Title: Should I Stay or Should I Go? Career and Life Plans of South African and Finnish Young People in the Margins of Education and Work

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Abstract

Calls have previously been made for research to examine marginalised youth from rural areas and their career development processes. In this paper we examine the tensions between local youth identities and the changing labour market structures and educational opportunities in rural areas. Young people form their identities locally where current labour and education policies call youth to be mobile and ‘placeless’ (Farrugia et. al. 2014). Young people who live in rural or disadvantaged metropolitan areas have a very different starting point to build their careers than peers from socially and locally more advanced backgrounds (Tomaszewski & Cebulla 2014). Labour policies expect young people to be socially adaptive and ready to leave their local environments. In this article we examine the tension between young people’s locally and relationally shaped identities and their future and career orientations. The study is a comparison of two different cultural and geographical contexts in rural Finland and metropolitan South Africa. In both of these contexts, the youth interviewed are considered to be in the margins of society because of their experiences of high drop-out and unemployment rates. Our research task is to examine how social and geographical localities, the conditions of educational opportunities as well as the labour market demands are represented in the life narratives of South-African and Finnish young adults. Data collection consisted of ethnographic field notes, interviews and follow-up interviews. We had a Finnish sample of 18 to 24-year-old young people (n=17), who do not have secondary education or work, who were in attendance of the Open Vocational College (OVC). In the South African sample, data was collected from Kayamandi Township high school learners, between the ages of 17 and 20 years old (n=17). Braun and Clarke’s (2006) content analysis was used to group themes according to two theoretical approaches: namely the relational approach to youth agency as well as the theoretical concept of belonging. Significant findings emerged that showed that there are two types of reconciliation and tensions. The first is that of subjective and familial or community expectations before mobility is undertaken. The second reconciliation is the reconciliation of localities (i.e. old versus new experiences). When these two reconciliatory processes were completed young were prepared to embrace mobility for career development. The implications for further research and practice aimed at facilitating the career development of marginalised youth worldwide are discussed.

Keywords: career development, career-life planning, mobility, relationality, agency, belonging, marginal youth

Relation to the conference theme

Public discussions concerning young people’s career paths and institutional support structures are dominated by an individualistic rhetoric. This implies that offering adequate career services and
educational opportunities will enable young people to become well-resourced and equipped enough to manage their careers and find labour market entry points. New insights can be gained by examining young people’s challenges and reflections about leaving their localities in the search for better education and work opportunities. We aim at shifting the, thus far one-sided discussion, from ‘resourced, agentic and mobile’ young people to a more holistic and contextually integrated dialogue that includes relational processes of how agency, resources and opportunities become available – or not – to young people. There is a need to take on a more holistic and contextual approach in supporting vulnerable young people’s career and life transitions – where mobility is an imperative for an increasing number of young people.

**Research questions, objectives and theoretical framework**

Young people form their identities locally where current labour policies enhance fluid identities (Farrugia et. al. 2014). This means that youth residing in rural or disadvantaged metropolitan areas have a very different starting point to build their careers than more contextually advanced peers (Tomaszewski & Cebulla 2014). Labour policies expect young people to be socially adaptive and ready to leave their local environments. However, a lacuna of research exists on how young people access – or do not – the resources needed to ‘make it’ in the world-of-work beyond their localities and people, and what implications are for social policy and practice (see Wierenga 2011, 384).

Our **objective** in this paper is to examine the tensions between local youth identities and the changing labour market structures and educational opportunities. Although this topic is of paramount importance, only recently have calls been made to address this research gap (Juvonen & Romakkaniemi 2018; Evans 2016; Farrugia, Smyth & Harrison 2014; Butler & Muir 2017). Our research contribution is unique because the career-life narratives of marginalised young adults are presented from two different cultural and geographical contexts, rural Finland and metropolitan South Africa.

The tension between young people’s locally and relationally shaped identities as well as their orientations towards their future and career were examined using two **theoretical frameworks** Cuervo & Wyn 2014; Emirbayer & Millsche 1998). These frameworks include the relational approach to youth agency as well as the concept of belonging. The importance of including both approaches is that the notion of relationality highlights the intersubjective and social dimensions of agency and their participation in the construction of agency. The concept of belonging, according to Wyn and Cuervo (2014), sheds light on the attempts of young people to stay connected to people, places and issues that are meaningful to them as they simultaneously try to find their place in the modern economy (see also Butler & Muir 2017).

**Methods/methodology**

This paper draws on data from two independently conducted PhD studies. Sanna Toiviainen’s data consists of a longitudinal ethnographic study conducted 2014–2016, which consists of ethnographic field notes, interviews and follow-up interviews that were collected at a group-based learning program in a city in Eastern Finland aimed for local young people without secondary education or work, called the Open Vocational College (OVC).
Anouk Jasmine Albien’s data consists of a multi-phase mixed method research design where repeated measures were embedded in an intervention framework in a South African Township with high school learners. Qualitative data and scores were tracked at four time points: T1 and T2 before administering a culturally-constructed career life-designing intervention, as well as at two time points after the intervention (T3 and T4). In addition, ethnographic field notes, intervention feedback and evaluation exercises, interviews and follow-up interviews were included to enrich understandings of career-life changes in this disadvantaged population group.

Braun and Clarke’s (2006) content analysis will be used to create themes that are informed by the relational approach and the theory of belonging. Analysis will be based on participants’ past career-life histories, their future career plans, as well as personal stories about reconciling relationships, education and work. Thus a research base can be created, that centers on the reflections about work or educational opportunities in relation to mobility and locality in marginalised youth populations.

Outcomes/ expected results

Preliminary results show, that young people in rural and disadvantaged areas reflect the need to become mobile in order to work towards achieving their own subjective career success. In order for these young adults to accept the level of mobility required for their career development and leave their localities, two different reconciliation processes need to be achieved. Firstly, a reconciliation of two different identities is undergone. The reconciliation of fulfilling familial obligations or expectations and subjective career-life objectives emerged, which highlighted the relational identity formation processes that need to be completed before a decision on mobility could be reached. This process is dependent on finding and maintaining a meaningful role in the community, establishing and sustaining a feeling of connection, a sense belonging as well as reciprocal feelings of responsibility and trust between the old and the new locality (also eg. Wierenga 2011). Therefore, the second reconciliation process is between the two localities (i.e., how the individual integrates experiences from the old versus the new locality). Implications for career development interventions, research and practice are extensively discussed to facilitate the career development of marginalised youth worldwide.

References


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