

# YOUTH, AGENCY AND THE POSSIBILITY OF AUTONOMY IN THE CONTEXT OF OUTREACH WORK

Tarja Juvonen

L., Soc.Sc., Doctoral Student

Finnish Academy -funded project: "Reciprocal Relationships and the Construction of Well-being during Critical Periods of Everyday Life (RePro)"

Department of Social Sciences, Social Work

University of Helsinki

# IN THIS PRESENTATION

- About my doctoral thesis
- Conceptual conversations around the thesis
- An exemplary article
- Methods and data used
- Main findings (the article)



WORKING TITLE OF MY DOCTORAL  
THESIS IS:

- Emerging Adulthood and the Construction of Agency in the Context of Outreach Work



# THE AIM OF MY RESEARCH

- Is to study from different point of views how young people`s agency and autonomy are constructed in the outreach work practices in the interface of youth and social work.



# THE ARTICLES INCLUDED IN THE THESIS

1. Kontrolli ja nuorten kanssa tehtävä etsivä työ. [Control and Outreach Work among Young People.] (2009) (Professional Licentiate Studies – Social Work with Children and Young People)
2. It was like I had forgotten Myself inside the Four Walls – Challenges of Independent Housing as Part of Agency in Emerging Adulthood (forthcoming 2013)
3. Nuorten aikuisten autonomisen toimijuuden jännitteinen rakentuminen ammatillisen etsivän työn kontekstissa. [Emerging Adults´ Tensioned Construction of Agency in the Context of Outreach Work (forthcoming 2013) In a book edited by Merja Laitinen and Asta Niskala: Asiakkaat toimijoina sosiaalityössä [Clients as Actors in Social Work].
4. An article (2013) which deals...?
5. Summary



## *I`M RESEARCHING*

- *the stories of young people and the meanings that are constructed in the encounters between young people and the workers in places like Adult Social Services, Unemployment Office and Housing Office*
- *how, in these stories and interaction, one constructs young people´s autonomous agency and possibilities to act (toimijuus ja toimintamahdollisuudet).*



# THE RESEARCH DESIGN

- A qualitative case study that is methodologically based on social constructionism and on a relational viewpoint, which emphasizes the significance of diverse social relationships and networks.
- The data is collected by interviewing young people (11 interviews), by recording young people's and Vamos worker's discussions (11 discussions) and when these young people run errands in different officials (10 incidents)
- As a part of data I have moderated and recorded two focus groups with Vamos workers.



# THE RESEARCH FIELD

- Is placed on outreach work done by the Vamos project in the Helsinki Deaconess Institute in Helsinki
- Vamos project is aimed at young people aged 17 to 29
- These young people are typically in the middle of different *transitions* between youth and adulthood
- Outreach work tries to encounter young people who seem to have various and difficult problems in their lives and who are not getting those social or health services they should have or need.
- Main principles of outreach work are young people's right to decide on matters concerning their own lives, respect and trust on young people





# THE RESEARCH METHOD

- Discourse analysis combined with *Voice-centered relational method* by Lyn Brown and Carol Gilligan, later developed by Natasha Mauthner and Andrea Doucet (1998)
- Standpoints through which the data is read:
  - Reading for the plot and for researcher's responses to the narrative.
  - Reading for the voice of the "I".
  - Reading for relationships.
  - Placing people within cultural contexts and social structures



# FIVE MAIN FEATURES FOR EMERGING ADULTHOOD (J.J. ARNETT, 2004)

- It is the age of identity explorations, of trying out various possibilities, especially in love and work. It is the age of instability.
- It is the most self-focused age of life.
- It is the age of feeling in-between, in transition, neither adolescent nor adult.
- It is the age of possibilities, when hopes flourish, when people have an unparalleled opportunity to transform their lives.



# AGENCY (EMIRBAYER & MISCHE, 1998)

- *Agency* can be conceptualized as " a temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past but also oriented to the future and toward the present. Agency is seen to actualize in certain contexts and relations, where individuals interact with other people, meaning or events (Emirbayer & Mische 1998).



# AGENCY (JEFFERY 2011, LAYDER 2006)

- Agency implies the ability of individuals or groups to act on their situations, to behave as subjects rather than objects in their own lives, to shape their own circumstances and ultimately achieve change.
- In exercising agency, individuals have the potential to influence the events around them and ultimately, in doing so, change the structure of society, which they may perceive as constraining and inhibiting towards them as individuals.
- its (agency) significance as a concept lies in its relationship qualities. It is through communicative interaction with others, through our general sociability as human beings and our relationship with society and its constituent structures that agency needs to be viewed.



- "Emerging Adults' Tensioned Construction of Agency in the Context of Outreach Work"



# TOWARDS AUTONOMOUS AGENCY

- Relationalist models of agency in which the unitary self chooses and judges. (Hoggett, 2000)
- Non-rationalist models of agency that give space to a subject who avoids making decisions, repeats itself or destroys sense rather than is making sense. (Hoggett, 2000)
- The inner side of agency: autonomy.
- The autonomy of a human being is ideal. (Lagerspetz, 1998)
- Restrictions of autonomy?



# MAIN FINDINGS IN THIS ARTICLE: FOUR DIFFERENT KINDS OF AGENCY

- Passed Over Agency
- Defiant and Demanding Agency
- Critical Agency
- Sidestepping Agency



## THE PASSED OVER AGENCY

- A young person is encouraged to open up his life in order to influence the decision discussed in the negotiation.
- Outreach worker is helping him to express himself.
- In the end this young person can only decide whether he accepts the result of the negotiation or not.
- The encounter in this kind of negotiation is contradictory from the perspective of a young person's agency.





# DEFIANT AND DEMANDING AGENCY

- Negotiation turns into bargain, where interests cross and the use of power emerges.
- The defiant and demanding agency of a young person gets as a counterpart the worker's attempts of control
- The dilemma of supporting and control.
- Unwise decisions
- The encounter becomes controversial from the perspective of a young person's agency.



# CRITICAL AGENCY

- A young person becomes frustrated and disappointed on the service system (the system is inflexible, the needs of a young person are not encountered, coercion).
  - A young person recognises and resists the limitations and rules of a service system.
  - A young person challenges the worker(s).
  - Being critical is an attempt to gain better life, a life that is one of one's own, not defined from outside.
- > The agency becomes strengthened.



# SIDESTEPPING AGENCY

- The attempts to activate a young person at the unemployment office are turned down because he acts passively and is sidestepping.
- The workers try to reason, allure and even slightly threaten the young person. At the same time they are quite openly and honestly showing their frustration in consequence of the seemingly slow progress of things.
- A young person agrees everything that he has to, but the real action is missing. The words and plans are not realised.
- The negotiation gets stucked and even has caught in a double bind.
- The agency?



# DISCUSSION

- The coercion that comes from outside or the decisions made beforehand, without the involvement of a young person do rarely constitute a person's agency or answer the question who I am. They do not help a youngster to be independent and autonomous.
- Social services (institutions) and the interaction in them has " a power to reach deeply to those persons' lives, who are dependent on them and also to touch their life stories and above all their insight of their worth."
  - Richard Sennett 2004



# BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Arnett, Jeffrey Jensen (2004) *Emerging Adulthood. The Winding Road from the Late Teens through the Twenties*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Brown, Lyn Mikel & Gilligan, Carol (1993) *Meeting at the Crossroads: Women's Psychology and Girl's Development*. *Feminism & Psychology* 3 (1), 11-35.
- Emirbayer, Mustafa & Mische, Ann (1998) *What is Agency?* *American Journal of Sociology*, Volume 103, Number 4, 962-1023 .
- Jeffery, Liz (2011) *Understanding Agency. Social welfare and change*. Bristol: Polity Press.
- Jokinen, Arja & Huttunen, Laura & Kulmala, Anna (2004) (toim.) *Puhua vastaan ja vaieta*
- Mauthner, Natasha S. (2002) *The Darkest Days of My Life: Stories of Postpartum Depression*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mauthner, Natasha & Doucet, Andrea (1998): *Reflections on a Voice-centred Relational Model. Analysing Maternal and Domestic Voices*. In Ribbens, Jane & Edwards, Rosalind (eds.): *Feminist Dilemmas in Qualitative Research*. London: Sage Publications, 119 - 146.
- Mauthner, Natasha S. & Doucet, Andrea (2003) *Reflexive Accounts and Accounts of Reflexivity in Qualitative Data Analysis*. *Sociology* 2003 37: 413–431.

