance of shared semantics and their links to the role of institutions and communities as providers of alternative semantic frameworks for not being in education and employment. Secondly, it clarifies Honneth's ambiguous theoretical concept by offering a sociological focus on communities and institutions as providers of shared semantics.

The article is divided into two main parts. In the first, it is argued that Honneth's recognition theory in combination with Scheff's sociological focus on shame provides an insightful theoretical frame for analysing how young adults interpret their situation. In the second section, the resulting theoretical perspective is applied to empirical data drawn from interviews with 35 young Finnish adults who have been or

are currently outside of education or employment. With the help of abductive reasoning, their interpretations are examined in light of the research questions presented above.

Honneth's recognition theory and feelings of shame

The central thesis of Honneth's recognition theory is the Hegelian idea that developing and maintaining a positive view of the self depends on forms of mutual recognition (Honneth, 1995; Zurn, 2015: 6). While recognition theory concentrates on three forms of mutual recognition (love, respect and social esteem) that are seen as important to individuals' views of themselves, it is social esteem which is crucial when studying the relationship between self-perceptions and young adults' position in the labour market (Honneth, 2010; Jütten, 2017). Social esteem is defined here as the recognition of a person's capacities to realise culturally defined values, and their subsequent achievements; it is an important part of allowing individuals to interpret themselves as different from others and positively valued (Honneth, 1995: 125). For young adults who are not seen as worthy of social esteem because they are outside of education or paid work, the problem is a structural one: they have been deprived of the mutual recognition taking place in the labour market, which is where individuals recognise each other as important contributors to the common good (Honneth, 2010; see also Smith, 2012: 95–96). From this perspective, young adults are motivated to participate in the labour market and formal education because it is in the context of these institutions that they can feel themselves fulfilling their roles as productive and useful members of society. On the other hand, young adults who are not in education or employment deviate from norms of gainful employment, a situation that can injure their self-interpretations (Honneth, 1995: 131–132), and also make it a struggle to frame themselves as worthy of social esteem in the eyes of other people (Jahoda, 1982: 24–25).

In recognition theory terms, these common experiences of being somehow disgraced by NEET status are a form of disrespect. For the young adults themselves, however, the experiences produce different affective reactions depending on how they interpret their situation (see Honneth, 1995: 163–164). As Peterie et al. (2019) have demonstrated, being unemployed can be a source of anger that is then directed towards a system which is seen as causing it, but it can also give rise to feelings of shame if unemployment is perceived as a personal shortcoming. In order to explore this variation in greater depth, it is important to study the interpretations of young adults themselves and how they link to the semantics they share with a broader population. Shared semantics, in this context, refer to the 'semantic bridges' that young adults can use to interpret their private experiences of shame as the result of larger social processes to which other people are also subject (Honneth, 1995: 163–164; Thompson, 2006: 163); these are made available and plausible on the basis of various temporal, situational and volatile societal factors. Mass unemployment, for example, can provide the unemployed with a shared language of interpretation that they can use in a plausible manner to enable them to dilute negative feelings by extending their situation to include other individuals as well. In contrast, without shared semantics which draw on causes outside of the individual, unemployment can be understood more as a personal failure than as a structural problem, thereby inducing feelings of shame.

With the aid of shared semantics, young adults can reflect on their situation and the possible feelings of shame that it induces, and realise that they are 'being illegitimately denied social recognition' (Honneth, 1995: 136). However, several authors (Houston, 2016; Pilapil, 2013; Thompson, 2006) have criticised Honneth for being too ambiguous and naive about the links between hurt feelings, shared semantics and social struggles for recognition. While Honneth (1995: 137–138) interprets feelings of shame as a motivation for individuals to engage in social struggle for recognition, should they adopt the intersubjective framework of shared semantics encouraging such behaviour, he has not been clear about the process whereby such adoption takes place (Houston, 2016: 13–14; Pilapil, 2013: 54–58; Thompson, 2006: 171–177). Houston (2016: 5) claims that Honneth has a central gap in his model which is the assumption that 'experiences of disrespect, engendering the emotion of shame, lead ipso facto to social struggle aimed at seeking withheld recognition'.

In this article, Honneth's recognition theory is elaborated by accommodating Scheff's sociological insights on shame (see also Houston, 2016: 13–19). For Scheff (2000: 96–97), feelings of shame should not be understood within an individualistic, asocial framework, but be regarded as feelings of rejection, failure and inadequacy that signal to individuals that their social bonds are threatened, linked to perceptions that they are negatively evaluated by others. In other words, Scheff (2000: 95) perceives shame as a response to the threat of disconnection from others. With Scheff's insights on shame, it is suggested that the adoption of shared semantics can be further illuminated from the perspective of how young adults perceive the plausibility of circulating semantic framings to their own specific social context: is this particular interpretation of the NEET situation plausible for me to accept in this context? Augmenting Honneth's view, Scheff's theory of shame focuses analysis on how the social context, whether their community or its institutions, can help young adults to reflect on their NEET situation with or without language that can induce feelings of shame in them. In one social context, deviation from the gainful employment model can be seen as shameful whereas, in others, shared semantics can help young adults to understand that it is not (altogether) their own fault. In this article, therefore, we seek to clarify the importance of communities and institutions as providers of shared semantics.

Combining Scheff's insights with Honneth's recognition theory presents the following orientating theoretical framework for analysis: to be proud of oneself, one must feel adequately recognised in one's community. Young adults who are not in education or employment, however, may perceive themselves as deviating from normative understandings of young adulthood as an important transition period, often accompanied by education, leading into gainful employment; feeling negatively evaluated as a result, they may experience shame. Yet, depending on their participation in different communities and institutions, young adults can adopt shared semantics that aid them in their struggle to interpret themselves in a language that does not induce shame. Thus, our analysis attempts to explore how young adults interpret their situation of being outside of education and employment. What kind of variation in response is displayed among them, and how can the differences be explained?

Methodology

The data used in the article consist of 35 in-depth interviews which were conducted between 2018 and 2019 with young adults from NEET backgrounds.¹ The interviewees were recruited from four different regions of Finland with the help of Finnish outreach youth workers. Interviews lasted two hours on average and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. The young adults were aged between 18 and 29 at the time of the interviews, with a mean age of 24.² Two thirds of them identified as male or female while another third identified as sexual and gender minorities.³ All had contact with the Finnish youth services. Although all had a recent background of being outside of education and employment, and were in this category when invited to the interviews, variation in their circumstances had occurred in the interim and a couple of interviewees had recently found employment or started studying. The analysis presented in this article, however, focused on their current or previous 'inactive' experiences. Around half of the interviewees reported having completed upper secondary education after the compulsory nine-year period of Finnish comprehensive schooling.

The interviewer used a semi-structured interview style with a similar set of open-ended questions in every interview, exploring well-being, previous experiences with employment and education, hobbies and free time, social relationships, understandings of the position the interviewees have in Finnish society, and whether they feel valued and accepted in their daily lives. The following analysis concentrates especially on the young adults' reflections (prompted by the interviewer) on whether they feel valued within their communities and in Finnish society as a whole. It is assumed that this self-reflection provides insights into how young adults think about themselves and how they interpret they are perceived within their social context.

Processing the data was inspired by abductive analysis (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014), the goal being threefold: to make sense of how young adults interpret their situation when they are outside of

education and employment, to examine the variation between their interpretations and to suggest how the differences can be explained. In abductive analysis, the role of theoretical knowledge is to prompt further understanding through deep engagement with the data (Tavory and Timmermans, 2014) which, in this case, provided opportunities to delve deeply into the linkages between feelings of shame and shared semantics. Four broader positions on how young adults related to and interpreted their NEET situation were identified (presented below) by paying close attention to feelings of shame. The analytical process consisted of multiple close readings of the data and writing interpretative summaries of every interview. As people tend to leave their feelings of shame unacknowledged or non-verbalised (see Scheff, 2014), and there were no explicit questions dealing with shame in the interviews, the chosen analytical strategy was to scrutinise a range of terms used by the interviewees about themselves that are usually related to feelings of shame (see Chase and Walker, 2013: 743; Retzinger, 1995; Scheff, 2014). These included describing oneself as a failure or worthless, a loser, stupid, incapable, a bad example to others or as being part of the ‘dregs of society’.

Findings

The findings are structured to four different positions on how young adults relate to not being either in education or employment. These positions vary but may overlap in a single interview. First, it is shown that there is a tendency to interpret the NEET situation as a personal failure, and to describe it with words related to feelings of shame. In the last three sections, however, it is pointed out that such feelings are not an inevitable outcome of not being in education or employment. The way that young adults can come to adopt certain shared semantics within their communities and institutions is illuminated, along with how this affects their interpretation.

Internalizing fault: am I a failure?

It is not the non-normative position itself that is shameful for young adults; rather, it is the perception that they are responsible for their situation and to blame for it. This sense of failure, regarded here as concomitant with feelings of shame, was a common position the interviewees adopted when explaining their setbacks (such as dropping out of formal education or failing to find work) on the basis of internal attributes, particularly an inability to succeed in these institutions. One interviewee, after observing that they have had thoughts of giving up due to rejections from educational institutions and the labour market, questioned whether they would ever be able to fulfil normative expectations in these fields, adding, ‘I often start to wonder whether I am just not good enough’. Similar accounts of being ashamed of personal shortcomings were also apparent when the young adults blamed themselves for making ‘stupid choices’: for being addicted to drugs, for example, or for not having paid enough attention at school. These experiences were usually described with a range of words related to feelings of shame, such as seeing oneself as inferior or incapable in comparison to others.

This was also seen in how they often searched for introspective solutions to their current situation. They talked about wanting to ‘fix themselves’ before attempting further education or job hunting (see also Aaltonen et al., 2017) because they have had so many negative experiences of not being able to perform in those fields. Therapy was often sought as a means of finding time to recover and make changes for the better (see also Silva, 2012). The following extract is but one example of how the interviewees did not seek to ‘shift the blame’ to society or any other external factors (Stavrova et al., 2011: 169), but, rather, saw themselves as responsible for their situation.

Interviewee: But I don’t feel that society treats me as an inferior.

Interviewer: You don’t feel like that?

Interviewee: I don’t feel that I’m treated as such, but I feel that I am.

Interviewer: You feel that you are.

Interviewee: Exactly, there’s the difference.

When young adults blame themselves in this way it would indicate that they have not accessed or adopted shared semantics that would help to lead them away from interpreting themselves as somehow ‘flawed’, that something is wrong with them. These interpretations are produced by their feeling that they are inadequate in relation to the normative standards, a shame-inducing conclusion that is prompted by their experiences of failure and being rejected from the education and labour markets.

It could also be that constant comparison with the normative standards can explain why some young adults, even though they perceived themselves as making progress, still felt humiliated by their current NEET situation, and the sense that they had failed in some way despite moving towards employment. The adversities they have had to endure are experienced as a burden because they interpret them to mean that they are, in normative terms, behind their close peers. This view can be seen in the next excerpt:

I’ve always felt that I’m kind of a loser. I’ve not been ... well now I’ve been able to graduate, but I’ve not performed very well in schools and I’ve been unemployed ... well actually now I’m employed ... and I’ve been always comparing myself to my siblings who have their families, cars, their own apartments and jobs, while I am living in the apartment my parents own so I don’t even have to pay the full rent and my parent helps me with my groceries and personal finances. I don’t know, somehow I’ve always felt like a loser because of those things. But on the other hand, I’m now employed and there is more work I will be able to get. And I was able to graduate at last. I don’t know what’s wrong now (laughing).

Here the young adult recounts (even if laughingly) how they have a new job and have just graduated but, in an ambivalent way, still feel like a ‘loser’. Despite the mildly ironic tone in their talk, it becomes apparent that the young adult is comparing themselves to their siblings whom they think have been quicker at fulfilling normative expectations, a comparison that is inhibiting them despite the progress they have made. Feelings of shame are being induced by the normative standards which the young adult constantly feels unable to reach through their own fault.

It is important to stress here that research has found that most young people who are not in employment or education are making the transition to adulthood under socioeconomic disadvantage (Järvinen, 2020; Pitkänen et al., 2021). Similar underprivileged backgrounds were also evident among the interviewees in this study. Yet, despite having come from a background containing multiple social problems, some still blamed themselves, for example, for not having seen the value of education when they were younger. Furthermore, familial socioeconomic disadvantage was often combined with adverse childhood and adolescence experiences, such as school bullying. The perspective taken in this study (Honneth, 1995: 163–164) suggests that young adults feel ashamed because they lack the shared semantics with which to frame themselves as worthy of social esteem. Not having reached the goal of gainful employment, they seek to explain why, yet without the semantic bridge to frame matters in a way that would help them to interpret their hurt feelings as resulting from larger social processes to which other people are subject as well. The most common forms of misrecognition in contemporary society, as Andrew Sayer (2011, 87) has argued, is the interpretation that individual success is dependent mostly on individuals’ own effort and intelligence, and not structural inequalities such as the young adults describe next.

Externalizing fault: an external problem?

While constant comparison with other people in education or employment can induce feelings of failure, such comparison can also allow young adults who are not in education or employment to feel that they are not to blame, that finding reasons for failure within themselves is not the only option. In other words, some communities and institutions can supply them with specific shared semantics which enable the interpretation that an unfavourable social position is the result of externalities, thus alleviating feelings of shame (see also Lamont et al., 2013). This section demonstrates that the existence of specific shared semantics can enable ‘personal experiences of disappointment to be interpreted as something

affecting not just the individual himself or herself but also a circle of many other subjects' (Honneth, 1995: 163–164).

While some of the interviewees struggled to acknowledge their position as other than one of personal failure, others interpreted it as caused by structural factors such as regional unemployment. For example, one interviewee, graduating shortly after the financial crisis of 2007–08, observed that only a couple of their classmates had secured a job. It is argued here that these kinds of social circumstances can aid young adults by enabling them to reflect that they are not the only ones who are unemployed. They have friends and relatives occupying similar positions outside of education and the labour market. In this sense, young adults' close peer groups can make it easier for them to adopt shared semantics emphasising external reasons for their non-normative situation. There are fewer reasons for self-blame when they can feel that they are not the only ones deviating greatly from normative expectations.

The young adults' ability to reflect on whether to attribute their NEET situation to internal or external factors can be seen as crucial to their social esteem. Social circumstances matter because they offer the young adults a way to acknowledge that they are not the only ones who are out of work and not in education. Should their peers share a similar position, there is less need to explain it on the basis of individual qualities. This clarifies why some young adults noted that they felt more comfortable in the youth services' milieu where everyone shared the same stigmatised status, than in more public settings, where they felt they were 'not normal'. As one interviewee said of comparing themselves with others and the feelings of shame that ensue:

Perhaps it is more my feeling that I'm different and that I have these problems. And there's also [the fact] that others are in school or working, and they have their relationships, some even have kids ... that others are kind of living a normal life while I don't have many of these normal things.

While comparison to their working or studying peers can make young adults feel like outcasts, institutions such as youth workshops for the young and unemployed can help them see that they are not the only ones who are outside of education or employment in their peer group. In this sense, youth services can supply young adults with shared semantics that reduce their feelings of shame because of their situation.

Adverse life-course events formed another source of shared semantics which enabled the research interviewees to find reasons for their situation somewhere other than in themselves. This was evident when they argued that their previous experiences had negatively influenced their life course. Here, institutions such as the media, youth services and other support groups for disadvantaged youth are important, as within these institutions young adults can encounter shared semantics that help them to interpret their situation without self-blame. For example, several interviewees claimed that bullying at their comprehensive school had affected their sense of self and, thus, their social behaviour. While a history of being bullied can, in itself, induce feelings of shame, it seemed also to help young adults to interpret their position as not being caused by their actions alone. In Finland, there has been abundant discussion about bullying, which has been a major societal concern for several decades. More recently, learning difficulties and diagnoses such as ADHD have also been intensively discussed. These public discussions provide young people with shared semantics through which they are able to explain their non-normative situations in relation to education and working life. Moreover, some interviewees found reasons for their current situation in the treatment they had received in educational institutions and from the authorities, as they felt that their learning difficulties or mental health problems were bypassed or ignored when they were underage. Some also used their disadvantaged social background and 'difficult life' as an explanation for their life situation, as in the following excerpt:

Interviewer: Did you have a good childhood and adolescence [in the foster home]?

Interviewee: (laughing) Seriously? Not at all, no. Without sounding too boastful, I've been able to survive better than others. Honestly. I didn't have a good childhood or youth, not at all. The first foster home was a hell and after that [before going to

school] I went to another foster home, and after turning 18 I started to live alone. So, no way, life has not been easy for me. But, well, if anything, it has taught me and developed me into what I am nowadays.

The above extracts make it apparent how shared semantics related to economical upheavals, difficult life-course experiences or a disadvantaged societal position aid young adults to perceive their situation in the broader picture and help them to understand that they are not solely responsible for it; hence, these framings are crucial to reducing or alleviating feelings of shame. Indeed, as the above quote shows, when young adults can interpret their situation by using shared semantics reducing individual responsibility, it may even allow them to feel proud of themselves for having overcome diverse obstacles and learned from them.

Thus, the availability of, and access to these shared semantics might help young adults not only to use their adverse life-course experiences or disadvantageous backgrounds as explanations for their non-normative situation, but also provide them with strength and a source of pride. The role of communities such as youth groups, and institutions such as the media or youth services, is important in providing such shared semantics, which can support young people in identifying and analysing the influence of external forces on their lives (see also Sharone and Vasquez, 2017).

Minimizing the problem: a temporary situation?

At the same time as young adults are required to take more responsibility for their decisions regarding further education and employment, their transitions have become more uncertain and fragmented and youth unemployment more prevalent (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). Under such circumstances, a temporary period spent outside of education or the labour market can appear as a normal phase of young adulthood; however, young adults may not always see that their situation is dynamic and unstable because of the changes in the societal arrangements that define transitions. Therefore, they need shared semantics to interpret their situation as temporary and changeable, and for this to happen, they need institutions that help them.

Based on the interviewees' accounts, there is a certain ambivalence about 'seeing oneself as a failure' and 'seeing oneself as temporarily inactive', illuminated by the narrative of one young adult who first described how proud they were when they got an apprenticeship for a job they liked. However, after about four months they noticed that the apprenticeship was too demanding and involved too much responsibility. After some time, they were laid off. This chain of events caused self-blame and, to use the young adult's own words, depression; they felt that they had failed even though they had tried to do their best. Later in the interview, they mentioned that therapy had helped to deal with these negative thought processes, and, with help, they had been able to re-think and change the idea of themselves as a 'lousy person', adding that settling into a new city and becoming involved in youth services had helped them move forward in life. The story illustrates how interpretations of oneself as a failure can change; the positions that young adults take towards their NEET situation fluctuate and vary over time. The meaning of life events, social relations and institutional encounters, such as those in therapy or youth services, can help young adults who are not in education or employment to relate to their situation as only temporary, creating hope and better future horizons, and, hence, reason to move on from self-identification as 'deeply flawed'.

Thus, to avoid feelings of shame, it is important that shared semantics alleviating shame are available to young adults. These kinds of shared semantics allow those who feel they can still succeed in the labour market in the future to perceive that they are not deviating too much from the norm of gainful employment, that they are still 'in the game'. On the other hand, as Clark et al. (2010: 53) argue, those who perceive their re-employment prospects to be poor may be more prone to the social-norm effect of unemployment. One important factor could lie in being able to explain to oneself and others that one

will be valuable to other members of society (Honneth, 1995: 128), that there will be opportunities to move on from one's situation in the future. This is aptly illustrated in the following excerpt:

I think I'm scrounging a little, but not too much. To be honest, I don't think I'm scrounging at all but I'm receiving from society more than I give back because I don't do so much work here [youth workshop for the unemployed]. At the moment I'm here one day per week, and that is because I've time to study and help at home, but I think that is the situation at the moment. ... At the moment I'm receiving a little more from the society than I'm giving back, but it will stabilise after I start studying and then I will start to give more and more to society. And after I graduate and am employed, I can give a lot to society.

Here the interviewee specifically notes that they are currently 'receiving more from society than giving to it'. The interviewee goes on to explain, however, that this will change in the future when they go to the university and ultimately find employment in an occupation whose social worth is widely acknowledged. Thus, the interviewee can interpret their situation as a temporary phase, thereby avoiding feelings of being ashamed of it. Youth services and other social institutions can provide young adults with these kinds of semantic bridges that can help them to interpret their non-normative situations as only temporary and provide them with the terminology to identify and describe a path towards education and employment.

Interestingly, most of the interviewees distanced themselves from those whom they see as not even trying to fulfil normative expectations, such as being 'passive' while unemployed (see also Chase and Walker, 2013: 750–752; Lamont et al., 2016; Pultz, 2018). For example, one of the interviewees stressed that their being outside of paid work and formal education was their own choice and part of their plans, explaining that that they were socially active. Further, they specifically said they do not want to be perceived as passive, as someone who just lies on the bed. Therefore, it is interesting that the interviewee later mentioned that this narrative – 'unemployment is part of my plans' – was also motivated by their wanting other people to interpret their unemployment in that way. Thus, it is clearly important for some young adults to be able to explain to themselves and others that they are trying to move towards the trajectory of young adulthood which is regarded as normal, or at least have plans to do so, to avoid feelings of shame. While they are not currently adhering to the normative ideals of gainful employment, they envisage that they will in the future.

To interpret their situation as only temporary, they need access to shared semantics that present this interpretation as plausible, which, as discussed above, can be supported by their communities and institutions such as youth services and therapy. These provide them with the resources to identify and describe paths towards education and employment by providing help and opportunities to move forward; they also help young adults to normalise their situation, highlighting that being temporarily outside of education and employment is a more common part of young adulthood than it has been before (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007). These kinds of shared semantics offer young adults the possibility to maintain positive self-conceptions during their time in a situation which can be interpreted as non-normative. In other words, if young adults can maintain the optimism to perceive themselves as employable, it removes some of the burden of their current situation, allowing it to be interpreted as fixable and temporary.

Questioning the problem: not a huge deal?

While young adults may diverge from normative modes of contributing to the common good by integrating to working life and, thus, struggle with presenting themselves as worthy of social esteem, alternative strategies for interpreting their situation can help young adults to view themselves as valuable and maintain their sense of social worth. These shared semantics can even bring the normative aspect of gainful employment into question and possibly offer alternative ways of belonging to society.

In all the examples discussed below, the interviewees had found acceptable ways of contributing to their communities that did not involve waged employment. One way that was mentioned was helping

family members: by taking care of their sibling's kids, for example. Another was voluntary work; one interviewee shared that they did yard work for their grandparents and found it very rewarding, while another collected scrap with a close relative. A couple of young adults described how taking care of animals brought meaningfulness to their lives, while yet others appreciated that they had friends to whom they felt they were valuable (see also Heikkinen, 2000). Even though most of these alternative pastimes can hardly be regarded as external reasons for not being in education or employment, they allow young adults to feel that they have a specific and valuable role in their communities, one which provides them with recognition for achievements outside of education and employment. With the help of this recognition, young adults can make their non-normative situation feel more socially acceptable, which can help them to maintain their sense of social worth.

A couple of research participants questioned the norm of gainful employment altogether, using shared semantics within their social circles that helped them to formulate alternative interpretations for their situation. One interviewee, who was active in their personal cultural circles, interpreted their situation as one of living on 'another island' from which they were watching 'Finnish society'. They were not criticising work itself but the fact that their work (cultural and voluntary work) was not appreciated by 'the mainland', that is, Finnish society. It is significant here that, besides the recognition gained from sources other than employment, this interviewee was the only one to describe their unemployment as a social stigma. Yet they were able to challenge the norm of gainful employment and hence reject the self-shaming induced by the stigma (Honneth, 2010: 223–224); rather, they accused 'media and society' of attaching blame to an individual of being unemployed.

Well, I guess, on the whole, I would like to be respected at the societal level. I'm pretty pissed about how the unemployed and those who are not very educated are treated in the Finnish media and society. There seems to be a very strong social stigma which is a real pity ...

As this interviewee suggested, not being in education or employment might not need to be so stigmatising for those who share other important roles in their communities and can find alternative ways of being an active part of them. With the aid of close friends and community support, some young adults challenge the social norm to work, and seek alternative ways of belonging to society (see also Honneth, 2004: 362).

Discussion and conclusion

This article investigates young adults' subjective responses to not being in education or employment. While previous research on young adults in this situation has found that there is pressure on them to interpret their situation more as a personal disgrace than a structural problem (Brunila and Lundahl, 2020; Helms Jørgensen et al., 2019), this study was interested in the variation between young adults' interpretations in this respect. By clarifying the importance of shared semantics and the role of institutions and communities as providers of alternative semantic frameworks which challenge individualistic explanations of the NEET situation, the study's findings highlight that not all young adults blame themselves for not being in education or employment.

In addition to self-blame, the analysis identifies three different positions that young adults use to interpret their situation: that it is caused by external forces; that it is temporary; or that it is not something of which they should be ashamed at all. To facilitate these alternative interpretations, young adults need communities and institutions to adopt semantic frames that help them to see themselves as worthy of recognition in their own social context (Honneth, 1995; Scheff, 2000), and that help them to interpret their NEET situation as something which is the result of larger social processes to which other people are also subject (Honneth, 1995: 163–164). The findings illuminate how being surrounded by peers who are similarly outside of education and working life can help young adults to see that they are not alone in their situation, which can alleviate feelings of shame. Moreover, certain accounts provided by youth services

or the media can help young adults to interpret their NEET situation as caused not by themselves but by factors related to a disadvantaged social background, (undiagnosed) learning difficulties or adverse life-course events such as school bullying. Further, as transitions from education to employment have become more uncertain and fragmented, institutions such as youth services or therapy can aid them to consider their situation as only temporary, creating hope, the promise of better future horizons and, hence, reason to move on from self-identification as ‘deeply flawed’. Lastly, within certain communities, young adults can even access shared semantics that actually challenge the narrow conditions of mutual recognition, focused on working life integration, that put strong emphasis on only educational and work-related accomplishments.

This article valorises the importance of institutions and communities offering marginalised groups of people shared semantics that enable them to maintain an interpretation of themselves as worthy of recognition (see also Lamont et al., 2013). It explores how shared semantics come to be adopted, while also pointing out that such framings do not necessarily lead ipso facto to social struggles for recognition (Houston, 2016: 5). It illuminates how, as individuals constantly evaluate and interpret the social expectations of their social context (Scheff, 2000), they make use of the shared semantics supplied by the communities that surround them and by institutions, adopting and adapting them in ways that allow them to avoid the feelings of shame that their non-normative situation may induce. Thus, this article augments Honneth’s (1995) ambiguous concept of shared semantics with a more sociological focus on communities and institutions as providers of shared semantics that help individuals to interpret their non-normative situation in a language that does not assign sole blame to them.

Despite this article’s exploratory nature, these empirical and theoretical insights can be further utilised in studies of NEET situation. While the data used in this study highlighted the importance of communities and institutions in helping young adults, it should be acknowledged that these very same institutions can also contribute to young adults’ self-blame (see, e.g., Brunila and Lundahl, 2020). Therefore, it is vital to explore further when and how the NEET situation induces shame and how to develop institutional support that would offer young people not in employment or education the possibilities to view themselves as worthy of recognition.


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ORCID iDs

Vesa Välimäki  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8537-9686>

Sanna Aaltonen  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3977-8245>

Notes

1. This article uses qualitative data initially collected for the project *Young people not in work, education or training and their understanding of the future, democracy and public services* (Anu Gretschel & Sami Myllyniemi, see <https://www.youthresearch.fi/research-projects/thoughts-of-neet-youth>). The in-depth interviews were conducted by Senior Researcher Anu Gretschel Ph.D.
2. The Finnish Youth Act defines all those under the age of 30 as young people.

3. This does not mirror the NEET group in Finland. The Finnish outreach youth workers were asked to place a special focus on finding young adults identifying as sexual or gender minorities. We have chosen to use the pronouns they/their throughout the article to avoid making assumptions about the gender of the young adults interviewed.

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Author biographies

Vesa Välimäki is a doctoral researcher at Tampere University. He is a youth sociologist whose doctoral dissertation focuses on the social attachments and detachments of young adults who are not in education or employment.

Sanna Aaltonen is a senior lecturer at the University of Eastern Finland. She is a sociologist by discipline and her research interests include young people and marginality, youth transitions, wellbeing and qualitative methodologies. Her current research explores local responses of working-class communities to structural changes.

Päivi Honkatukia is a professor of youth research at Tampere University. She is a sociologist whose studies have concerned gendered violence and social control, youth participation and young adulthood. She leads several projects around these themes.