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To cite this article: Catarina Lundqvist (2019): Time horizons in young people’s career narratives – strategies, temporal orientations and imagined parallel futures negotiated in local settings, Education Inquiry, DOI: 10.1080/20004508.2019.1601000

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/20004508.2019.1601000

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Published online: 23 Apr 2019.

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Time horizons in young people’s career narratives – strategies, temporal orientations and imagined parallel futures negotiated in local settings

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ABSTRACT

Substantial research has shown that changes in contemporary western societies have prolonged transitions from youth to adulthood and altered the conditions and timing of transitions in education, work and family formation. Thus, contemporary society is creating new temporal conditions with important implications for social institutions, organisation of education, work arrangements, and individual career choices. The presented study explores temporal dimensions of career choices and transitions in this context from perspectives of young people in a small town in Sweden. Three specific temporal questions are addressed: How are time horizons constructed in young peoples’ career narratives; in what ways do individual temporal strategies and orientations towards the past, present and future interact with opportunity structures and socio-geographic space; and how does locality influence these temporal constructions and interactions? There are three main conclusions. First, young people in the focal setting still maintained and constructed career strategies and life goals based on an ideal of linearity and long-term perspectives. Secondly, individual temporal orientations are intertwined with interpretations of local conditions, producing place-based temporalities. Thirdly, imagined parallel futures form a future planning horizon that incorporates multiple temporalities simultaneously.

Introduction

Numerous studies have shown that changes in contemporary western societies have prolonged transitions from youth to adulthood and altered conditions and timing of transitions in education, work and family formation (Evans, 2002; Lindgren & Lundahl, 2010; Olofsson, 2014; Walther & Plug, 2006; Woodman, 2011). In Sweden, for example, the age of establishment in the labour market, defined as the age when 75% of a cohort is employed, is 29 years today, while in 1987 it was 21 years. This delayed labour market establishment is connected to increases in: requirements for higher education, difficulties for young people in Sweden to enter the labour market, and short-term or temporary employments for young people (SCB 2017; SOU 2013:74).
Accordingly, transitions and careers are less linear and more fragmented, individualised and destandardised. Individual life-courses are less predictable and thus more insecure and complex (Biggart & Walther, 2006; Du Bois-Reymond & Stauber, 2005; Leccardi, 2005; Olofsson, 2014; SOU 2013:74). Contemporary western labour markets are characterised by constant transformations, rapid conversions and “short-term principles” (Sennett, 1998), with associated ideals such as flexibility and risk willingness, which influence individuals’ self-perception, identity and view of their life courses (Andres & Wyn, 2010; Nowotny, 1994; Sennett, 1998). Two decades ago Sennett (1998) asked: “How can long-term goals be pursued in an economy devoted to short-term?” (p. 10). There may be no straightforward or universally applicable answer. However, by exploring how individuals relate to the future, he argues, one can at least highlight problems associated with construction of a coherent life-cycle perspective in contemporary western societies.

Regarding the temporal dimension, current research often focuses on the extent to which young people are planning for the future. Various authors have argued that it is difficult for youths in contemporary western society to orient themselves in a long and coherent time perspective. Some claim that young people handle the future as an “extended present” (Nowotny, 1994), as they are occupied with current priorities because of unpredictability and increased difficulty to make future plans (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Leccardi, 2005, p. 2008). Others claim that young people see active opportunities for formulating their own lives in coming years ahead (Anderson et al., 2005). Nevertheless, contemporary society is clearly creating new temporal conditions with important implications for social institutions, organisation of education, work arrangements, and individual career choices. From a sociological standpoint, the presented study explores temporal dimensions of career choices and transitions in this context from perspectives of young people in a small town in a Swedish northern municipality. Three specific temporal questions are addressed: How are time horizons constructed in young peoples’ career narratives; in what ways do individual temporal strategies and orientations towards the past, present and future interact with opportunity structures and socio-geographic space; and how does locality influence these temporal constructions and interactions?

The goals are to explore young people’s temporal engagements, provide an empirical contribution to research on youths’ career choices, and extend understanding of how time and place interact in the construction of time horizons.

Although primarily focusing on young people’s career choices and transitions within their professional careers, i.e. educational and labour market careers, a broad understanding of the concept “career” is applied. An individual’s life course is regarded as multidimensional, consisting of a network of mutually influencing professional, educational, family and leisure careers (Närvänen, 1994). As I focus on past experiences of career choices and transitions, as well as present considerations (planes and hopes) of the future, I also address imagined futures, imagined careers and “possible selves” (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Time is regarded here as a social construct that must be contextualised in relation to social, political and historical events, and has a social function, coordinating, structuring and constantly interacting with place and socio-geographic contexts (Adam, 2008, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Regarding the spatial dimension of youth transitions,
previous studies have underlined the importance of geographical position, local culture and local opportunity structures for understanding career choices and transitions (Ball, Maguire, & Macrae, 2000; Reay, David, & Ball, 2005; C. Evans, 2016). However, in Sweden and other western countries, youths’ life conditions and career transitions have been primarily studied from an urban perspective and there is growing criticism of “unacknowledged metrocentricity” that “has gone hand in hand with the invisibility of spatial processes in young people’s lives” (Farrugia 2014, p. 293, cf Cuervo & Wyn, 2012; Helve, 2003; Sørensen & Pless, 2017; Woodman & Wyn, 2015). Hence, a need for further research on place-based career choices in rural areas and smaller and peripheral towns in Sweden has been articulated (Rönnlund, Rosvall, & Johansson, 2017; see also Rosvall, Rönnlund, & Johansson, 2018; Svensson, 2006). Therefore, this study focuses on young people living in a small town in northern Sweden, a depopulating and peripheral area in relation to urban areas mainly concentrated in southern Sweden. From this perspective, in addition to the main focus on temporality, I investigate the influence of locality in the construction of young people’s time horizons.

The following sections outline the theoretical framework and context of the study and the methodology applied. The results are then presented in four sections, focusing on four key themes identified in the analysis, as summarised and further discussed in a concluding section.

**Theoretical framework**

A key element of the theoretical framework applied to address the research questions, particularly the social embeddedness of career choices, is the sociological “careership” theory presented by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) and later revised by Hodkinson (2008), which was partly developed to avoid “the twin pitfalls of implicit social determinism or of seeing (young) people as completely free agents” (p.29). Building on Bourdieu’s (1998, 1977) theory of action and concepts of dispositions, habitus and fields, Hodkinson and Sparkes postulate that individuals’ choices reflect pragmatic, rational decision-making within their habitus, in interaction with others in the social field and in relation to their specific resources. The decisions are made within the mélange of partly unpredictable patterns of turning-points and more predictable routines that develop during individuals’ life courses. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) describe turning-points as self-initiated, structural or forced upon individuals, stating that: “Within each turning-point, career decisions are pragmatically rational and embedded in the complex struggles and negotiations of the relevant field” (p.39).

Hodkinson and Sparkes’ (1997) concept “horizon for action” denotes the space formed by interaction between individual dispositions and opportunity structures, within which individuals consider what are possible, appropriate or desirable choices and actions. To analyse temporal aspects of career choices, the concept of “time horizons” (cf. Leccardi, 2014) is used in a similar manner, as they are constructed in interactions between individuals’ temporal orientations and social contexts that produce temporal orders. The theoretical starting point is that the social world is both spatially and temporarily structured and that we use time as a tool for constructing reality. Further, our perceptions of the past, present and future influence our horizons for action (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; cf. Leccardi, 2014). The theoretical concept
“temporal orientation” refers to individuals’ strategies for making meaning and choices in relation to an envisaged time-frame, while “temporal order” refers to the social context and organising function of time (Närvänen, 1994). Temporal order is produced in social interactions and by social institutions then reproduced by people acting in relation to different time-frames (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). Temporal orders are shaped by influential discoursers or public narratives (Somers & Gibson, 1994) and constructed by social norms, regarding for example when during the life course a young person is expected to have become self-sufficient. Thus, the “temporal order” concept facilitates analysis of how individual time horizons are socially constructed (Närvänen, 1994). Further, the concept “possible selves” facilitates analysis of participants’ accounts of the future, by focusing on representations of the self in the future, which play important roles in identity formation. Possible selves represent not only individuals’ aspirations, but also their concerns for the future, and may be experienced singularly or multiply (Dunkel & Anthis, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986). They are also always social, as “those possible selves a person is able to envisage are influenced by family, friends and school and by gender, class and race” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011).

The theoretical framework is also buttressed by Emirbayer and Mische’s (1998) conceptualisation of agency as a temporally embedded process. The authors identify three dimensions of agency: “iteration”, “projectivity”, and “practical evaluation”, which correspond to the past, future and present “dimensions” of time, thereby enabling examination of forms of action that are primarily oriented towards one of these temporal dimensions. Focusing on the interaction of these three temporal dimensions they conceptualise agency as a:

“…temporally embedded process of social engagement, informed by the past (in its “iterational” or habitual aspect) but also oriented toward the future (as a “projective” capacity to imagine alternative possibilities) and toward the present (as a “practical-evaluative” capacity to contextualise past habits and future projects within the contingencies of the moment)” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 962).

Thus, the theoretical framework is rooted in conceptualisations presented by Hodkinson and Sparkes. However, Emirbayer and Mishe provide additional theoretical tools for elucidating the reflexive processes and agentic dimensions involved in the focal phenomena and their interactions with temporal dimensions.

**National context**

Many small municipalities in Sweden face demographic challenges due to an ageing population and rapid urbanisation driving significant emigration of young people to bigger cities. Sweden is one of the most rapidly-urbanising countries in the EU, and the population is declining in approximately half of its 290 municipalities (Syssner, 2014). Smaller localities in peripheries of metropolitan regions face a lack of workforce in many sectors, while unemployment rates are higher due to difficulties in matching capacity. As a result of population decline social services have also been cut (Bjerke & Mellander, 2017). An additional challenge for northern Sweden is that it is far from the growing metropolitan regions in the south, so there are greater distances to expanding labour markets, and fewer readily accessible higher educational, commercial and
cultural activities. Thus, in public debate Sweden is described as a divided country in terms of regional development (Mellander & Bjerke, 2017; Tidholm, 2017), as growth of urban areas is contrasted with depopulation elsewhere. The depopulation of smaller localities has negative effects on institutional, economic, social and cultural conditions, and hence living conditions of young people (cf. Svensson, 2006).

Several Swedish studies have addressed effects of small towns’ and rural localities’ conditions on young people’s career choices. They have also highlighted how young people relate to and handle social expectations to leave their home towns in favour of more urban settings (Svensson, 2006) and how a “learning to leave discourse” and out-migration codes affect their orientations (Rönnlund et al., 2017; Rosvall et al., 2018).

Methodology and methods

The methodology is rooted in a life course approach, influenced by narrative theory, interpreting narratives as social actions and acts of identification and positioning (Andrews, Sclater & Treacher, 2004; Anthias, 2002; Somers, 1994). Somers and Gibson (1994) argue that narrative is a constitutive feature of social life and that “agency is negotiated, identities are constructed, and social action mediated” (p. 64) through narrativity. Further, narratives must be contextualised in relational settings, particularly (here) how temporal orders operate and are reconstructed in public narratives that influence individual narratives.

Participants and local setting

Narratives were obtained from individual, in-depth interviews with 18 youths aged 20 to 27 years, nine of each gender. All the participants were living in their hometown (X-town), although some of them had left for education or work and returned after some years. X-town is located in a relatively small coastal municipality (population less than 40,000) in northern Sweden. Like several other municipalities in the region, it has an industrial heritage and the local labour market in recent decades has been dominated by a few relatively large industries. The municipality is trying to attract service companies, increase its population, reduce emigration of young people, and make the area an attractive place for people to return to after, for example, studying elsewhere. In the region there are two universities within 30 kilometres. X-town is approximately 100 km from the Swedish capital Stockholm, which is often an urban reference point in the participants’ accounts.

Participants were selected with an aim to cover a broad cross-section in terms of employment, although they cannot be regarded as a representative subsample. They were initially found through contacts with a targeted selection of organisations: major local employers, small companies, a local organisation for the self-employed, the municipality, student/alumni-organisations and the local employment agency. After establishing contact with an initial number of participants I asked them to invite friends or colleagues to participate. On this basis some of the participants were employees, while others were self-employed, unemployed or students. All of them had work experience. In general terms, most participants had a working-class background, almost all their parents had at most upper secondary school education (three had parents with
higher education) and careers in industry, service and administration or social and healthcare settings, mostly as employees.

**Methods and analysis**

The interviews were semi-structured, 60–120 minutes long, and focused on the participants’ previous educational and working life choices and their imagined future careers. They were all recorded and subsequently transcribed. In addition to providing narrative accounts on these themes, the participants were asked to draw a “timeline” of their careers, on a blank sheet to avoid influencing their representations. These timelines provided additional informative illustrations of turning points and often imagined parallel futures.

Throughout the study, ethical guidelines of the Swedish Research Council (2017) have been recognised and followed. Informed consent to participate was obtained from each participant, they were informed of their right to withdraw consent at any time without giving any reason, names and acquired information were anonymised, and the confidentiality of personal information was strictly maintained.

Transcripts of all 18 interviews, along with the “timelines”, were analysed following a procedure based on thematic analysis *sensu* Braun and Clarke (2006), searching the data for repeated patterns of meaning, regarding ‘latent or interpretative’ themes. Theoretical concepts including horizons for action, social embeddedness, temporal orientation and orders both informed the analysis and functioned as “search-lights”. The overall analytical questions focused on career considerations, in the past, present and future, and social factors that influenced the participants’ considerations regarding education, work, and ‘life careers’ (Närvänen, 1994) in general, including family formation. After initial coding of the material, I searched for potential themes, then reviewed the themes in relation to the entire dataset to define key themes. Here, I specifically focus on four key themes, each addressed in a separate section: ‘handling insecurity’, concerning how labour-market insecurities are handled and illustrating relations between short- and long term perspectives; ‘the good life’, primarily concerning strategies and life goals based on an idea of linear transitions; ‘locality’, regarding roles of locality in time horizons; and ‘multiple futures’, concerning participants’ elaboration of imagined parallel future careers.

To illustrate patterns of meaning drawn from the data I primarily use extracts from interviews with four participants (dubbed Sandra, Anna, Johan and Linda) in the following sections. The quotations and “timelines” from their interviews have been selected to illustrate ideas commonly expressed by the participants regarding specific themes, together with some indications of the nuances and complexities involved.

**Results**

**Handling labour market insecurity with educational investments**

When the participants evaluated their employment prospects, several contrasted their opportunities with their parents’ options and careers. They imagined the labour market conditions in which the parental generation established themselves as more stable and
predictable, providing long-term employment even for those lacking higher education. In contrast, they portrayed a labour market where temporary jobs had replaced permanent employment and transitions were characterised by oscillations between unemployment and temporary work, hopefully leading eventually to a permanent position. Such uncertain transitions described have been conceptualised as “yoyoisation” in post-traditional life courses (du Bois-Reymond and Straber 2005), meaning that transitions are reversible and fragmented with uncertain outcomes (Biggart & Walther, 2006; Leccardi, 2005). Thus, the participants described the labour market as “hard”, “uncertain”, and “insecure”, and corroborated their own experiences with references to friends’ experiences. These accounts of the past and current labour market both illustrate their lived experiences and reflect discursive public narratives that reinforced their lived experience and informed their horizons for action. The analysis below draws on theoretical understanding of agency as a socially embedded process (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997) and addresses relationships between the young people’s experiences, the insecurity discourse and their negotiations to secure their future in a long-term perspective, and (an overarching issue) how individual time horizons are constructed within such negotiations.

A notion detected in all the participants’ narratives is that education may help efforts to manage some uncertainties of the labour market, although they were all aware that higher education provides no guarantee of a secure position. Almost all of them had invested in, or were planning to invest in, higher education. There were variations in the latter groups’ planning horizons, and whether planned investments are ever realised or remain imagined is beyond the scope of this study: the analysis focuses on the justifications of real or planned/imagined educational investments. Moreover, their educational paths had not been straightforward. After finishing upper secondary school, all of them had worked for some years before participating in higher education or planning to do so. When justifying their investments in higher education they emphasised the relative long-term security that education might provide. The following analysis of Sandra’s and Anna’s narratives illuminates the similarities in the participant’s motives for actual or planned/imagined educational investments.

**Sandra and Anna**

Sandra and Anna both had permanent jobs, but still portrayed similar images of the uncertainty of the labour market as participants who were unemployed or had temporary jobs. Sandra, 26 years old when interviewed, had worked at a relatively large service company for the preceding seven years. During this period, she had advanced and when interviewed she was a communication manager. While working for the company she had also taken a three-year university course in communication, because she had always been interested in the subject and it was in line with her professional work.

C: What were the reasons for your educational choice?
Sandra: Well, I wanted to continue my work at X-town. I’ve never been good at planning my life so I didn’t have any outlined plan when I started to study. I knew I didn’t need a study loan because I worked at the same time, so it wasn’t a financial question. It was more for fun. And academic credits are
good to have. And I have this idea that you’re not a good person if you haven’t got a university diploma.

C: Where does this idea come from?

Sandra: Many of my friends in this town... they have no higher education and hardly any of them have a permanent job. They’ve prioritised family and children before getting a steady income. Which for me is absolutely unthinkable. It’s got to do with my own upbringing and my father. You don’t get children before you have a steady income, and security. That’s why higher education is good to have.

Sandra was satisfied with her current position as a communication manager, but she described several alternatives that she could potentially pursue in the future.

Similarly, Anna, 23 years old when interviewed, had a permanent job, but was still worried that “anything can happen”, so she planned to invest in higher education:

It’s a good experience to work here. The most important thing for me is that I like my work, as long as I feel comfortable. But at the same time, I want to study, I just want to have accomplished that. And I’d rather study now than later when I have children. I want to take some courses at the university, for insurance, as a foundation.

As in Sandra’s narrative, the envisaged family and professional careers are intertwined. Anna imagined having children after finishing education and re-establishing herself in the labour market for at least two years within her new profession. Like most of the participants, Anna wanted to live in her hometown in the future. However, she had a rather pessimistic view of the place and its future. She described a downward spiral with relocations, as the local population, businesses and social services constantly decline. Reflecting on her future educational choices Anna said:

I think mostly about getting an education that allows me to stay in X-town. But what will be left in X-town and what will be shut down? I must start studying quickly, because nothing may be available later. Everything can change quickly./.../It might have been different if, for example, I’d lived in a bigger city, I probably wouldn’t have studied what I’m thinking about here and not right now either.

Anna’s narrative highlights the significance of the local opportunity structure and how it affects time horizons. Anna’s current choice was to study to become a traffic engineer, for which she anticipated a local labour market even in a longer time perspective. She had always been interested in financial matters and planning, and she hoped that the occupation would at least partly match these interests. But primarily her choice was based on her appraisal of the labour market and she justified her choices by saying: “...so in a way, I want to be secure and safe especially in an insecure town”.

Thus, although Anna (and several other participants) had permanent employment, they still related to the perceived opportunity structure of the labour market and formulated future plans in the face of insecurity. Considering the temporal aspects at play, the perception of education as a provider of “security” (Sandra) or “a foundation” (Anna) was clearly based on a long-term perspective. So, a major negotiation determining their, and other participants’, time horizons was between their temporal orientation (influenced by a desire for long-term sustainability), and the unpredictability of the labour market (imposing a short-term perspective).
“The good life” in the future horizon – or the discourse of linearity in transitions

When the young participants reconstructed their past choices and narrated their imagined future choices and their “possible selves”, they told a story of “the good life”. As similarly illustrated by Andres & Wyn, 2010, such narratives summarised respondents’ hopes and goals in life, including the intertwining educational, professional and family elements encapsulated in the “life career” concept (Närvänen, 1994). In the following sections I address temporal dimensions in the narratives of “the good life.” The analysis is informed by the temporal orientation and order concepts to explore the relationship between individual orientations and societal norms.

For most participants “the good life” as a future goal consisted of a comfortable and secure (family) life with sufficient steady income from an enjoyable job enabling professional and personal development. For almost all the participants, the place for this was the hometown. Generally, the narrated idea of a good life was infused with relatively modest expectations, imaginable and not very different from lives of the parental generation. These concepts of “the good life” correspond to a “normal biography”, characterised by the “relatively predictable and linear move from youth to adulthood, marked by engagement in paid work, education and household formation” that typified trajectories of the generation born in the mid-1940s to 1960s in Western societies (Woodman 2009, p. 243, cf. Andres & Wyn, 2010). The young peoples´ idea of “the good life” was also rooted in a preferred sequence and timing of phases in line with social norms. This is exemplified by the chronological sequence of education, a secure job and steady income, and then family and children, incorporated in Sandra’s and Anna’s descriptions of their desired life careers.

Johan

This chronology of transitions also appears in Johan´s narrative, which also highlights how social norms related to higher education are negotiated in individual considerations and the influence of discourses of spatial mobility.

Johan was one of the few participants who had not invested in higher education and was not planning to. Nevertheless, the public narrative on higher education as a “must have” was a prominent feature of his narrative. Unlike both Sandra and Anna, Johan had concluded that he did not need higher education to counter labour market uncertainties. However, this had involved facing and making peace with both his own expectations and social expectations of the local context. His narrative of “the good life” illustrates a positioning in the intersection between social expectations of an educational career, and defence of a successful career and life despite not leaving the hometown and not studying.

Johan, 25 years old when interviewed, took the Natural Science programme in upper secondary school. He achieved good grades but did not know what to study and had no guidance from his family, whom he described as “real workers”. “You are supposed to work, not study”, Johan concluded. Instead of continuing study, he was offered temporary work at the factory where his father and uncles worked. At the time of his interview he had worked there for six years.

I’ve been working at the factory since I graduated from upper secondary school. The idea was that I’d work there for one or two years. I’d always wanted to study at university, I had
good grades, but somehow, I got stuck and here I am. When I was younger I said to myself and my family that I’d never work in the factory. Half of my family worked there. I just wanted to get away from X-town. But after a while you realise that the job’s rather good, you get used to a salary, you meet the right girl and settle down and start thinking about a family. I’m really satisfied with my life now. But it hasn’t always been that way.

Johan had to confront the idea that those who stayed in the hometown were “left behind”, not making the “right choices” and in a symbolic sense not moving forward. However, at the time of the interviews he felt satisfied with his position and life choices.

I enjoy working as a laboratory technician and I’ve received education within the company. I was lucky in a way, I got three temporary posts here after finishing upper secondary school, so I sort of slipped in and then got a permanent job. That made it even harder to leave town. And my earnings are relatively good too, so it’s comfortable and has provided security.

The employment had given him a secure income, a key element of the linear and “normal biography” that Johan maintained, and essential foundation for housing and subsequently a family. Johan and his fiancé had bought a house the preceding year, he was longing to have children and stressed that he was in a good position to balance work and family life.

The above analysis illustrates how young people relate to social norms regarding when points in life course transitions were to take place. In theoretical terms, it shows the “temporal orders” (Närvänen, 1994) and “public career timetables” (Roth, 1963) involved, as they formulate careers in relation to “a normal biography” (Woodman 2009), that is (still) based on social expectations of linear transitions. Clearly, any such ideal biography incorporates a preferred chronological sequence and timing of life course phases (Närvänen & Näsman, 2006). Contemporary transitions and life courses may have been destandardised, in terms of the prescribed order of social transitions and phases, and become more circular from a temporal perspective (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Leccardi, 2005, 2008; Närvänen & Näsman, 2006). Nevertheless, the social norm of linearity still appears to provide a discursive reference for individual temporal orientations and ideas of a good life.

Normatively speaking, and through the choices they made, the young participants constructed strategies and life goals based on an idea and ideal of linearity and a long-term perspective. However, these social norms partly conflicted with their understanding of the insecurity and short-term principles they faced in the labour market, which may have altered their chances of attaining “the good life” in a long-term perspective. Woodman (2009) and Wyn and Woodman (2007; cf. Wyn et al., 2008) addressed the same conflict as they recognised that in both Australia and Britain most young people have fairly traditional hopes and expectations. Woodman (2009, p. 251) argues that the normal biography is “still seen as a reference point even if in many respects it no longer matches lived experience”. Analysing this “both/and”-dimension of contemporary western society, Woodman shows that this norm can coexist with recognition that the outcomes are uncertain and less predictable than they were a generation ago.
Time and place – the role of locality in time horizons

Previous studies show that geographical position, local culture and local opportunity structures influence people’s horizons for action and associated phenomena (Ball et al., 2000; Reay et al., 2005; Evans, 2016). The narratives considered here corroborate these findings, as shown in the following passages, which highlight roles of the socio-geographic context and locality in construction of time horizons. Returning to Sandra´s and Anna´s narratives, both contrast their own careers with those of friends who had children before they had established a steady income. In this respect both Anna and Sandra perceived themselves as having different priorities. Sandra also interpreted the friends’ prioritisation of a family career as a local phenomenon, reflecting predominant social norms of a small town, and drew a distinction between social norms regarding careers in small towns and bigger cities like Stockholm:

I think that a career’s more valued in Stockholm. You can have a career on another level compared to what you can accomplish in a small town. Here you value your family, friends and leisure. In a city like Stockholm you value your career and friends. In the city, you’re living with your job as a status symbol, in a different way than you do here. Here it’s good if you have any job at all.

Some years previously she had thought about moving to Stockholm, for the following reasons:

My plans to move to Stockholm were probably just a way to escape from this, “I don’t understand why you’re single, you’re so happy and nice.” “It’s a pity you haven’t got children.” You don’t have to pity me, I’m not, don’t worry about me.

Sandra´s narrative highlights relations between time, place, social relations and identifications. She did not identify with the local place and social norms in terms of an imagined family career. Concerning the relation between time and place, the quotation exemplifies how the participants related to imagined local career timetables. Sandra, for example, contrasted the local temporalities of careers with a perceived urban timetable, where imagined timings of transitions in professional and family careers were more flexible.

Another important aspect of the locality of time horizons concerns the relationship between “place and pace.” This is illustrated by the indication in Anna’s quotation in the previous section that if she had lived in a bigger city with another opportunity structure she would probably have made other educational choices and taken decisions less hastily. However, she perceived a need to select something immediately, before things changed for the worse due to the insecurity of the local labour market. Thus, Anna’s negotiation of educational choices should be regarded as a “relational spatial practice”, a concept applied by (Rönnlund et al., 2017) to describe how decision-making processes are situated locally and how, following Massey (1994), places are constructed in relation to other places.

Johan’s narrative further illustrates the spatial dimension evident in the participants’ strategies. As discussed in the previous section, Johan was handling social expectations facing those who did not leave their hometown to study. He perceived that he had been stereotyped as one of the “ones left behind” in the small town, who were not advancing.
Since upper secondary school I’ve felt that people judge you because you’re left in X-town, it’s like “Pity you, who are left.” The ones that moved from here are very judgmental, but they don’t have to pity me. But that’s what you’re supposed to do, you’re supposed to leave your hometown to study. But I haven’t suffered from staying, I’m doing great. Otherwise I would have left.

Johan’s experiences can be understood in relation to a strong “out-migration code” described in a Swedish context by Rosvall et al. (2018, cf. Svensson 2006), consistent with a “learning to leave” discourse (Corbett, 2013) and a strong “mobility imperative” (Farrugia, 2016).

The interpretations of the participants’ accounts, illustrated by quotations of Johan, correspond with findings by Evans (2016) that young people’s relationships with place are often multifaceted, contradictory and reflected in conflicting aspirations. Evans (2016) further argues, referring to Skeggs (2004), that in the discourse of spatial mobility “place attachment of the working class has acquired connotations of pathology, defeat and failure” (p. 502). Johan perceives that the hometown, and consequently those “left behind”, are laden with a conception of stagnation, which incorporates ideas not only about spatial immobility but also social immobility and temporality, implying that future perspectives and aspirations are tightly limited. However, Johan also provides a counter-narrative confronting the image of success by giving an alternative narrative of a local career.

Thus, the narratives confirm the inter-relationships of time and place, and that locality plays an important role in constructions of young people’s time horizons and career narratives. They reveal how individual temporal orientations are intertwined with interpretations of local conditions and values, producing place-based temporalities that interact with individual dispositions. This is consistent with the concept that “horizons for action” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997, cf. Hodkinson, 2008) are influenced by the nature of the field within which the person is positioned and her/his embodied dispositions.

**Imagined parallel futures and multiple temporal orientations**

The participants were all planning in some way for a future career while simultaneously handling the insecurity and short-term principles of the labour market. However, inspired by Woodman (2011), rather than exclusively examining the extension of planning horizons, the thematic analysis also explored their use of multiple temporal strategies and mixture of past, present and future perspectives when discussing possible and/or desirable future careers. This section addresses how imagined parallel future careers and “possible selves” (Stevenson & Clegg, 2011) were narrated and multiple temporal orientations interacted with individual dispositions as well as opportunity structures. Narratives of the future are conceptualised here in terms of “projectivity”, i.e. “the imaginative generation by actors of possible future trajectories of action, in which received structures of thought and action may be creatively reconfigured in relation to actors’ hopes, fears, and desires for the future” (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998, p. 971).

**Linda**

In upper secondary school, Linda took the Natural Science programme and wanted to become a veterinarian, but abandoned the plan because she struggled with the
mathematics. After upper secondary school she had various temporary jobs, such as receptionist and saleswoman. She also took a university course in psychology during this period. Linda was 22 years old when interviewed and was working on a temporary project in the municipality administration, a job scheduled to continue for a further four months. Her narrative and timeline portrayed four parallel futures converging in the same future goal – illustrated in the picture below with a house, and text saying “A permanent job where I feel comfortable, family life in a house” (Figure 1). The parallel timelines leading to this future goal are all spanned by a question mark, symbolising her insecurity regarding the future. The upper line illustrates her hopes of finding a similar job within the municipality administration enabling her “to progress upwards” and eventually get a permanent position. The second line illustrates her idea of getting higher education and then a job. Dietician was an option she was considering at the time, as a way to realise her interest in nursing and working with people.

The third line says “writing” and is drawn with dots to illustrate its deviation from the others. Linda had always been interested in writing, and her teachers in upper secondary school encouraged her to become a journalist or writer. Despite the support from significant others Linda did not regard this as a viable professional career, because the prospects and earnings are too uncertain. Nevertheless, as a future goal she wrote “Publish a book” in a separate circle. The fourth and last line says “Start looking for a job again” and this line is interrupted by a spiral ending in the text “Finding a job”. Linda explained that this spiral represents the possibility of having to oscillate between temporary employments and unemployment before eventually finding a permanent position.

Linda’s narratives of her imagined future careers and “possible selves” exemplify similar elaborations of multiple future alternatives by the other participants. The

Figure 1. Linda’s timeline. Translated from Swedish
different futures they portrayed coincide to varying extents and the timeframes covered also vary. Thus, following theoretical ideas regarding the projectivity dimension of agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), an individual’s time horizon is constructed of multiple future temporalities. Some alternatives for the future extend the future horizon, while, simultaneously, others draw it closer to the present, depending on which scenario is currently considered most viable.

The youths’ articulation of the strategies indicates that the multiplicity of future options should not be interpreted as expressions of an inability to make decisions for the future, or a strategy of “keeping options open” (Bauman, 1997) due to indecisiveness. The analysis does not support the idea that young people handle the future as an “extended present” (Brannen & Nilsen, 2002; Nilsen, 1999; Nowotny, 1994) because they cannot make long-term plans either. In accordance with claims that young people see active opportunities for formulating their own lives in the years ahead (Anderson et al., 2005), I instead argue that these parallel futures should be understood as elements within a future planning horizon that incorporates multiple temporalities simultaneously. Moreover, young people such as the participants construct their horizons for action and time horizons through “pragmatic rational decision-making” (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). In the concluding section I argue that these parallel futures must be contextualised with respect to efforts to balance personal and professional interests on the one hand, and interpretations of labour market demands on the other. The overall motive for the young people’s compromises is (still) to secure the future in a long-term perspective.

Conclusions

This study confirms that choosing careers is a situated embedded process, and both spatial and temporal dimensions of opportunity structures are crucial for understanding how young people construct their time horizons. The negotiation that most strongly influenced the participants’ construction of time horizons was between individual temporal orientations, influenced by a desire for long-term sustainability, and the unpredictability of the labour market (imposing a short-term perspective).

With the overall future goal of attaining “the good life”, the young participants evaluated prospects of different future alternatives against past experiences, their current position and appraisals of opportunity structures of the labour market. The analysis shows that both lived experience and a discursive understanding of the labour market informed their choices. As they sought to balance their interest with their interpretations of the labour market demands, the young people, pragmatically and rationally, considered compromises required to secure their long-term future. Consequently, in accordance with previous findings (Woodman, 2011) and theory (Hodkinson and Sparkes 1994), this pragmatic, rational decision-making was built on support from significant others, past experiences, resources and interests, which to varying extents conformed or conflicted with their aspirations for the future. In this process the participants related to the local opportunity structure and social norms regarding a desirable biography. The temporal orders and public career timetables that influenced their careers and ideas of a good life can be conceptualised as a “normal biography”, based on ideas of predictability and linearity of life course transitions.
Similarly, Woodman (2009) found that such ideals still provide reference points for young people, although in several respects it does not match their contemporary lived experiences.

The analysis also highlights how the horizons for action correspond with different time horizons and temporal dimensions. The elaboration of parallel futures, and multiple possible selves, illustrates how both the present-oriented future and a longer planning horizon can be simultaneously considered, and the previous section shows how multiple futures, extending temporally from the short to the long term, may be incorporated in future planning horizons. The results corroborate Emirbayer and Mische’s theoretical understanding of agency as a temporally embedded process. They show that the construction of time horizons involves ongoing negotiations addressing multiple temporalities simultaneously, although one alternative and future temporality might dominate at any given moment in a given opportunity structure.

In support of Evans (2016), Rosvall et al. (2018) and Rönnlund et al. (2017), the results confirm the importance of analysing young people’s career aspirations from a spatial perspective and underline the importance of addressing interactions between spatial and temporal aspects. The analysis shows that the socio-geographic location affected the young people’s views of themselves, their horizons of action and their time horizons, that time and place are interrelated, and that locality plays a role in young people’s time horizons. The participants perceived that specific temporal conceptions derived from conditions of the small town. These perceived local ways of ordering time were often contrasted with imagined urban norms regarding the temporality of careers. The temporal comparisons between the local (small town) and urban confirm that temporal strategies are spatially situated. Further, in accordance with Emirbayer and Mische (1998, p. 962), they suggest that the individual is embedded simultaneously within many relational fields with “multiple, overlapping ways of ordering time” that affect time horizons and hence horizons for action.

**Note**

1. *Within* each current theme these participants’ quotations draw on commonalities with the other participants. *Across* the themes, there might be dissimilarities between the participants. For example, extracts from Johan’s accounts illuminate commonalities with the rest of the participants with respect to the “the good life” and linearity of transitions theme. However, as one of the few who was no’t interested in higher education, Johan’s career was not representative in terms of the participants’ strategies for handling labour market insecurity.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

**Funding**

This work was supported by The Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare;Forskningsrådet om Hälsa, Arbetsliv och Välfärd [2011-1333].
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