

Inequalities in the making: The role of young people's relational resources through the Covid-19 lockdown

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Abstract

Since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, youth researchers have reported increased inequalities between young people, but the social processes that drive these changes are not well understood. In this paper, we draw on rich longitudinal interview data following the same participants from a year before and into the midst of national lockdown during the pandemic in Norway to explore the unfolding of classed and gendered responses that were triggered in young people across the class spectrum. We find that advantaged, ambitious youths engaged in self-resourcing practices with support from their family that could make them even better positioned after the crisis. Youths that were socially vulnerable before the pandemic dealt with the situation alone and in highly gendered ways that seemed to amplify their insecure position in the peer group and community. Thriving youths from working-class communities engaged in lockdown practices that connected them deeper to the family and resourced them for gender traditional, local lives. Illuminating how a crisis prompts practices that increased emerging differences along classed and gendered lines, the paper shows that to grasp inequalities in the making, researchers must consider the importance and changing nature of resources – including relational resources in the family – over time.

Keywords: Agency, biographical method, crisis, gender, inequality, longitudinal, pandemic, projects of the self, social class, youth

Introduction

When the Covid-19 pandemic reached Norway in March 2020, state authorities instigated the same strict policy of lockdown as most European countries. All schools were physically closed, social distancing was mandatory, and leisure activities and social venues were closed. Research from different countries has documented how young people living at home during lockdown were even more than under normal circumstances supervised by adults (Mollborn, Mercer, & Edwards-Capen, 2021). The home became an ‘intense site of practically everything’ (Fullagar & Pavlidis, 2021, p. 4), including education (Blikstad-Balas, Roe, Dalland, & Klette, 2022), fitness routines (Clark & Lupton, 2021) and socialising (Bengtsson, Bom, & Fynbo, 2021). Research on young people’s experiences and development during the pandemic has showed that marginalised young people have become more disadvantaged, particularly in terms of educational achievement (Darmody, Smyth, & Russell, 2021) and mental health (Gibson, Schneider, Talamonti, & Forshaw, 2021). However, the social processes behind these outcomes and linkages are yet to be sufficiently understood.

In this paper, we analyse classed and gendered responses that were triggered in young people across the class spectrum as they encountered the pandemic and societal lockdown. We structure our investigation around an encompassing view of youths’ ‘self-projects,’ by which we understand retrospective and current self-presentations and orientations towards the future. How youths understand their place in life and think about their future is part of what orients them towards classed and gendered life trajectories. Akin to a *vital conjuncture*, ‘a temporary configuration of possible change’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 871), the pandemic may represent a phase in time in which ‘potential futures are under debate and up for grabs’ (Johnson-Hanks, 2002, p. 872) for some young people – but not all. We ask: Who among youths from different class and family backgrounds were positioned to reap benefits from the type of societal crisis that the covid-19 pandemic represented in terms of surety of the self and the future, and who risked losing ground and falling behind? How are such patterns connected to the projects of the self that youths invested in prior to the crisis, and what type of family resources matter? Our aim is to understand how this type of vital conjuncture can set young people’s self-projects in motion and trigger practices and adjustments that consolidate already emerging differences along classed and gendered lines.

Our biographical and broad approach to youths’ practices and investments before and during the pandemic draws on the qualitative tradition of youth sociology that has described the variety of ways that young people live and narrate themselves, from the enriched lives of ‘top girls and boys’—driven, stressed, and successful (Halvorsen, 2020)—and, at the other

end of the class spectrum, marginalised and poor youths on the periphery who in addition to lacking material resources are faced with class stigma (Nayak & Kehily, 2014). Following the Bourdieusian practice-oriented tradition, we see young people's self-projects as intimately linked to social structures, such as gender and class (Bourdieu, 2007), but also, following Elder-Vass (2007), as inherently agentic and thus susceptible to change and re-narration, perhaps particularly in times of crisis (Friedman, 2016; Howie & Campbell, 2016).

Most of the research on how young people have fared during the Covid-19 pandemic is based on data from one point in time. However, in order to grasp processes of social reproduction, it is vital to employ longitudinal data (Lamont, Beljean, & Clair, 2014; Lareau, 2015). Our analysis contributes to the emerging field of longitudinal qualitative research in youth sociology, which has documented how self-projects evolve over time in youth and work to set youths up for different futures, privileged and more precarious (Lareau, 2015; Thomson, 2011). Our analysis follows this line of enquiry and is based on data from an ongoing longitudinal study set in Norway, *Inequality in Youth*. We follow the participants from a year before and into the midst of national lockdown during the pandemic. The analysis suggests how a crisis may prompt practices and investments among youths that deepen differences along classed and gendered lines. We also suggest that it is necessary to move beyond an exploration of cultural and economic capital in order to fully grasp how family resources influence young people's movement through youth and extraordinary times. Our analysis highlights the importance of relational resources in the family and how their meaning changes during youth.

Self-projects and relational resources

The concept of 'self-project' is central to our analysis. Studies employing this concept often consider how people actively present, construct, and 'work on' the self (Giddens, 1991: 75). A key insight is that presenting a coherent self is both required and acquired (Bühler-Niederberger & König, 2011). However, the concept has been critiqued for exaggerating subjects as rational and as disembodied, for example overlooking structural constraints, such as issues concerned with gender (McNay, 2000). As Thomson notes, 'the overly intellectualist idea of a "project of the self" needs to be tempered with an understanding of practices that are embedded within social fields' (Thomson, 2011: 157). Thus, to work as an analytical tool, self-projects must be understood in broader terms than those explicitly stated as prospective or retrospective plans or life stories. In addition to what young people say about themselves

and their aspirations, we suggest that the investigation of self-projects benefits from including how young people describe the minutiae of their everyday life, what they do and with whom they interact and connect.

While ‘self-project’ can be viewed as an answer to the questions ‘who I am’ and ‘who should I be in the future’, the analysis of self-projects must include the question of ‘how do they get there’. This question may be answered by what Thomson (2011) calls a ‘biographical method’, a concept that highlights the interplay between self-projects and emotional investments, habits, and activities that young people, consciously or unconsciously, employ and that work to support or thwart their self-projects. Insight into these strategies—that we identify through young people’s practices and habits before and during lockdown—is a way to study embodied dispositions moulded by their environment and resources.

According to Bourdieu, social class is reproduced in the family through transmissions of cultural and economic capital (Bourdieu, 1994 [1979]). Empirical studies have shown that family relations also matter for social reproduction, and that there is a relational or emotional aspect of ‘class work’ (Morgan, 1996) in the family (Author a and b)(Author B and colleague)(Reay, 2004). Building on this research and to gain a better sense of how self-projects in youth emerge and are negotiated, we analyse the various ways young people are supported by relational resources, whether and how well-being and a sense of purpose is secured over time and during crisis. We focus on hands-on care, emotional support and joint projects that fuel feelings of worth and belonging in young people. We contribute to the literature on class and relational resources with a processual perspective; how the form and meaning of relational resources are subject to change over the course of youth for differently positioned young people is rarely investigated and poorly understood.

Inequality and the family during the pandemic

A general finding in the sociological literature on young people’s experiences during the pandemic is that key inequality markers became more articulated. Those already marginalised suffered most, commonly measured in terms of loneliness and mental health problems (Panda et al., 2021). In addition, classed health behaviour in the family was perpetuated or even exacerbated (Mollborn et al., 2021), and young people from disadvantaged families had the poorest learning outcomes from digital education (Engzell, Frey, & Verhagen, 2021). There are nuances to this picture, however. In Denmark, young people with low socioeconomic status experienced increased well-being during lockdown, while students with high status

showed signs of reduced well-being (Jensen & Reimer, 2021). In Norway, one study reported a slight reduction in well-being among the most resourceful (von Soest, Bakken, Pedersen, & Sletten, 2020). Thus, although young people's well-being during covid seems to be correlated to traditional inequality markers, in particular cultural and economic capital, this relationship is not straight-forward.

There are indications that the family became more important in young people's lives during the pandemic. A study from Norway found that children in general felt less sad and angry compared to before the pandemic, which may be linked to the increased time they spent with their parents, but they were also more influenced by family stress than before (Larsen, Helland, & Holt, 2021). A study from the UK found that young people who felt close to their parents experienced significantly fewer and less severe mental health problems and lower levels of loneliness (Cooper et al., 2021). While the role of support, connection and care in the family has been emphasised, there are few clues in this literature as to *how* relational resources mattered for young people from different social classes as they negotiated their emerging self-projects through the pandemic. This lack is linked to both methodology and perspective. Few studies have followed the same individuals from before the pandemic and the research has focused rather narrowly on outcomes rather than processes of self-formation.

Method and sample

Our analysis combines data from the first two waves of the *Inequality in Youth* study, which was designed to investigate various aspects of inequality and cultural variation between young people growing up under different circumstances in Norway. At both timepoints, the participants attended lower secondary school, and were relatively well supported by the structures of education and living with their parents. Other than that, their living conditions varied widely. Indicators from Statistics Norway (2019) and the full cohort national youth survey Ungdata (2019) were used to select four study sites: a wealthy urban neighbourhood, a flourishing, multi-cultural suburb, a rural village, and a small industrial town. Participants were recruited from one school in each site, and the samples from each school mirrored the general socio-demographics of the community.¹ We used the Bourdieu-inspired 'Oslo register data classification' (ORDC) scheme (Hansen, Flemmen, & Andersen, 2009) to categorise the participants in terms of social class based on information about both parents' education and occupation (see Eriksen & Stefansen, 2022a).

In the first wave of interviews in the autumn of 2018, 40 girls and 41 boys were interviewed in person at their schools by a team of researchers. They were then aged 12–13 and had just started lower secondary school. The interviews were conducted in their schools and lasted 45–60 minutes. They covered the participants’ childhood, ideas about the future, and their everyday life at the time of the interview. We employed the ‘life-mode’ interview template for the last part, which details practices and activities through one particular day (Haavind, 2001). The second wave interviews were conducted in April and May 2021 during national lockdown in Norway. This data collection was not planned as a part of the study’s original design, but something we instigated because of the unprecedented situation of lockdown. In this wave, we interviewed half of the original sample, 10 youths from each site, in total 20 girls and 20 boys, via telephone and video-calls, when the young people were at home. We detail below how we made that selection. The participants were then aged 14–15 and had lived with Covid-restrictions for between six and nine weeks. These interviews focused on everyday life during the lockdown period, how the participants coped with the strict infection control regime at the time, and their plans and hopes for the immediate and more distant future. These interviews were conducted mostly by the same researchers as in the first wave, which was instrumental in creating rapport with the informant and in following up in a natural manner.ⁱⁱ

Analysis

The starting point for the analysis is a typology of four types of self-projects based on the first wave of interviews (Eriksen & Stefansen, 2022a). The typology represents a ‘mental construct,’ not the same as reality but rather a thinking tool (Swedberg, 2014). The types were constructed by combining two dimensions that were central in youth’s self-presentations and imagined futures: their level of educational and/or career ambition or scope and their level of optimism or surety. We placed the participants along both dimensions, which informed a dynamic model of four different self-projects, labelled ‘local thriving’, ‘assured optimism’, ‘on shaky ground’ and ‘the narrow path’. As we only could interview half of the original number of participants for the second wave, we aimed to select those of the young people who stood out as most clearly placed within the parameters of each type of self-project. In the present analysis, we are using the original types as a useful ‘harbour’ (Weber cited in Swedberg, 2014) from which to understand how youth self-projects are negotiated over time.

We chose this strategy of purposeful sampling because it encourages theorizing, mindful that it entails a risk of downplaying nuances within the broader sample (Suri, 2011). Because our analysis focuses on changes within already conceptualised types, we have excluded the few youths who had fluctuated between self-projects over time. This is an interesting type, but analyses of their trajectories fall outside of what we are aiming for in this paper. The fourth type of self-project, youths on a narrow path, is also excluded from our analysis. This is due to lack of data as there were only three of the participants in the last wave of interviews who articulated this type of self-project. A common theme among them, however, was how heavy investments in one single field, be it sport or school, could continue despite of the pandemic. This can indicate a type of self-project that is more hardwired and less susceptible to change once it is established, but we lack data to explore this further.

The analysis that follows is divided into three sections—one for each of the three self-projects. In each section, we focus on what the youths said about themselves and their goals in life and on how they manoeuvre through life—their practices before and during lockdown with regard to school, leisure, and social relationships, particular with their parents. Using the notion of the biographical method (Thomson, 2011) as a sensitising concept, we highlight fields and activities that feature most clearly in each type and investigate how self-projects and methods were subject to change from before to mid-pandemic, and the role of the relational resources in the family for their trajectories. Due to the complexity of a comparison across both time and type, not all nuances within each type can be described. Instead, we illustrate shared characteristics within each type by drawing a few particularly illustrative cases to the forefront.

Rehearsing traditional gender roles: Local thriving youths following in their parents' footsteps

At age 12-13, before the pandemic, the 'local thriving' youths were well-adjusted, integrated in their communities, and had a positive outlook on life. Many lived in rural areas, and their families were working class or lower-middle class. At this age, they were not particularly focused on school or sports achievements and rarely expressed ambitions towards mobility or elite occupations in the future. Rather, they envisaged clear paths towards local work, family life, and staying in their home place close to their family and relatives. These paths were mostly gender-traditional—the girls typically aimed to follow their mothers' footsteps, for example, becoming care workers or lower-grade teachers, like Frøydis, who wanted to work

with small children when she grew up. She did not feel very accomplished at school, but she noted, 'It is okay as long as you do your best and put in an effort.' All the boys aimed for blue-collar jobs, or, as Kasper and Anders, careers in the police. Both boys and girls talked about close networks of friends and family and presented their parents and grandparents as secure and loving. Many of them also spent much time with their grandparents, who often lived close by, and some, like Sigrid, talked about almost daily visits. In short, their pre-teen, pre-pandemic self-project was optimistic and loyal, embracing the close and familiar and envisioning traditionally gendered career paths within their local communities.

During the lockdown in 2020, the now 14- and 15-year-olds saw their family as an unequivocal source of support and being together with family was of the utmost priority. If these youths had any concerns during lockdown, they mostly revolved around their grandparents' health. Sigrid told us during this time that in order to spend time together with her grandparents, she and her family had gone into a voluntary 14-day quarantine so it would be safe to visit them. Lockdown meant that their after-school activities had changed: Sports practice was digital or cancelled and the possibilities of seeing friends were radically restricted. Some were not allowed by their parents to see friends at all. Many had parents who had to be physically present at work, particularly those in the health and service sectors. However, in the afternoons and weekends the socialising was mostly within the family. There was an intense focus on doing and making things together in the family; going on walks or for drives around the countryside, eating together, watching TV, and playing games.

Some of the activities they chose during lockdown were distinctly gendered. Anders frequently used to go hunting with his dad before the pandemic. During lockdown, this outdoor orientation intensified. In the previous week before the interview, he had had 'three sleepovers and two daytrips with mates and family.' Now, he thought about going into the army instead of the police. Similarly, at the beginning of the eighth grade, Fredrik spent his money on a stuffed rabbit and flyfishing equipment, and he was into hiking and hunting. During lockdown, he had more time on his hands and, adding a new dimension to his fishing, had started fly-tying: 'Actually, I have started fly-tying. I think that is quite fun. It takes a long time; I make them from scratch. (...) I fish and do things you can do in nature.' Lockdown afforded him the opportunity and time to further his efforts and skills in his hobby.

The girls showed a similar deepening of gendered patterns during lockdown. Many of them had started baking cakes for the family, cooking dinner, or making things for the home, like Emma, who had started carving cutting boards with her grandmother. Several girls were tidying and sorting things out around the house, as Sigrid said: 'Actually, I have cleaned out

my whole room (laughs), cleaned out a closet and threw out quite a lot of stuff. And I did a jigsaw puzzle, of all things.’ The boys’ orientation towards the outdoors and the girls’ orientations towards household interests did not overlap. But they shared an overarching self-project revolving around securing their close network and continuing a path trodden by their parents, comprehensible and straightforward in traditionally gendered trajectories. Whereas important conditions were changed, the alterations they had to make during lockdown did not substantially affect their self-projects—their future orientations or their optimism. Moreover, their habits, priorities, and tempo remained mostly the same as before the pandemic; if anything, their biographical methods from before the pandemic were intensified during lockdown. Across time, a pre-condition to their self-project was a loving and secure relationship to their parents and wider family.

A new balance: Assured optimists embracing the calm

Before the pandemic, those whom we identified as assured optimists (cf. Maxwell & Aggleton, 2014) could at the age of 12-13 typically see themselves living in urban spaces as adults, often abroad in places like New York or London, with top jobs and an elite education. Their ambitions for their careers were always high, but often eclectic—they conveyed a general sense of optimism that they could become whatever they wanted, for example Victoria, whose future plans spanned studying law, becoming a comedian, or an actress. They presented themselves as accomplished, confident, and mobile. There were mostly girls, but also a couple of boys in this type. They were close to their parents, most of whom had elite jobs, higher education, and their families were characterised by an abundance of economic, cultural, and relational resources. Like the other boys and girls in this group, Rebecca led a very hectic life at the age of twelve; she was ambitious academically, had several organised leisure activities, and played on the first teams in two sports. The life of the assured optimists was filled with friends and activities, and through their talk of parties and socialising they gave the impression of being at the centre of their social circle. Rebecca’s recent birthday, for example, was celebrated in her home in a leafy suburb with 40–50 of her friends present. Their self-project in the eighth grade may be summed up as optimistic and assured, goal-oriented and ambitious. Their method included playing on many strings and working towards success in every arena with grit and self-discipline, as many ambitious and stressed young people today (Eriksen, 2022).

During lockdown, digital school and lack of intense socialising had a most profound impact on these young people. Our anticipation was that these resourceful youths would suffer during lockdown due to the abrupt halting of things they loved before the pandemic. But while Otilie and Nora noted that they missed the social energy from the school class now that their school was closed, accustomed to drawing energy from socialising in larger groups, this was not the case for most young people in this type. Rather, most discovered that they could thrive on their own, often in surprising contrast to their life before the pandemic. Leni, for example, was a very social girl when we interviewed her before the pandemic. During lockdown, however, she said, ‘I guess I have learned that I’m not that much of a social person anyway and that I can make do just as well with being at home for a very long time without meeting anyone.’ Josef had a similar revelation, saying that he during lockdown had discovered that he enjoyed spending time alone. This change towards calm and lower stress was also visible in relation to schoolwork. We had also anticipated that that home-schooling could have interrupted the optimists’ ambitious academic goals, but in general, they were no less ambitious than before. Rather, they experienced lockdown as something positive—a time out—that gave them more control. They expressed joy from being in charge of their own work, and, as Katrine pointed out, the benefit of lockdown was that she got a lot more schoolwork done. This was true for many, partly because leisure activities and socialising that took up much of their time normally could safely and legitimately be put on pause for the time being. There was little fear of missing out when they knew that no one else was being social.

Moreover, this change of pace instigated a mental shift. Now, most looked back at the time before lockdown as detrimentally busy. At 12 years old, Hanne was a self-professed perfectionist, and she told us then that her mother and teacher helped her handle the achievement pressure. At 14, reflecting on the time before lockdown, she said, ‘Oh, I got very quickly exhausted. I very often felt overrun. (...) Because before, you came home and had one hour before practice, and you just quickly made some food and then went out the door and then back again. It was just a lot of chaos, really. And now everything is so much calmer.’ Rebecca perceived a similar change in herself with fascination:

I’m more relaxed and peaceful now (...), and I sleep more and eat more regularly. I even have more time for all the things that I usually didn’t have time for. (...) I don’t have to stress over everything and think about things that I should have done. It is tremendously lovely (...), and I am much less stressed and afraid of everything. I take

things more as they come. I'm fascinated by that—about myself too! (laughs). It is not typically me, but things happen, and you change.

Whereas she presented herself as tough and ready for anything as a 12-year-old, she now reflected that she used to be 'afraid of everything.' This fear can be related to the ceaseless striving to uphold high achievement in every arena, akin to British middle-class parents' frantic use of enrichment activities for their children to hold a 'fear of falling' at bay (Vincent & Ball, 2007). A similar anxiety, perhaps, was somewhat appeased during lockdown for these young people.

Their connection to their family was like that of the local thriving youths in terms of the sense of support and love they conveyed both before and during lockdown. The assured optimists, however, talked explicitly of a change in the family's habits that was substantially different. Most had parents who normally had office jobs, but now worked from home, and the families suddenly found—and embraced—a renewed pattern of togetherness. Their parents, like themselves, embraced the comparatively calmer days, and the rhythm in the whole family had slowed down. Like the families of the local thriving youths, they went on more walks together, played more board- and card games, and had more movie nights. That their parents worked from home further emphasised the family togetherness in a direction similar to that of a work community; Marte and Victoria enjoyed that their family now ate all meals together—breakfast, lunch and dinner, and Victoria's father loved helping her with her schoolwork also during office hours. Lockdown amplified the possibilities for parents to engage in practices of 'enriching intimacy' (Stefansen & Aarseth, 2011) with their children.

The lockdown seemed to prompt a new self-reflexivity in these youths and a growing recognition of the value of self-care and time-outs from a hectic life. Like the local thriving youths, they had shared projects with their parents and a renewed togetherness, but for the optimists, the overarching project was also a scaling down. Now, we saw a conscious deceleration and an emerging self-reflexivity in seeing one's past self in hindsight as having been too busy. Their goals of achievement and elite futures were still intact, but their biographical method had changed substantially. Both the change and their overarching achievement-oriented project were supported through the parents' example and hands-on support.

Seeking belonging from the bedroom: Departing from a shaky foundation

Before the pandemic, the young people we identified as ‘on a shaky foundation’ shared a low level of security and optimism. Having either low, vague, or unrealistic ambitions and loose or complicated social ties with peers, they rarely expressed positive feelings for the local community. They described troubled or unenthusiastic relationships with school and often had low school achievements. Most had parents in working-class professions or parents who received welfare benefits. Many had broken or troubled family relationships, and their descriptions of their home environment lacked the warmth and liveliness that characterised the local thriving and optimist types. A typical example is Are, who lived in a small town with his mother who struggled with health problems. At 12, he mentioned daily arguments with his mother and sister and that he rarely saw his father who lived in another part of the country. Similarly, Janne described conflicts with both her parents. She spent most of her time at home in her room and seemed detached from family life. One defining feature of their biographical method at that time was a constant search for belonging and recognition, likely to be related to their precarious connection to and lack of self-confidence in interactions with peers.

There were, however, marked gender differences in how they worked at achieving this. Most boys conveyed difficulties with fitting in among peers, like Jonas, who had been bullied all through primary school, or Noah, who said he had no friends. They rarely participated in organised leisure activities; gaming filled much of their time. They mostly played shooting games like *Fortnite*, *Overwatch*, and *For Honor*, and it was also here that many of the boys looked for—and also found—community and validation. Among girls, efforts to improve bodily appearance figured prominently in their narratives at this time, mostly through excessive dieting. Like the boys, the girls were not active in organised sports, but some exercised alone, like Hedda, who talked about her worries related to becoming both ‘fatter and thinner’. In contrast to the local thrivers and the optimists, these young people did not talk much about their parents in positive terms. There was more conflict and separation in these families, and the youths kept their worries about relations and body issues to themselves. We heard little about the family ‘hygge’ that was so important for the other two types.

Lockdown seemed to plummet the girls into an even more intense project of self-improvement strictly directed towards appearance. When she was 12, Janne had been one of many girls from the rural village who were preoccupied with looks and dieting. In the

lockdown interview, she described that she had changed clothing style and started exercising a few months earlier and that her efforts had resulted in increased social recognition: 'I feel that I am more liked now by the girls, I feel more popular. (...) I know they thought "we don't want to hang with her, she doesn't look good, weird rumours go around about her." But now it has changed. I have more friends.' During lockdown, socialising was reduced to video chats in the afternoon. Spending much time alone, she felt propelled back to a time when she had few friends and little to do, except thinking too much. 'I'm bored, and think like "what's the point in living now?" With Covid here, it isn't fun anymore. I won't be able to meet people for ages, and I don't know when it will pass.' Her hard-won confidence was fragile because it relied on positive feedback and recognition of her changed looks. Jannike was in a similar situation. Before the school closed, she felt as though her friends had kept her out; they had done things without her, and she had just had a fight with them the day before the school closed. When we interviewed her almost a month into lockdown, she felt isolated and had had no contact with them. She worried a lot about what the others might think of her, had started to work out much more than before and eat healthily, and to drink lots of water 'because I get spots and stuff on my face, so I try to stay healthy because I want to get rid of them before school starts again.' The boys, whose biographical method before the pandemic was primarily to seek companionship or refuge in online arenas, did not seem to change their method during lockdown. They gamed even more, often alone or occasionally with online friends—though seldom with friends from school or the local community. The same continuation was evident for all but one of the boys in this type, Are. Struggling to find friends in eighth grade, just before lockdown he had been introduced to a new group of people with whom he had started to socialise outdoors despite the restrictions.

Lockdown did not significantly change these young people's search for belonging and recognition but rather highlighted the short-term perspective of their self-projects – and how they were alone in their struggles. Aiming at finding solid ground and a sense of belonging here and now among local peers or online, they did not seem able to mobilise resources from the family to support them or compensate for their fragile social relationships among peers. Coming from all sites, they share characteristics with the urban working class that Vincent et al. call 'struggling to cope', people who are 'using all their agency in dealing with the demands of daily life' (Vincent, Ball, & Braun, 2008, p. 71). For these young people, the struggles were not primarily about material resources, but about their sense of security in the peer group.

Discussion: Widening differences through subtle changes

Lockdown, together with the passing of time and the young people's maturation, brought to a large extent forth continuation, rather than abrupt changes, to young people's self-projects. While there are some nuances, these self-projects were anchored in social class and established at an early age. Overall, the analysis suggests that the crisis impacted on the self-projects by prompting practices that amplified already existing differences along classed lines. The self-projects also became more distinctly gendered. Below, we suggest how the analysis contributes to the understanding of the unfolding of young people's lived gender and class over time. Particularly, our emphasis here is on relational resources in the family and their impact on the way that these adjustments are made.

The most privileged type in our typology—the assured optimist type—mostly came from well-resourced and supportive families in the upper middle-class. At age 12 and 13 they were engaged in a range of self-resourcing practices and invested heavily in school. They worked hard and had high ambitions. The sudden change in pace and mobility that lockdown represented did not rattle them. Nor did they simply motor on. Rather, during lockdown, they used the timeout consciously, entering a self-reflexive mode often associated with the middle classes (Threadgold and Nilan, 2009). In most cases, they shared this slowing down with their parents who worked from home. At first glance, the optimists' slowing down could be seen as a complete remodelling of their self-projects, but our interpretation is the opposite. They were still oriented towards being the best in the field where their effort made sense at the moment—education—with strong emotional and practical support from their parents, and investments that simultaneously seemed to let them follow their heart and would benefit their long-term plans. Taking the long-term view on what they could accomplish in life, the lockdown meant that they could afford to embrace a new tranquillity. The 'futuraity' that has been linked to middle-class parents' anxiety in general (Ball, 2003) thus seemed to protect these youths from stress during lock-down. An already privileged position, secured by an abundance of family resources, thus afforded the opportunity to emerge after the pandemic as more balanced and healthier—and even better positioned.

On the other end of the class spectrum, relational resources are the one form of capital, more pronounced than economic or cultural capital, that separate between the shaky foundation and local thriving types, although there also were subtle differences along formal class dimensions. The local thriving type is distinctly working-class and rural but is rooted in the less precarious fractions of the working classes. Their families mostly come from the

‘managing to cope’ fraction among the working classes (Vincent et al., 2008), those who lead lives without the struggle caused by economic hardship and relationship breakdown. Their self-projects were not growth-oriented, in the middle-class sense of growth as expansion of the self (Sherman, 2017), but rather they intensified by connecting to a local and traditionally-gendered family-oriented lifestyle. With the close support of their parents, the local thriving youths seemed to move even closer to a rural working-class ideal of family life, as a ‘sheltered space’ for relaxation, joy, and togetherness (Stefansen & Farstad, 2010), which may suggest an increasing of the rural/urban divide in young people’s selfhoods described by Eriksen and Stefansen (2022a).

The local thriving boys and girls seemed to joyfully embrace more gendered identities, their practices connecting them even deeper to a local and family-oriented lifestyle. That the girls spent much time nesting may signify a desired narrowing towards family life and a nurturing role associated with traditional working-class femininity in which self-realisation happen at home (Skilbrei, 2005). Similarly, the boys’ practices of hunting and fishing, a distinctively male endeavour, at least in rural communities (Krange and Skogen, 2007), may point towards an embrace of a traditional working-class masculinity. Although seemingly showing a departure from contemporary ideals of gender equality, these practices may represent secure and comfortable traditional gendering. There was little identity struggle; rather, we see a desire to be part of the local community, towards the ‘fitting in’ found in other studies on working class cultures (Eriksen & Stefansen, 2022b; Gillies, 2005). The gendered future paths we saw in the eighth grade were recognisable in their dispositions, everyday activities, and hobbies. As such, their method represents not only a continuation but also a maturing of their self-project in a manner that suggests a good fit with the local, gender traditional working-class culture.

The youths who at age 12 and 13 carved out their self-projects from a shaky foundation grew up in families in the lower echelons of the working classes. During the pandemic these youths were either even more entangled in striving for recognition from peers or withdrawing from the local community. Signs of self-exclusion and a ‘sense of restriction’ (Lareau, 2003) ran through their narratives. Some of their practices could evolve into more serious problems, such as eating disorders and self-depreciation. Most striking in these interviews is the sense that they were struggling on their own, lacking parental guidance and intervention. The lack of sufficient family support may leave them in an even more insecure and vulnerable position than before.

Whereas the gendering of the self-projects of the assured optimists and the local thriving youths seemed willed and desired, the gendering of the shaky foundation type of self-project appeared less agentic. The vulnerable boys who moved towards retreated masculinity and the vulnerable girls who took to the hyper-femininity of dieting and appearance anxiety illuminate their limited possibility for agency. While their emotional investments during lockdown were tied to difficult or absent relationships in the past, boys' and girls' methods differed. Although the boys seemed to be isolated from their local community, they did sometimes meet friends online, which should not be underestimated as an important social arena particularly for boys (Leonhardt and Overå, 2021). However, this type of quiet and withdrawn masculinity is different from the traditional working-class masculinity and the active, involved physical togetherness we saw among the local thriving boys and their fathers. The girls were conflictedly entangled in and dependent upon peer relationships, and their strategies for fixing these relationships were interrupted by the pandemic. The lack of recognition from their peers was felt more acutely and not compensated by family-projects of any kind, and seemed to spur them deeper into a quest of hyper-femininity.

For all types, their changing biographical methods suggest an increased pull towards gendered pathways when the daily structures and hassles ceased during lockdown. It is noteworthy that we see cases of the biographical method changing radically during the pandemic while the self-project remained largely intact, as was the case for the optimists, although we might see over time that this change of practices and habits may alter their self-projects – the way they see themselves and their future. Our findings also underline the importance of attending to intra-class differences when studying the unfolding of classed life trajectories, and the differentiating role played by relational resources in the family that not necessarily follow traditional class divisions.

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