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Success, coping and social exclusion in transitions of young Finns

Tarja Tolonen*

Department of Sociology, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland

Using analytical concepts of success, coping and social exclusion, this article attempts to describe young people's life histories and various ways of transition into adulthood; transitions that I claim to be classed, gendered and culturally diverse. This article draws from several research projects, mainly Social and Spatial Transitions in Young People's Life Course. In this study, 61 young people around 20 years old were interviewed. Pierre Bourdieu's notions of social and cultural capital are applied in the reading of young people's life histories. Also their sense of agency and strategies of coping are examined. Bourdieu's theory of capitals has been developed further in the context of youth studies. In the article I introduce the notion of subcultural social capital, which refers to social networks and groupings and resources in certain youth cultural fields. In this article, five cases of young people are examined through narratives of success, coping and social exclusion. I suggest that these stories are embedded in specific cultures, which are classed and gendered.

Keywords: youth culture; transition

Introduction

Using analytical concepts of success, coping and social exclusion, this article attempts to describe young people's life histories and various ways of transition into adulthood; transitions that I claim to be classed, gendered and culturally diverse. This article draws from work in several research projects,¹ primarily Social and Spatial Transitions in Young People's Life Course. In the latter study, 61 young people around 20 years of age in four different towns in Finland, experiencing different life situations, were interviewed concerning their transitions. While the term 'transition' is widely understood with reference to education, employment, family life, friends, relation to space, and so on (cf. Gordon and Lahelma 2003, Thomson *et al.* 2003, MacDonald *et al.* 2005, Tolonen 2005b, Gordon 2006), the discussion here places the primary focus on educational and work transitions.

Finland is at times claimed to be a homogeneous society with few social, cultural or ethnic differences, if compared, for example, with the social stratification of Britain. One key characteristic of Finland is that it is a Nordic welfare state believed to guarantee equality in many ways: by offering free education and substantial public social care and healthcare and by levelling out huge wage differences through taxation. However, at the same time the country exhibits a widening gap between those who are better off and those with social and economic deficits in their lives. There are thus plenty of economic and social differences, one crucial difference being

*Email: tarja.tolonen@helsinki.fi

in the area of education. For example, Järvinen and Vanttaja (2000) state that the parents of high-achieving students have a higher level of education and income level than drop-outs from the educational system do; also, students without further education are more likely to remain unemployed (see discussion in Heikkinen 2000). Another area of disparity of the ideal and actual relates to gender. Gender equality is often stressed in discussion of Finland as a welfare state, and indeed, women and men have about the same educational level, with women also participating strongly in work life. However, Finland, along with other Nordic countries, has not escaped the gender wage gap, gendered segregation of both work and education, and a hierarchical difference in valuation of femininity and masculinity (Rantalaiho *et al.* 1997, p. 4, Korvajärvi 1997).

In the present research, economic and social differences are understood within the context of new studies of social class, in which concepts such as culture, identity and lifestyle, combined with the notion of gender, are used (cf. Anthias 2005, Devine and Savage 2005). There seems to be a new turn in class studies, as described by Anthias (2005, p. 26): 'Dividing people into permanent class and status groupings simply does not work or have any heuristic value because the people in class group are concurrently crosscut by gender and ethnicity'. Thus, social class – rather than just a matter of how the economic wealth is allocated to different groups through exchange in labour market – is conceptualised in a more open way, in the studies considered here, where its role is either to explicate positions and value of individuals in the labour market, education, culture or in the leisure sphere (see Skeggs 1997, 2004a, 2004b, Walkerdine *et al.* 2001, MacDonald and Shildrick 2007), or to illuminate how individual persons identify and value themselves in relation to others (Skeggs 2004a). Again, the analytical 'lenses' I use to discuss this evaluation of self with young people are those of the notions of success, coping and social exclusion. The discussion here excludes the relationship of these concepts to the 'underclass', a vast field frequently addressed in the area of youth research (cf. MacDonald 1997, Heikkinen 2000, Bullen and Kenway 2004, MacDonald *et al.* 2005, Williamson 1997). The focus here is instead on the terms and the light they shed on young people's lives.

My interviewing method problematises the terms 'success', 'coping' and 'social exclusion' as a tool for reflecting young people's life situation, as well as their plans for the future. Thus, young people's use of terms in the interviews is treated as the object and tool of analysis, and it is read in the contexts of life histories. I present five cases for which I have generated narratives of success, coping and social exclusion on the basis of the life historical interviews, the cases of three boys (Ilari, Janne and Jukka) and two girls (Tuuli and Petra). Pierre Bourdieu's (1997 [1986], 1990) notions of social and cultural capital are applied in the reading of the young people's life histories, with feminist research on education offering another important point of reference for this study (cf. Skeggs 1997, 2004a, Reay 2000, Walkerdine *et al.* 2001). A focus is placed also on sense of agency and strategies of coping (see Gordon 2006).

Introduction to the data

The data-set used in this article includes interviews of 61 young people around Finland concerning their social and spatial transitions, with around 15 interviews in each of four towns in Finland (the Kouvola/Kotka area, Salo, Kajaani and Helsinki)

in 2001–2003, with varying employment and education traditions (see more detailed analysis in Tolonen 2005b). However, the analysis presented here relies primarily on interviews of 16 young people in 2002, who had been interviewed in earlier as part of a piece of ethnographic research conducted in Helsinki schools in 1994–95 (Tolonen 2001, Gordon and Lahelma 2002). Young people who were part of this longitudinal data were expected to be able to reflect on their current and past social relations as well as their experiences on education and work life.

The data were collected to reflect local traditions and life changes, as well as the varying life situations of young people. Most of the 61 young people were studying at the time of the research, with over one-third of them (26 out of 61) studying at polytechnics (including art schools) or vocational schools; most were from working-class or middle-class families with some vocational or professional education. Ten interviewees had an academic background, and most of these were either applying to or taking part in study at university. Four young people had steady jobs, with subsequent vocational education. Of the rest, 21 were in between jobs or educational institutions, were planning to study further or had just finished their education, and a few girls were pregnant and due to give birth soon. Some of these young people had obtained a job via an apprenticeship contract.

The interviews took place in my work office, coffee bars, libraries, school cafeterias and in a few homes by invitation. I asked several kinds of questions concerning the participants' current life situation, main concerns and dreams, as well as their transitions – for example, education, work, moving away from home or to a different town and family changes (see Gordon and Lahelma 2003). The young people were also asked to describe success, coping and social exclusion and to tell stories of success or to give examples of them, and also to indicate which of these terms would describe their life situation most accurately, if any (see Savage *et al.* 2001, MacDonald *et al.* 2005). Eight young people either refused to describe themselves in these terms or gave an answer that was not clear enough to be coded.

Of the remainder, 17 young people described themselves as being successful at the moment. This category, which included most of the university students and some college students (especially those who had chosen to study fine arts subjects), is presented in this article by the cases of Ilari, Janne and Petra, showing how success is constructed in different ways. Over one-third of the young people (24 out of 61) described themselves as 'coping'. This description covered young people in various life situations: some of them were studying in local colleges near home (e.g. students of engineering or in the Information Technology (IT) sector) while others were recovering from family crises or a difficult life historical space, such as misuse of drugs or alcohol. Tuuli's case represents here one way of coping with the loss of family. Finally, seven young people described themselves as being socially excluded at the moment. For them, this meant, for example, economic dependency on or social exclusion from others, or a former or present addiction to drugs or alcohol, of which Jukka's case is an illustration.

Before undertaking analysis of these five interviewees cases, I turn to Bourdieu's theory of social, cultural and economic capital, adding some discussions of classed self as well as of how 'I' is constructed in the interviews in relation to the themes in question (Skeggs 2004a, Gordon 2006).

Why capital?

Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as a tool of analysis has been quite popular in sociology of education for some years. This kind of analysis has paid attention to individual students and their school success; these are explained by school culture and family background – also this is a tradition that has strongly influenced my own understanding of cultural capital with emphasis on education practices and official qualifications, which are important in the Finnish context with its high education level (in Finland, Vanttaja 2002, Metso 2004, Tolonen 2004, 2005a, 2005b; in Britain, Skeggs 1997, Reay 2000; and in Australia, McLeod 2000).

Specifically, in my research into new means of class formation in Finnish society (cf. Skeggs 2004a, Devine and Savage 2005, Tolonen 2008), I have found Bourdieu's theory of capital applicable to young people's life histories by virtue of its inclusion of several forms of capital, closely interconnected (see also Field 2003). Neatly summarised by Beverley Skeggs, Bourdieu's economic capital refers to wealth and financial assets, while cultural capital consists of embodied, body/mind dispositions and goods as well as education. Social capital refers to resources based on connections and group membership; symbolic capital is the form that the different types of capital take once they are perceived and recognised as legitimate (Skeggs 1997, p. 8; see also Bourdieu 1997 [1986]). It is important to note that in Bourdieu's theory the other forms of capital can be converted into economic capital and *vice versa* (Bourdieu 1997 [1986], pp. 53–55). Thus, even if the forms of cultural and social capital are the focus of study, this theory always has economic consequences. The latter argument has been problematic for youth studies, however, since young people's social and cultural practices do not always have clear material consequences and not all use of social and cultural capital has the aim of economic benefit (cf. Qvotrup Jensen 2006, Holland *et al.* 2006, as well as Tolonen 2007).

In Bourdieu's theory, one other problem is found in the assumption that social capital is closely connected to symbolic (Bourdieu 1997 [1986], Field 2003, Siisiäinen 2003). This means, for example, that social capital is more easily available to people in high social positions. As Field states: 'There was no place in his theory for the possibility that other, less privileged individuals and groups might also benefit in their social ties' (2003, p. 20; see also Tolonen 2004). Thus in this theory there are 'right' and 'wrong' kinds of social capital, and, presumably, young people are not (yet) embedded in such networks as are the most 'profitable' (see also Holland *et al.* 2006).

Bourdieu's theory of capitals also has been developed further in the context of youth studies by adoption of terms such as 'subcultural capital' (Thornton 1995, p. 11, Fangen 2001, p. 45, Bullen and Kenway 2004, Qvotrup Jensen 2006) to highlight the youth cultural aspect of the term. In her study of the Norwegian Radical Nationalistic Underground Movement, Katrine Fangen interprets the members as having subcultural capital, which refers to proper 'stylish matters' and 'ideological knowledge' (Fangen 2001, p. 45). Sarah Thornton's research on club cultures also plays with the notion that subcultural capital, as Bourdieu described it, can also be objectified and embodied. Subcultural capital is embodied in the form of being 'in the know', such as in using current slang (Thornton 1995, p. 11). Thornton also suggests that cultural capital achieved within recreational youth club cultures is

convertible to economic capital as well, although Qvotrup Jensen (2006) criticises this argument.

There has been plenty of discussion of Bourdieu's work among feminist researchers (cf. Adkins and Skeggs 2004). In her study of mothers, children and education, for instance, Diana Reay (2000) highlights that the sphere of culture in Bourdieu's theoretical framework opens possibilities for analysing gendered practices of everyday lives. Similarly, Beverley Skeggs (2004b) sees explanatory potential in Bourdieu's work – for example, linking of objective structures to subjective experiences (2004b, p. 21; see also Wacquant 1992, p. 13). Skeggs and others also define gender within this framework of capital: gender is seen not as a field or as capital *per se*, but as a form of symbolic violence in the cultural field (Skeggs 2004b, p. 24, Lovell 2004, McNay 2004).

Among the many feminist researchers who have used cultural and social capital in their empirical analysis of young people's and children's lives are Skeggs (1997), Reay (2000), McLeod (2000), Bullen and Kenway (2004) and Holland *et al.* (2006), all of whom stress the importance of social and spatial contexts and cultural practices in analysis where none of gender, sexuality and ambivalence in life situations are ignored. Many critical points have been introduced in this context. For example, Skeggs states that in his analysis Bourdieu ignores everything that does not 'fit', the elements that are ambivalent especially with reference to gender and sexuality (Skeggs 2004b, p. 29).

Although I fully acknowledge that Bourdieu's theory is strongly based on the relationship between agency and structure (see, for example, Bourdieu 1990, Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992), I turn now to another kind of analysis applied in feminist youth research. The purpose of this method, used by Tuula Gordon (2006) – see also McLean *et al.* (1995) – is to listen to the 'I' speech of young people in the contexts of life historical interviews. The method focuses on how young people talk about themselves, and what kinds of feelings they express as well as how they express the ambivalences in their lives. For example, to conduct analysis of young girls' agency in a longitudinal study, Gordon (2006) looked into the ways they talk about their lives, and how they use 'I' phrases – as in 'I was', 'I feared', 'I decided', 'I sort of hoped' and 'I am really happy' – with particular attention to how the girls phrased 'I' statements changed over time and how these phrasings related to the outside world and changes in their lives (see also McLean *et al.* 1995). Also the 'I' talk can be used in analysing selves in different class positions. Skeggs suggests that class positions can be 'taken' by some actors, while other (for instance, working-class women) class positions are 'given' by others, and she suggests that for some the 'reflexive self' is not so easy to arrive at (see more on Skeggs 2004a, p. 39). Also construction of self, as well as habitus, exists in relation to each other, and is conceptualised in relation to 'who you are' (see Lawler 2004, pp. 112–113). This article considers the tone of young people's 'I' speech as a reflection of their relationship to others (family, friends), and uses it to pin down their social resources as well as possible moments of hesitance and ambivalence in their transitions.

My use of the terminology of capital and agency is embedded in the above-mentioned traditions of youth studies and (feminist) sociology of education. In general I study individual students, whom I see as possessing, creating or having attained *social and cultural capital* (see Morrow 1999, p. 747), which in some cases can be converted into *economic capital* and which are gendered, contextualised and

localised (cf. Skeggs 1997, McLeod 2000). I attempt to observe the processes by which *social capital* (e.g., networks and group memberships) is being created and used by agentic young people in certain cultural, social and economic fields or locations, as well as what kinds of social capital young people have, how are they formed and what meanings these relationships have for young people themselves (Tolonen 2004, 2005a,b; see also Raffo and Reeves 2000, Bullen and Kenway 2004, Holland *et al.* 2006). I use the term *cultural capital* to refer to the skills and knowledge that have been learnt in childhood from the family (and are embodied through habitus; cf. Bourdieu 1990, 1997 [1986], p. 49) or during education and in other cultural spheres of young people's lives. Here concentrating on young people's transitions related to field of education and work, I focus mainly on educational cultural capital (see Bourdieu 1997 [1986]), referring to skills and institutional recognition in the fields of Finnish education and work life – since 'a capital does not exist and function except in relation to a field' (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, p. 101).

In the article I also introduce the notion of *subcultural social capital*, which refers to networks and memberships of youth cultures and groups. These contacts may not be valued, perhaps, in the other fields later in life or by outsiders or parents, and in some discussions they may be considered the 'dark side of the social capital' (Putnam 2000, Field 2003). If subcultural capital refers to knowledge and know-how in certain youth cultural contexts (see Thornton 1995, p. 11, Fangen 2001, p. 45, Bullen and Kenway 2004), the term 'subcultural social capital' refers to social networks and groupings and resources in certain youth cultural fields – similarly to how Holland *et al.* (2006) apply the concept of bonding social capital in the contexts of young people's transitions. They apply Putman's (2000) ideas of 'bonding' and 'bridging' social capital; while the first refers to inward-looking bonds reinforcing trust and ties within groups, the latter is concerned with external connection with heterogeneous groups (see Holland *et al.* 2006, p. 101). I suggest, with Holland *et al.* (2006), that both of these different forms of social capital (bonding and bridging) are both present in young people's lives and used by them. This term 'subcultural social capital', like 'subcultural capital', attempts to fit the language of capital into youth research, which highlights and values the meanings and relations produced in youth cultures and groups.

Analysis of the life histories

Having already given a brief description of the ways in which the data ($n = 61$) show young people positioning themselves as coping, successful or socially excluded, I now introduce the five cases of young people I have selected, mainly from among the longitudinal data. The main selection criteria were to: present at least one case from each category among success, coping and social exclusion; present young people with different social and educational backgrounds; maintain gender balance in the discussion; and present some cases depicting different experiences of the welfare state and its services.

In my analysis of the young people's life histories and the social and cultural capital embedded in them, I apply the concepts of social and cultural capital in various ways. For instance, I pay special attention to young people's family relations and friendships and the potential support received from and created in them (social

capital), as well as their skills and the position they have attained at home and in the fields of formal education or work settings (as part of cultural capital). I also focus on how 'I' is presented (as active or hesitant) in their gendered and classed life histories.

Ilari: 'Things just happen to me'

At the time of the interview, 23-year-old Ilari was studying in two faculties at university and saw himself as a fairly successful person. In Finland there is no university entrance fee, which is taken as a sign of an 'open society'. The situation is not, however, as democratic as it seems, since it is much more likely for the fathers of university students to be middle class than working class (Järvinen and Vanttaja 2000), a pattern that held for Ilari. His parents had a college education and they worked in middle-class professions. Also, in grammar school Ilari showed great interest in learning school subjects as well as interest in social and political matters (Tolonen 2001). Via Bourdieu's analysis of capital, I interpret Ilari as having a great deal of cultural capital (with reference to education) arising from his family and also acquired through his own education. Ilari also had plenty of social contacts and was skilled socially, and in his 23 years had built many kinds of social networks. Most of his friends were from the university mainly, but he also kept in contact with his childhood friends. He was very active in several student organisations, and was known by many people in the faculties where he studied (see Bourdieu 1997 [1986], p. 51) which helped him to build friendships in various subfields.

But there are many good acquaintances I've got to know through these activities. ... [I know] not just the people who are studying in the same year's course but others as well. ... There are lots of people I know. The people I study with ... also I see the ones I met when I started the other studies – we still meet regularly. (Ilari)

This way of relating socially had become a habit. He had a long history of joining student organisations.

TT: ... [A]lready at secondary school you were in the student organisation?

Ilari: Yeah, when Mari resigned I became a member of the student council. ... [O]ne could think I pushed to have these positions, but it is not so ... I just get appointed to these student activities [many at his present place of study – TT]. ... I really would not have time ...

Interesting is that Ilari represented himself as rather passive (a floater) in his social actions, and here he used phrase like 'I just get appointed'. He did not consider himself very ambitious or as having carefully planned his life; rather, within these activities he saw himself as 'floating' from one position to another and expressed the idea that 'things just happen to me' (cf. Gordon 2006, Järvinen 1998). I call his story 'a floating success story'.

In fact, Ilari's way of representing himself as a 'relaxed', floating person was based on his rather privileged social and cultural position; he was able to 'relax' since it seems he did not have to fight for this position: he was *chosen* as a representative by his fellow students. One must recognise also that his social networks were not 'subcultural' in the narrow sense – he seemed to have social capital of various kinds (cf. Holland *et al.* 2006). His well-chosen social networks (social capital) seemed to

carry him from one position to another, enabling him to gain special knowledge (cultural capital) that he might be able to convert into reasonable economic capital as well later on.

Janne: 'I made it happen'

When I first met Janne at comprehensive school in 1994, he was less interested in educating himself than in 'extracurricular activities' during school time (Tolonen 1998, 2001). He used his time to attain the right kind of *subcultural social capital* to protect him in verbal or physical fights, which was important in the local school he attended (Tolonen 1998, 2001, Bullen and Kenway 2004, p. 148). After comprehensive school he attended vocational college. Although his mother had a college education and would have preferred him to gain a higher education, for Janne the most valuable cultural capital was gained in practice and through work, as his father had done. It was also very telling that the figure he cited as successful was his father. Janne thought that he and his father had created success in work life through practical skills and knowledge. He talked about his work career as a salesman at an IT company with quite determinate 'I' phrases, such as 'I had to travel' and 'I really learnt how to lead':

I had to travel quite a lot and at the most I had 20 subordinates. ... I really learnt how to lead, what it is really to be a boss; almost all of them were women. ... [I]t was not always easy ... with two women – for example, they had higher degrees than I did, and suddenly I was their boss. ... Well, I learnt a lot in that time. (Janne)

There was no hesitance in his 'I' talk concerning work life. He was an able young man with a good sense of himself as a social person with practical skills. What he did not seem to realise was that not only his individual skills counted. He was 'read' by others in 'gendered practices of working life', including a possible glass ceiling and lower payment for women with higher education (cf. Rantalaiho and Heiskanen 1997, Charpentier 2006). After a while, Janne experienced 'a positive critical moment' (Thomson *et al.* 2002) in his work career and his social skills became even further activated.

... then came ... a headhunter from another company and wanted to hire someone. There were 10 of us there. I just talked and talked. This is a terrific job now, with lots of potential chances ... one thing is to educate oneself more. ... Janne)

After getting this new job, which he saw as a result of his social skills ('I just talked and talked'), he saw himself as a very successful young man making full use of his potential in many ways. He even made plans to educate himself further, which he could not consider possible earlier. His feeling of individuality grew and he saw himself as a very active person, in contrast to some of his friends (with 'subcultural' social capital) who, according to him, has little ambition in life. Also in the 'I' analysis, Janne presented himself as a successful self-made man with great social skills and will to use his networks at work – where he seemed able to convert his social skills and practical cultural capital from the IT field into economic capital as well (see Bourdieu 1997 [1986]). I thus call this life history an 'I made it myself success story' with strong emphasis on agency.

Jukka: 'After school my life did go in quite a bad way'

Jukka was a well-known bully among fellow students at the age of 15 while at comprehensive school in 1994–95 (see Tolonen 1998, 2001). At that time, his life primarily consisted of activities outside school, such as drinking and fighting, and while at school he took part in schoolwork very rarely. He finished comprehensive school after an extra year there. I re-interviewed him in 2002 when he was 22 years old.

Jukka told me he was from a hard-working family and that he carried these values with him even if it did not show in his current actions. His parents had working-class jobs and some vocational education. He told me in the first interview, in 1995, that he had had quite a happy childhood with no big troubles and he succeeded well in school. In his school years, however, the family's social and emotional balance changed with his parents' divorce, affecting the social capital – and according to Jukka, the support and discipline at home (cf. Coleman 1988). He grew distant from his family and started to create other kinds of strong social ties and 'subcultural social capital' instead: he belonged to several social groups when he was 15 years old. These kinds of social relations were highly valued and useful within the youth cultures of the local comprehensive school he entered. There he was considered a member of the 'group of kings' that was dominating the informal level of the school (cf. Tolonen 1998, 2001, Bullen and Kenway 2004).

By the time of the second interview, in 2002, it was clear that this kind of social bonding had created problems for Jukka in the long run. He had left school, with quite poor marks. Without any vocational education, Jukka had little chance of finding a job, since the high level of education among young Finns (see Komonen 1999, Heikkinen 2000, Järvinen and Vanttaja 2000). His social networks were not supporting him in finding work. Instead, they were attracting him to take part in illegal activities, such as use of illicit drugs. Thus, networks need not to be only supportive (see Heikkinen 2000, p. 403, Suutari 2001). This kind of *subcultural social capital* (like the 'bonding' social capital of Holland *et al.* 2006 and Putnam 2000) may be considered a risk as well, manifested for Jukka in several kinds of uncertainties in social and economic terms. Also his 'I' talk highlights ambivalence and troubles concerning his life history, such as 'I don't know', 'my life did go', 'I had trouble', 'I had to do' and 'I tried'.

TT: We met last time in your grammar school. How is your life now?

Jukka: Well, the tape won't be enough if I tell you everything.

TT: I've got another one there ... [laughs]

Jukka: I don't know. After grammar school, my life did go in quite a bad way, until that finished when I had trouble with the law and I had to do community service [rather than enter juvenile detention – TT] for 40 hours. On the last day of 1998, that was finished. In 1999 I went into the army and completed my education as a medical assistant there. Since then I have tried to find a job. This year I was in my second job, but only for two days, since I did not like it there.

When I met with Jukka, he was on medication to try to prevent his drug use. Earlier, his father had offered him a job as a 'helper' in construction work, but the company laid off many people that year, including Jukka. It was his father who had offered great support for Jukka in difficult times. Jukka did not mention the authorities of the welfare state, like municipal youth or social workers, as significant sources of

help, which is quite common among young people – especially boys – in a marginal position (see Heikkinen 2000, Suutari 2001). At the time of the interview, he was striving to find a job, ‘a real working-class job’ with manual work; however, he doubted his ability to maintain one, due to his weak physical condition. He also dreamt of ordinary family life and thought he would be quite a responsible father, if he ever had children. At this point Jukka’s life story could be classified as ‘one of social exclusion’ thus far, including a strong wish ‘to make it back to normal life someday’ (cf. Suutari 2001, p. 178, Strandell *et al.* 2002, MacDonald *et al.* 2005).

Tuuli: ‘I make it happen even if there is trouble on the way’

Tuuli is a 20-year-old woman with a quite a dramatic life history. She had lost her parents at an early age, due to illness and alcoholism, and had been taken into care with her younger siblings, her sister and a brother. They had a foster family by the time Tuuli was 10 years old. She remembered the change of families both with fear and with a sense of security. Also interesting is the shift of phrasing from ‘we were taken’ to ‘I was’ and ‘I felt’ in her description of when she was a teenager:

TT: . . . Then your mom got ill. Who brought you up then?

Tuuli: I was about nine years old. . . . I and my sister and brother were taken into care by social workers just before my mom got seriously ill, since our family life was quite unstable. . . . Actually those who really brought me up were my foster parents. . . . During that period, our sense of security was especially important to me because we had to move to another family. It was kind of scary, so that is why I still see the sense of security as important to everyone; everybody must have this chance, that you don’t have to be afraid all the time.

TT: Mmm, you were scared then?

Tuuli: Oh yes, I was when I was little. And still when I was a teenager I felt I would not get over it. But then I just dealt with the situation and somehow I kind of grew stronger and then I wanted to help others who were in the same kind of situation. . . .

She said she has been sad about what happened in her life, and it had felt strange to change family like that. After she became used to the a new family, she felt it was worth it – she claimed the hard work and healthy atmosphere of her new home had been important to her and supported her will to educate herself (see Coleman 1988). Tuuli had succeeded very well in school and was planning to study further. Thus, her educational cultural capital had remained high in a difficult social situation. She wanted a profession allowing her to help others. In summary, Tuuli was a working-class girl who took the value of helping others seriously also due to her own experiences (see Skeggs 1997, 2004a, Walkerdine *et al.* 2001). It was when she was making decision on her further education and career that she made an important shift from being positioned as helped to one who is helping others (cf. Thomson *et al.* 2002, Gordon 2006). At the time of the interview, she saw herself as coping. How she defined coping included agency as well, with ‘I know’ and ‘I got’:

I know what coping is; I got lots of experience of that. . . . it is that you are pleased with your life, even if it is not like living in a rose garden, but you still go on. . . . (Tuuli)

In the near future, she claimed, she would be successful if she could attain the occupation she was dreaming of.

... [E]ven if I would not make much money in a month, I see myself as successful if I can do what I want. I mean as [her dream occupation] I would not make much money ... – but I feel that I would see myself as successful if I get to express myself by helping others through this work. (Tuuli)

Tuuli's story was filled with agency talk, such as 'I know', 'I got experience', 'I see' and 'I want'. I suggest that her story can be deemed one of 'coping filled with agency', at least for the moment. For the near future, she was hoping she was on the way to success.

Tuuli seemed to be a person who was coping, one with a clear vision of the future in front of her. She had attained educational and embodied cultural capital in a certain field, in which she was heading for further education through the support of her foster family. She also had many friends at school, who were to increase her subcultural social capital as well – in this case a supportive kind. She had also received many other kinds of social and emotional support – from the authorities, from a new foster family and from friends. Many girls in the study cited the authorities as an important source of support in the absence of help from their parents (see Tolonen 2004, 2005a, 2005b; see also Suutari 2001, p. 186). In the future, Tuuli should be able to convert her educational cultural capital into economic capital in her chosen helping profession. While she knew the salary would not be very high, she still indicated that she would consider herself successful if she ever got there.

Petra: 'I am not sure what to choose'

Petra is a 23-year-old woman with a large amount of social and cultural capital from childhood. She was one of several children in a family where social relations were close, and if something happened to any of the children, a great amount of social support was given and received (see Coleman 1988). The social relations of the family were very intensive, and she did not want to move out but felt it was time to do so (see also Lahelma and Gordon 2003, p. 379). Still, at the time of the interview she was seeing her family regularly. She also had many friends around her. All of these networks, family and friends, seemed to serve as positive social capital for her.

Besides having received and created social capital, Petra had a large amount of cultural capital; that is, she had accrued cultural habits and skills from her family through habitus (see Bourdieu 1990). All of the children, as well as her parents, were either working or studying artistic subjects. Her parents had some college education, although her father did not get his diploma; he was still working in a middle-class profession, as her mother was. Petra had also gained educational cultural capital herself, studying at several institutions of higher education, all focusing on artistic subjects. Actually, Petra felt that this was also a point of weakness in her life: she was studying in too many places and too many subjects, and instead of seeing herself as a multi-talented (as many of her male counterparts in my data for the same field did) she felt unsure in terms of what she should concentrate on later. This hesitation was phrased as 'I fear', 'I become unhappier' and 'I don't get what I want'.

TT: Are there any risks in your life, do you think?

Petra: Maybe the only risk is that I fear that I'll give up too much and become unhappier or I won't get what I want. And the only one who can prevent this is me.

Even though Petra received much social support on behalf of her family and had social networks of many kinds, she felt it was up to her alone to make decisions in her life, and that also in the future it would be up to her to make a success of her life. Although such speech can be claimed to be quite common among young people today, I still interpret Petra's speech as especially individualistic and middle-classed in this context (cf. Skeggs 2004a, Gordon 2006). Actually she felt so individualistic in her decisions that even if in trouble she did not find it easy to accept any help from others, even if it was potentially available. In the next example, she was reflected this in 'I am terrible at asking for help', 'I can't really trust', 'if I need any help, I am not able to ask', 'I try to be strong' and 'it is very difficult for me to tolerate'.

I am terrible at asking for help if I am in trouble. I can't really trust anybody on this. On the other hand, I can easily talk to people on everything, but if I need any help I am not able to ask. . . . I don't know – I try to be strong, but I don't know if I am [laughs]. . . . I have noticed also that it is very difficult for me to tolerate other people's weakness . . . I mean I like many people, but I have difficulties when seeing weakness in others. (Petra)

Her middle-class position and success in education were taken as somewhat self-evident: she had both social and cultural capital at her disposal, and she seemed to generate new capital constantly. In her interview there was much agency talk. However, by looking into her 'I' speech one can tell that she was very hesitant at the same time. She was engaged with many things and could not decide what to do in life. She performed a middle-class self without clear direction. Therefore I call her story 'a hesitant success story'.

Concluding remarks

I have chosen the cases above to present different kinds of stories of success, coping and social exclusion (cf. Pietilä 1999) found in the data. I found several kinds of stories in the terms of capital attainment and agency. Namely, there was the success story with strong emphasis on agency – 'I made it happen' (represented by Janne, a working-class young man); a success story with emphasis on 'floating' – 'Things just happened to me' (seen with Ilari, a middle-class young man); and a hesitant success story – 'I don't know what to choose' (for Petra, a middle-class young woman). I also found a story of coping with emphasis on survival and future success – 'I will make it happen even if there is trouble on the way' (that of Tuuli, a working-class young woman); and one story of social exclusion – 'I wish to make it (back to normal/ordinary life)' (in the story of Jukka, a working-class young man).

By giving names to the stories I intend to highlight not the ends but, rather, the processes that are embedded in the stories. I also assume that young people and their life situations will change over time (cf. Thomson and Taylor 2005, Gordon 2006). The language of capital affords highlighting how different forms of social, cultural and economic capital function as resources in individuals' ways of coping in transitions from school to work and other spheres of life and is useful in bringing out how classed, gendered and culturally diverse young people's transitions are (see also McLeod 2000, Thomson *et al.* 2003, Bullen and Kenway 2004, Tolonen 2004, 2005a, 2005b). Bourdieu's terminology of types of capital allows me to connect the micro-level processes of individual stories and macro-level structures of wider Finnish society. There are several kinds of 'structural' differences, such as social class and

gender, that can be pointed to here, and one can examine how they act to reproduce the prevailing social order in the fields of education and work life (cf. Tolonen 2008).

I have used the categories of success, coping, and social exclusion to compare young people's social positions and to suggest that it is a question of social class that should be asked here, even though respondents may avoid direct talk of class (see Savage *et al.* 2001). In any case, those who saw themselves as succeeding were more likely to come from a middle-class than a working-class background. Those who positioned themselves closest to the category of social exclusion at the time of the interview were often those whose (usually family) life had seen through a major crisis quite recently, most of these were unemployed or working in short stints, and many received social welfare benefits and thought of themselves as not having an independent economic life. The question of class be addressed as not only structural one, but also a process concerning presenting of self. For instance, taking the position of individualised self and having interesting projects of life and using them as a means of success is introduced especially in relation to young people pursuing an academic and artistic education, with clear reference to the middle-class 'reflexive self' and positions to be occupied, not given (cf. Skeggs 1997, Skeggs 2004a, p. 39, Walkerdine *et al.* 2001).

What I suggest is that these kinds of stories are framed by social structures, as well as including different feelings of agency (Järvinen 1998, Gordon and Lahelma 2002, Gordon 2006). The stories with agentic selves are thus not only framed but themselves embedded in specific class cultures – like Wacquant (1992, p. 11) writes on Bourdieu's theory: 'For the viewpoints of agents will vary systematically with the point they occupy in objective social space'. For example it was interesting that people with different social background had different criteria for success and opinions of what it means to be successful in life. This means that interviewees' feelings of success, coping or exclusion have to be situated in certain social and cultural fields: for Ilari it was an academic field with academic expectations and supporting social networks with a relaxed style of agency (a floating success story). For Janne the stories of coping and success can be positioned in the working-class culture (cf. Willis 1978). Petra's ambivalence in her educational choices was important and real for her, but her hesitance appeared in safe middle-class surroundings with economic, social and emotional support. If we look into Tuuli's life history (with changing of families as a child), filled with social, material and emotional uncertainties, her class position looks very different. Her strong sense of and need for agency are to be understood within this working-class context.

The stories were also very much gendered, in a very subtle way. For instance, young women's talk included more themes of care and duties in their families than boys' stories did (see also Skeggs 1997, Walkerdine *et al.* 2001). Also, while young men presented themselves as successful in their life projects, they did so with more assurance than girls in the same fields. Janne's story of himself as a man and a boss of more educated women was one way of showing male superiority in the workplace, which was based on gendered work culture, not just on his skills (cf. Korvajärvi 1997). Thus, also here gender might be considered a form of symbolic violence in the cultural field rather than a form of capital or a field itself (Skeggs 2004b, p. 24). This kind of gendered order of working life (Rantalaiho *et al.* 1997, p. 4) was reflected also by Tuuli and Petra in their interviews.

In this article, different forms of capital used and created by young people have been traced in the light of Bourdieu's theory of social and cultural capital as applied in youth research and elaborated upon by feminist critics. In my data, as presented above, several kinds of differences were found in relation to social class and gender. There were also differences in how convertible social and cultural capital might be into economic capital. Also it appeared that, in a general sense, subcultural capital (Thornton 1995, Fangen 2001) or subcultural social capital as introduced in this article was less likely to be converted into economic capital (see also Qvotrup Jensen 2006). Young people create new networks (and maintain old ones) in different 'subfields' without considering how these would benefit their social relations (as capital). Also, as a final note, I wish to point out that even though young people were positioned here as classed and gendered subjects, they used and created, not just received, social and cultural capital of different sorts in and of their potential use, amidst, transition processes in various fields (see Morrow 1999, Holland *et al.* 2006).

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