Conceptualizing well-being in youth: The potential of youth clubs

Abstract

This study identifies key mechanisms in youth clubs for fostering well-being among vulnerable youths. We develop a framework to conceptualise prerequisites of well-being in youth, namely having a safe place to be, positive relations with others and possibilities for growth. This conceptualisation maintains insights from psychological elements of well-being while bringing psychosocial theory of identity in youth into a sociological orientation. Understanding youth as a dynamic and situated phase expands the investigation of both well-being and youth clubs from merely revolving around 'risk' and 'protection'. Based on interviews with youth workers and participants in youth clubs in Norway, the paper describes how 'hanging out' in adult-supervised but otherwise unstructured spaces provides youths with safety, belonging and a gradual sense of mastery. As such, the club may function as an institutionalised safe space and gives time, a 'moratorium', offering vulnerable youths shelter from adult responsibilities and the acceleration of societal demands.

Keywords: youth clubs; well-being; adolescents; moratorium; mental health; Norway; peer relations; youth workers; social work

Introduction

In Norway, as in the other Nordic countries, youth clubs were offered to young people as an alternative place for socialising outside often overcrowded urban flats and facilitating simple leisure activities like board games (Forkby, 2014; Lindström, 2012). The main purpose of the clubs, however, was to keep young people occupied and off the streets, ultimately to prevent them from turning to drugs, crime and gangs (Forkby & Kiilakoski, 2014). The original concept of youth clubs has been more or less maintained in the representation of activities and the presence of adults offering guidance and opportunities for a chat (Vestel & Smette, 2009). The current 670 youth clubs in Norway (Statistics Norway, 2018) charge no or only symbolic fees and place no

demands on regular attendance or parents' time or effort. Therefore, youth clubs are often described as alternatives to organised leisure activities like sports (Gjertsen & Olsen, 2011), and they are popular among Norwegian youths: One third of the pupils in lower secondary school attend a youth club at least once a month (Seland & Andersen, 2020).

Although the prevention of problem behaviour is still an important rationale for youth clubs in Norway, a shift in reasoning has emerged in the last decade, in parallel with a new worry about the young. In much of the West, there has been a steep increase in loneliness and self-reported emotional distress, such as depression and anxiety, among young people (Collishaw, 2015; von Soest & Wichstrøm, 2014). Much of this increase may be seen in relation to increased achievement pressure in areas such as education and body image (Bakken, Sletten, & Eriksen, 2018; Eriksen, 2020; Pedersen & Eriksen, 2019). Conflicts between the generations and worries about youth crime and drug use are increasingly accompanied by a new concern about their well-being, namely that young people, rather than externalising any rebelliousness, may turn their problems inwards (Eckersley 2011). In Norway, clubs are now seen as possible arenas for the prevention of mental health issues among youth (Meld. St. 19, 2015; Norwegian directorate of health, 2017). As part of an overarching responsibility for public health, local communities are encouraged to make available social spaces where young people can meet, such as youth clubs or other drug-free environments, in order to provide social support and prevent loneliness (Meld. St. 19, 2015).

There is a considerable lack of knowledge about whether youth clubs may fulfil this task; research on how social care may enhance so-called 'well-being' mainly focus on parents (Pinchover & Attar-Schwartz, 2018) and there is an over-all paucity of knowledge about youth work (Forkby & Kiilakoski, 2014). The present study

investigates what mechanisms are at work in the club that may foster vulnerable young people's well-being.

In the literature, there is also a lack of conceptualisation of the term well-being, despite its proliferation in research and youth policy (J. McLeod & Wright, 2016). In investigating youth clubs' potential for well-being in youth, we elaborate a theoretical framework for how we may conceptualise well-being for young people. Drawing on individual interviews with youth workers and focus group interviews with frequent club attenders in Norway, we use this framework to identify some key mechanisms at work in the club for fostering young people's well-being. We suggest that youth clubs may function as an institutionalised moratorium (Erikson, 1968), providing marginalised youths with shelter from adult demands and responsibilities.

Youth clubs – making or breaking young people?

The research on the benefits of youth clubs diverge. In the field of youth work and club research, quantitative studies have repeatedly shown that youth club attendance, in contrast to other out-of-school activities, is negatively associated with young people's general health and well-being in terms of risks, mental health and crime (Feinstein, Bynner, & Duckworth, 2006; Mahoney, Stattin, & Lord, 2004; Pedersen, 2008). For example, a British study found that youth club attendance was a powerful predictor of a young person's being an offender, theorised to be caused by too unstructured club work (Feinstein et al., 2006). Although this study was criticised for confusing correlation with causation, leading to some of the study's conclusions being retracted, it still influenced policy work in the UK (Ritchie & Ord, 2017). In the same period, Norwegian policy documents reflected a belief that youth clubs secure positive environments for young people (Pedersen, 2008). However, Nordic studies have shown an association between youth clubs and marginalised young people. Based on Swedish data, Mahoney, Stattin

and Lord (2004) found that youth clubs attracted young people who are at risk. Once there, the frequency of attending the club was an indicator of developing antisocial behaviour, specifically for those who went to clubs where there was already a large proportion of antisocial young people. These authors too concluded that it was the unstructured club environment that encouraged antisocial behaviour.

On the other hand, a growing body of research also shows that youth clubs may be beneficial for the young. Recent English and Australian studies emphasise clubs' role in creating cultures of participation (Nolas, 2014), encouraging ethical reflection (Bessant, 2009) and facilitating important relationships with youth workers and peers (Hart, 2016; Ritchie & Ord, 2017). Relationships with youth workers have been shown to be particularly important for giving young people academic and practical help, life skills and support (Rhodes, 2004), as well as for young people who are in difficult circumstances, e.g. in the child welfare system (A. McLeod, 2008). In contrast with the study of Mahoney, Stattin and Lord, which indicated that unstructured clubs in themselves created the problem, Nolas (2014) found that unstructured space facilitates communities and friendships with peers. She argues that we need a better and more nuanced understanding of what the young get out of their time spent in youth clubs.

Results from the first stage of this research project, an analysis of Norwegian survey data (N=110,100), add to previous accounts of risks and promise associated with youth clubs. On the one hand, the analysis confirms correlations between youth club attendance, low socio-economic status, self-reported problem behaviour and health problems (Seland & Andersen, 2020). The sample of 6 per cent of the 13-16-year-old respondents who had been to youth clubs five times or more in the last month, have poorer self-reported health, higher rates of being bullied, report more frequent problem behaviour and poorer relationships with parents and school than those who go to clubs

less frequently or who never attend youth clubs. On the other hand, this group of frequent youth club-goers also score significantly higher on friendship relations with peers compared to young people who attended clubs less regularly. This combination of vulnerability and risk factors on the one hand and close friendship and support on the other, directs our interest towards those who frequently attend youth clubs, as they might inform and expand the focus on risk and protection that have characterised the research on youth clubs thus far.

Well-being in youth – a conceptual framework

Julie McLeod and Katie Wright note that 'well-being' has become a concept encompassing the physical, social, mental and emotional health of young people (J. McLeod & Wright, 2016). Despite the extensiveness of the term, there is also a concern that it often is understood only in terms of risk and protection (Wrench, Garrett, & King, 2013), in the same way as these concepts have proliferated in the debate about youth clubs, as we have shown above. There is a general consensus that an operationalisation of the term well-being is lacking (Dodge, Daly, Huyton, & Sanders, 2012), and although the concept is much used in sociological investigations, it has mostly been conceptualised from a psychological perspective (Keyes, 2006). For example, Ryff (1989) suggests six dimensions of psychological well-being: 1) self-acceptance, 2) positive relations with others, 3) personal growth, 4) purpose in life, 5) environmental mastery and 6) autonomy. Such psychological conceptualisations rarely relate these elements to the particularities of youth. Sociological understandings of youth have emphasised the processual, contextual and cultural (Cahill, 2015; Thomson, 2011; Wyn, 2009). Sociology's take on well-being is informed by this, identifying for example risk not primarily in the young person but in society (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Wyn, 2009; Wyn, Cuervo, & Landstedt, 2015). One fruitful way to operationalise

well-being for a sociological investigation – in this case, of youth clubs – may be to shift the focus from psychology's subjective elements of well-being to assessing contextual prerequisites for well-being in youth.

We suggest bringing Ryff's six elements of psychological well-being in dialogue with parts of the developmental psychologist Erik Erikson's theoretical conception of what is particular for identity in youth (Erikson, 1968). For Erikson, youth is *not* ideally an ongoing state of 'well-being' but rather a period of identity crises – a term by which Erikson meant turning points, rather than threats of catastrophe – that it is necessary to go through (Erikson, 1968). 'Well-being' as such is not an object for Erikson, but he stresses many of the same elements as Ryff for a positive development of identity in youth, notably belonging, positive relationship with others, and most importantly, he emphasises growth – and that individual development must be given room to occur. Erikson was interested in the contextual and circumstantial and the psychosocial dialectic between the individual and society; he theorised not only the psychological processes young people must go through but also what they needed in order to emerge from the 'crisis of youth' (Erikson, 1968). 'They need', he wrote, 'above all, a moratorium for the integration of the identity ascribed in the foregoing to the childhood stages' (Erikson, 1968: 128).

Erikson suggested that modern society allows for a moratorium that affords young people the opportunity to develop a 'positive identity' and to delay assuming an adult role, offering institutions or contexts in which the young may work out their identity crises. A psychosocial moratorium suggests a freezing or halting of demands and adult responsibilities. Based on current reports on growing mental health problems among youth, we suggest three prerequisites for well-being in youth:

1. A place to be, in which they can experience belonging and the possibility for safety. This may be considered a prerequisite of experiencing environmental mastery and autonomy in youth.

2. Having positive relations with others, a key element in conceptualisations of well-being. This is according to Erikson even more vital in youth as the vague phenomenon of 'society' takes over the place that was previously occupied by the concrete childhood milieu (Erikson, 1968).

3. Experiencing growth, purpose and the feeling of confidence. This entails for young people the vital task of coming to terms with their past, but also handling external demands in the 'here-and-now' and expectations for the future. The skill to interpret and the possibility to pace external expectations is vital for healthy development (Erikson 1968).

Method and sample

Based on our analysis of the afore-mentioned Norwegian Ungdata surveys (Seland & Andersen, 2020), we sought to capture the perspectives of frequent club goers as well as adult club leaders' experiences from working with this group. We have conducted three group interviews with 14 teenagers (aged 14–20, seven boys and seven girls) and individual interviews with three club leaders (aged 35-50, two men and one women).

This strategic sample was recruited following a two-stage process. First, we asked *Ungdom og Fritid* – the Norwegian association for youth clubs and youth work – for a list of youth clubs which are open more than once a week. The first club, 'Club Mall', is situated in an urban centre with ethnic majority and minority middle-class families and some more deprived demographic groups. 'Club Suburbia' is situated in a suburb dominated by high-rise buildings with a high proportion of immigrants. The

third club, 'Club Village', is in a neighbourhood with mainly ethnic-majority and middle-class families.

Secondly, each club leader approached club goers on our behalf, forwarding an information letter about the research project and gathered parental consent for informants under 16. Our sample of three club leaders told us that frequent youth club-goers can be divided into two sub-groups. The first group consists of youths who visit the club to get access to equipment such as musical instruments, computers or a sound studio, to self-organise activities like dance groups or to attend classes with instructors. The second group is made up of people who 'just hang around'. According to the club leaders, the young people who mostly use the club's facilities are resourceful and self-sufficient, whereas the 'hang-arounds' in many cases are more vulnerable and less resourceful. Based on the initial information about our research project, all club leaders had recruited young people from this last sub-group.

The club leaders' facilitation was vital to our study, but their bias or personal interest may have affected our sample. As we initially got turned down by several club leaders, our final sample of leaders may be more interested in well-being among youth and have more experience in this field than the average club leader. This may affect their relations with youth club-goers, meaning our sample may run the risk of exaggerating positive experiences from the club. Still, we believe our sample strategy to be fruitful for approaching possible vulnerable youth from a very small group (6 per cent) of the total number of youth club visitors (Seland & Andersen, 2020).

In semi-structured interviews, we asked the young people about their interest in the club, its possible attractions including social relationships, experiences at the club and some comparisons between being at the club and taking part in other activities, such

as sports. We asked the club leaders about the frequent users, activities at the club and the role of the youth workers.

Findings

In the analysis, we investigate how different aspects of clubs relate to the young people's well-being, seen from the perspective of the young and the club workers, according to the three prerequisites of well-being sketched above. First, we focus on the club as an arena and a physical space for the frequent youth club-goers, second, on their social relationships within the club, and third, on the possibilities in the club for the young people's personal development.

A safe place to be(long)

One of the first elements the club-goers mention when asked what the club offers is the club itself as a physical space: 'it is somewhere to be'. Most say that they are at the club every day it is open. This does not mean that the club is merely a place in which to physically be when they are not at school. Rather, the youngsters tend to describe the place as 'like a home' and the community there 'like family'. As Laila says in Club Village, there is a difference between 'those who are like visitors, who are at the club once a week' and those who 'are here regularly – every time it is open. We are like a family.' We begin the analysis by exploring the recurring metaphors of home and family. Where do they come from?

One important push factor for coming to the club is that most of this study's participants have experiences with marginalisation, either personally, because they as individuals felt like outsiders, or structurally, because their neighbourhood offered few other possibilities. The young people in Club Suburbia came from an area that was relatively deprived and, they said, quite stigmatised in the media as a place with an

undue share of crime and drugs. Here, quite a few of the young people in the area come to the club on every club night, and many also come to activities that the club organises, for examples dance or music sessions. Few of the young boys and girls in Club Suburbia portrayed themselves as vulnerable or marginalised in the interview, but the neighbourhood did not offer them many other activities suitable for their age range. The football team had collapsed, there was no handball anymore and other activities were scarce. The club is where 'everything' happens – parties and events – and it is the one place to meet friends on a day-to-day basis.

One exception from Club Suburbia is Ahmed. Having moved from Pakistan with his family to the Oslo suburbs when he was nine without speaking Norwegian, he said that, 'I started here as soon as I came to Norway. It was how I got friends. […] So I came to the club and got to know people, and we were in the same school class after the summer.' The literal foreign-ness in Ahmed's story is slightly different to the stories of the majority of the young boys and girls from the other clubs, who to a larger extent experienced an outsiderness that was, as they presented it, related to individual characteristics. Most told stories of loneliness and not having friends, as in this conversation between Emma and Thomas in Club Mall:

> Emma: In primary school I didn't have many friends. I had, like, one good friend, but in seventh grade she was a bit bad, so we weren't friends any more. And then I didn't have any friends until the middle of ninth grade.
> Thomas: I was in a small group of three girls. The boys were always playing football, and I wasn't interested in football, so I only hung out with the girls and played girls' games. And I was a bit bullied for that. The girls stopped hanging around with me during fifth grade, and I was on my own until I started lower secondary school. … Then I made a couple of friends in my class, and we started hanging out here. And then suddenly I made a lot of friends.

When asked about their activities and what they were like before they started going to the club, most of the young people in Club Mall and Club Village reported that they had experiences of being bullied and of being different than the norm: they typically described themselves as 'being the one with the blue hair', 'the spaz' or 'the excruciatingly shy one'.

While the experiences of being outsiders and a lack of meaningful or safe things to do or places to be can be seen as push factors, leading them to need *somewhere else* to go, the club's role as a low-threshold, high-ceiling space that will welcome all, regardless of whether they have skills or money, is an important pull factor. Young people affected by problems at home, drugs, alcohol or behavioural problems tend to be over-represented, says Stina, the club leader in Club Mall, but the club also becomes 'a safe place for those who feel that they don't belong to the mainstream norm core-crew'. At the club, all these people can be together in a way that differs from being at school. 'It's like being in a bubble away from it all,' says John, the leader of Club Village.

The description of the club as a safe space is frequently echoed by the youths. Ali in Club Mall said: 'I can just come in the door and there is a completely different environment. I feel safe here. I feel safe outside too, but safe in a different way here.' For some, the safety of the club is vividly drawn in comparison with an unsafe home. In such cases, the club represents not only 'a place to be' but also a place of escape and retreat, where they can get away. Laila in Club Village said that she 'would much rather be here than at home. It wasn't good for me to be at home. Not at all. […] Here I found reliable and safe adults, food, a place to be, community, something social. It was fun. It was like my flat.' For Cecilia, whose home, like Laila's, was not safe, the youth workers became like her family – she said that the club leader 'is like a father to me'.

However, this strong sense of belonging and safety means that new people, who by default must be let into the club's public space, may not be enthusiastically welcomed. Having just mentioned the feeling of safety he gets when entering the club, Ali continues:

> Ali: Lately, there have been some people here that I don't like.
> Thomas: (Laughing) Well, then you understand how it was for us when you all came! (All laugh). You felt like intruders into our home!
> Lena: I really don't like the fact that new people come here, I feel like this is our place.

The sense of the club as a home and the ownership they feel towards the club space is so strong that others who enter this public space are seen as intruders. The hostility between this in-group of regular club goers towards the out-group of 'others' – the new club members - may be understood in light of the regulars' own biographies. They draw a strict line between their own 'before stories' *outside* the club, and the inclusion and belonging they have experienced *inside*. Accordingly, the new members pose a potential threat to what the club represents first and foremost: safety and a home away from home.

Social relations and identity formation

The club offers possibilities for positive relations with others and, through these, an emerging self-acceptance. For some of the young people, the club is primarily a nice way to stay in touch with friends. For most, however, the club itself has been instrumental for them to have friends at all. One of the most important roles these friendships play is to give resonance to their experiences, guidance and care, and consolation in times of distress. In Club Mall, Ali notes that the club is a good 'place to be if you're down', and follows immediately up with:

Ali: I found out that everyone in our group has been depressed.

Lena: Not diagnosed – but they have been down. *Very.* Like most of us who come here have had problems in their lives that make it necessary for them to have some other place to be. It is a place that we can escape to if we feel like we need it.

Ali: So these things are related; we know how a person feels. And we know what it is like, so we can relate.

When talking about groupings in the neighbourhood that they identify with, they define themselves as 'club people'. This identity, which develops in the young in a community of peers more than in relation to the family (Erikson 1968), is offered by the club. Thus, the club not only offers a *place* to be, but also *someone* to be: it is an arena where they may go through positive identity development. There is a close association between friendship and fostering a positive and secure sense of self. Erikson emphasises how, in youth, peers are vital for identity development in terms of the past, the present and the future. One key part of this is coming to terms with one's past – including one's 'dark side' – and accept who one is now: what Ryff would call 'self-acceptance. Before joining the club, many of these young people were self-identified outsiders and they describe themselves as having gone through some difficult times. Now, however, they no longer portray themselves as outsiders; they are part of a strong community with other 'club people', and their friendships are part of what identifies them now. Ali's insight that 'we know what it is like, so we can relate' suggests that it is in part their negative experiences that help make it possible for them to help one another, just as their outsiderness may be part of what makes them insiders in this community.

The club also offers crucial relationships with adults. Most say that they are close to the adults, that they can confide in them and that the adults have time to listen. Moreover, as the adults do not have the authority of parents, they cannot make decisions for them but they can give valuable advice, as these young people from Club Village attest:

Jonas: They are really good friends, very encouraging. Many of them might have gone through some of the same things themselves, and recognise what you're saying.

Cecilia: They give us a lot of advice and are very encouraging. […] It was the grown-ups that became my friends here first.

Laila: You can talk about your private life. They tell you stuff too, but they have to be professional. But they might tell *us* more, because we are here so often.

Jonas: We become like ordinary friends. People who are here often become more like friends.

Laila: The grown-ups are here to be with us, not to teach us anything. They have time to sit for an hour and just talk; there is nothing that they *have to* do.

This fluidity of roles described by Laila and Jonas may make it difficult for the young people to identify what work the youth workers actually do in the club. The club leader Stina says: 'Sometimes, the club-goers do not understand whether we actually work here or just hang out with them because we think it's fun. They wonder what we really do, what kind of jobs we really have.' This statement illustrates the subtlety of much youth work and the invisible but constant relationship building between the young and the adults. These relationships, the 'hanging out', equip the adults with information and ideas about how to facilitate the young people's development, while also building trust and confidence among them.

Moreover, youth workers have more responsibility than ordinary friends, something that is illustrated in particular by those whose needs were greater than the average, for example Cecilia in Club Village. She says that she was 'pretty crazy' when she started coming to the club. 'I was thrown out from time to time, but I was always let back in. They had a meeting with my mum and helped me … I got to know them better, and it was here that I wanted to be.' The club leaders speak of their relations with the club-goers, and often with their parents as well, as a method in club work. While pointing out that youth clubs are often justified by the preventive social work they do,

John in Club Village underlines that he does not think of himself as someone who 'prevents' but as a person who empowers young people through his relations with them. The actual empowering takes place through activities and events, but this is facilitated by constant relational work. The club leaders describe this relational work as a more or less continuous conversation, where you pick up from where you left off the last time you saw each other and follow up on particular questions or problems that were mentioned earlier. 'I might be the first to know that a kid is gay,' Stina says. 'Often, we refer them to the school nurse or other services, because we are not therapists. But we may be their first point of contact on such issues.'

Saad, the club leader of Club Suburbia, reports that young adults often return to talk to the club workers after having been regular visitors all through their adolescence. 'It could be about jobs, flats, religion, identity, sexuality, conflicts, the law, police or educational choices,' he says, 'because they have always been able to talk to us in a way that differs from the way they talk to their parents or their teachers.' This openness demands that the club worker be generally available, always prioritise the chance of having a conversation with those who drop by and never let go or give up on them. The young people too observe how the youth workers are different from other adults in their lives. Thus, in a life stage when important guidance will more ordinarily be welcomed from peers rather than adults (notwithstanding that guidance might be sorely needed), the youth workers sneak through the loophole and find a way for the young people to accept help and guidance through their friendly and peer-like relations with them.

Growth, purpose and confidence

When asked what has changed for them since they started going to the club, most say that they now feel more secure and confident. Several say that they have become less embarrassed and confident enough to talk to strangers, others that they have become

more social and have gained friends and a sense of security. Some, however, relate more dramatic changes:

> Cecilia: The club has changed my life. I went from being a really bad person, I was crazy. I ran after people with scissors. I did a lot of crazy stuff. But the club has been part of changing me into a better person. I have been through a lot, and one of the most important people in my life worked here. So things would have been pretty different if there hadn't been a club. I would have been pretty crazy still, maybe – and I definitely wouldn't have had the friends I've got now.

The safety of the space, the relationship between peers and the club workers and the young are all part of the journey to personal growth. All club leaders have stories to tell about situations where they followed a young person through troublesome times and all ended well. 'It's like having a lot of grown-up kids out there,' Stina says, 'and I've shed many happy tears on hearing their personal updates.'

The club leaders also relate the potential for personal growth to the young people's individual mastery in diverse club activities. 'The club should be a place where the young can be creative, but also be allowed to fail,' says John, leader of Club Village. After being regulars for a while, the 'hang-arounds' are gradually recruited to do voluntary club work, engaged by leaders who, as they all say, sense that they can grow from being given a small amount of personal responsibility. At the time of the interviews, all the boys and girls in the study were regularly doing voluntary work in the club. It might start with a small task, such as helping to arrange a club party. As they prove their trustworthiness, they gain more responsibility, until some club-goers that started as hang-arounds are promoted to assistants, some even with their own key to the club. This is not only beneficial for the people in question but also for enthusiasm and attendance: all the club leaders know that a party or an event has to be organised with

strong youth involvement, or people will not turn up for lack of interest. 'Mastery is an individual quality and effort,' club leader Stina says:

> Say we've got to know a young person in the club, and we discuss him at a staff meeting: 'What does he like? What is he good at? How can we push him in the right direction?' Then we come up with a strategy without him knowing. We give him tasks, challenges that are proportionate to his skills and interests. Then he will experience mastery all along the way.

The point, this club leader adds, is that mastery in one field of life can be transferred to other fields that are more challenging. This work is voluntary and unpaid, but it entails earned responsibility and remains central to the informants' perception of self-value and identity, both as individuals and as a group.

All the young people talk about having learnt skills in the club that will equip them for the labour market. Many have gained a sense of purpose in life. In fact, a majority of those we interviewed wanted to become social workers and several were studying to become social workers. They talked about their experiences with voluntary work at the club as essential experiences that led them to these choices. As Samira in Club Suburbia says: 'I want to be a social worker, and I have gained a lot of experience working with children and young people […] through the club. I put in a lot of work and was really engaged […]. I wouldn't have had the same opportunities without that. Because of the club, I know what I want to study.' Work references and arrangements made by the club have also been important for getting some of the young people small jobs or contacts outside the club.

Self-realisation is a continuous process, but it is particularly in youth that the direction is literally life-changing. According to Erikson, the main task in youth is questioning oneself: one's direction, one's identity and purpose in life. The trajectories of the youths in this study commonly start from being friendless, depressed or in

different ways outsiders, to becoming someone for others, someone who belongs and someone skilled who is ready to help or work for others. Their educational choices reflect how they transform their experiences in the club into real-world capital.

The club leaders all say that many of the club-goers in general seem to feel that they have to hurry to 'be' someone and make something of their own assets or talents. Especially as expectations increase in school, being good at sports or simply being in control of your own life, club activities represent alternative mastery and self-esteem. One central aspect of youth clubs, according to the club leaders, is the activities that can generate a sense of mastery in the individual. Club leader Stina in Club Mall points to what she perceives as a growing concern about mental health problems and a tendency for young people to define themselves in such terms. She says, 'Then I say [to them]: "For the next two hours you and I will take a break from these problems; now we're going to climb this wall instead."' Saad, the club leader in Club Suburbia, says that the club's main role is to make it possible for young people to follow their personal dream.

For the frequent club-goers, however, the activity level is mostly at a bare minimum. When asked what they do on any ordinary day, they all answer that they normally 'hang out' or 'relax'. In all clubs, they play a lot of cards. At Club Village they say, 'We just sit around and relax, play cards and watch TV'. They are not asked to master or perform anything in the club that they are not comfortable doing, and their choices are autonomous – one of Ryff's dimensions of well-being – in the sense that they do not look to others outside the club for approval. There is even a hint of rebellion in not doing what their peers do in an ordinary day. As Cuzzocrea suggests, in an era that attaches great weight to individualism and a high level of activity and busyness, 'it appears that not taking a choice, i.e. waiting, may itself signify the making of a choice'

(2018, p. 572). As such, their low level of activity may be seen as an active choice to *not* do.

In this context, we may understand the club as an Eriksonian moratorium. As a shelter from demands, the club enables slow but sure environmental mastery. Although there is an element of expectations of acquiring labour marked qualifications both inside and perhaps particularly outside the club that might impose a pressure on these vulnerable young people, they nevertheless seem to be able to master these expectations within the shelter of the club. They communicate this as a sense of purpose, rather than pressure, because the clubs create a low-threshold possibility for the young people to find a direction and a purpose in a context they already felt safe, with quite moderate demands in terms of education and external professional pressures.

Discussion

In this paper, we aimed to identify some key mechanisms in youth clubs for fostering the well-being of young people. The study does not relate to all young people, but to representatives of those frequent youth club-goers who need a time-out from social demands of fitting in where many feel they can or will not. Nevertheless, although the benefits of the youth club are perhaps easiest to spot in those with a vulnerable starting point, they are probably relevant to a larger group of youths.

We find that the youth clubs facilitate well-being for the vulnerable frequent club-goers, following the three prerequisites for well-being that we started out identifying. First, the club is a safe place to be. It is a place where the young feel welcome and often for the first time in a long time where they feel like they belong. It is a place where those who are vulnerable or marginalised find community and friendship that they have not found elsewhere. Young people who had trouble at home, identified the club as an alternative 'home' with a 'family' of adults and adolescent siblings.

Secondly, the club enables vital and positive relationships with peers and adults for youths who have hitherto been unable to form such networks. At the club, they take part in a strong community, shifting their identity from being someone who was marginalised or different, to someone who accepts them for who they are, and also, for who they *were*. Third, the club offers autonomy, freeing the club-goers from the conventions of school and parents and from seeking others' approval. It provides opportunities for personal growth and self-realisation and it may even offer a purpose in life, in stark contrast to these young people's experience from school. The young people in our study understood voluntary club work as essential experiences that led them to career choices, which, for many, meant training to become social workers themselves.

This conceptualisation of the prerequisites of well-being in youth maintains insights from psychological elements of well-being while at the same time attempting to bring Erikson's psychosocial theory of identity in youth into a youth sociological orientation towards understanding youth as a dynamic, organic and situated phase. This conceptualisation extends the investigation of well-being from merely revolving around 'risk' and 'protection' (cf. Wrench et al., 2013), moving from the associations of well-being as simply risk-free or protected living, towards well-being as a psychosocial description of young people finding ways to go through the 'Sturm und Drang' of youth safely. One conceptual key to this is Erikson's notion of the necessity of a moratorium in youth, as it may hold the process of changing and re-narration of selves that not necessarily is pleasant but nonetheless important in order to grow into adulthood. For the vulnerable youths in the three clubs, it was the club that posed as an institutionalised moratorium and gave them the opportunity to thrive and develop.

The club works as a moratorium because it provides young people with a legitimate shelter from adult demands and responsibilities – even more important for

those who feel overwhelmed by educational or relational requirements outside the club. That youth clubs may function as a transitional space that enables the young people to grow and develop a more secure sense of self is suggested by several other authors. McLaughlin, Irby and Langman have pointed out how youth workers in disadvantaged communities may have a bridging function between the mainstream population and the disadvantaged (McLaughlin, M., Irby, M., & Langman cited in Rhodes, 2004).

However, the club as a moratorium is, we suggest, closer to what Nolas calls a liminal space that 'offer[s] young people the opportunity of identity development and the crafting of biographical narratives, both in terms of being and to [sic] becoming, as old identities are shed and new ones were adopted' (Nolas, 2014 34). The young people in this study use their past (and often negative) experiences as a way to build community and to aspire to the future they want, but their identities shift in a particular fashion. Rather than the youths' identities developing in such a linear fashion as the quote from Nolas and Erikson's term 'positive identity' may suggest, the implications from this analysis goes further: Because the youth clubs provide a pause from societal demands, the youths are given the opportunity to experiment, to fail and to slowly decide on who they are without having to prove themselves. From being outsiders, desolate, alone and depressed, they find in the club a place of safety, a home and a 'family' in the company of others in similar situations, enabling them to become individuals with a sense of direction and purpose, close friends, self-assuredness and life skills.

Conclusion

The idea of young people needing a moratorium to successfully grapple with challenges and changes is intriguing as the need for a moratorium might be greater for modern young people than in Erikson's time. In fact, What Rosa (2003) has called the 'social

acceleration' of modern society, in the form of 'over-engagement', is perhaps one of the main risks to young people's well-being (Eckersley, 2011: 633). As suggested by Cuzzocrea, the opportunity today for young people to have a moratorium is under pressure from social acceleration and a 'constant sense of busyness' (Cuzzocrea, 2018: 14), although the need for one may be correspondingly greater. We therefore suggest that the need for an institutionalised moratorium such as a youth club may be all the more necessary in the current demanding social and educational climate.

Based on this study, the opportunity to do seemingly nothing appears to be one of the club's main functions for the well-being of vulnerable youths – a choice that seems radical in an era when 'doing' is what defines us. Through this apparent nothing-doing, the club makes room for self-acceptance, coming to terms with one's past, redefining one's past experiences as an outsider to become an insider, through positive relations with others. It may be particularly those who need the club because they have little else, and who are welcomed in and continue to go there, who benefit most from the opportunity to form a more secure sense of self. Their experiences and relationships in the club play a vital part in this process.

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