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How Young Women Negotiate Their Imagined Futures in the Finnish Work Society

Emma Lamberg

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The originality of this publication has been checked in accordance with the University of Turku quality assurance system using the Turnitin OriginalityCheck service.

Cover Image: Olli Jakonen

ISBN 978-951-29-9085-6 (PRINT)
ISBN 978-951-29-9086-3 (PDF)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)
Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2022

UNIVERSITY OF TURKU
Faculty of Social Sciences
Department of Social Research
Sociology
EMMA LAMBERG: Becoming Workers: How Young Women Negotiate Their Imagined Futures in the Finnish Work Society
Doctoral Dissertation, 146 pp.
Doctoral Programme of Social and Behavioural Sciences
December 2022

ABSTRACT

This study examines how young women at the threshold between post-compulsory education and the labour market become workers and imagine their futures in the Finnish work society. More specifically, the study investigates how culturally shared and dominant scripts and ideals of the work society are negotiated, felt and lived by young women, showing how these scripts and ideals shape the aspirations of differently positioned young women.

The study is situated at the intersection of cultural sociology and the sociologies of gender, work and youth. Theoretically, it builds on previous debates on gender, work and subjectivity in the post-Fordist, postfeminist context. The study draws on interviews with 39 young women collected in Finland between 2017 and 2018. The participants of the research studied in the following two educational contexts: upper-secondary vocational education in social services and health care, and tertiary education in media and communication programmes in polytechnics. The interviews were complemented by periodical observations at the participants' educational institutions.

The study comprises three sole-authored peer-reviewed articles and an integrative chapter. It identifies three sets of expectations that young women associate with their imagined futures and unpacks the contradictions associated with each set. First, the study maps how young women studying to become practical nurses in vocational education programmes negotiate *the expectation of not 'becoming stuck' in institutionalised care work*. The analysis revealed that the ethos of self-development celebrated in education often clashed with the accelerated work conditions that the participants encountered during their initial work experiences. Furthermore, the analysis shows that young women's positions in the hierarchies of the Finnish work society constrained their possibilities of 'moving forward' from institutionalised care work. Second, the study examines how female media students in tertiary education negotiate *the expectation of cultivating an individualised and productive subjectivity*. The analysis showed the centrality of postfeminist and entrepreneurial imperatives in the negotiations of young women studying to become media workers, yet it also emphasises that young women's engagement with these imperatives is ambivalent. Finally, the study scrutinises how *the expectation of finding pleasure in work* structures both the care work students' and the media students' narratives. The results showed that young women make sense of their

imagined futures through the cultural ideal of emotionally fulfilling work and revealed the field-specific contradictions that the participants had to navigate to become aligned with this ideal.

By synthesising these findings, this study makes multiple contributions to scholarship. The study presents an approach that examines changes and continuities in post-Fordist work and its gendered aspects with theories of postfeminism and subjectivity. Consequently, the study suggests that the culturally dominant positioning of young women as autonomous, aspirational and self-optimising subjects is reflected in the research participants' narratives. However, the analysis emphasises that young women's engagement with this mode of subjectivity is not total and uncritical but pragmatic and contradictory. In addition, the study shows how young women's positions in the hierarchies of Finnish society constrain their possibilities of inhabiting the culturally idealised, agentic, self-transforming and value-accruing subjectivity: the ideal practical nurse is still constituted as a gendered and racialised docile subject who stays in her place, while the ideal for media workers is to cultivate an entrepreneurial and economised subjectivity. Furthermore, the study demonstrates the need to consider how the culturally dominant work ethic, which invites people to approach work as a route to self-realisation, is lived at the subjective level through feelings. The study approaches the post-Fordist work ethic using feminist theorising on emotions and argues that self-directed emotional work plays a crucial role in shaping how young women become workers. Thus, the study indicates that socially shared, work-related feeling rules crucially inform young people's work orientations in contemporary work societies.

KEYWORDS: youth aspirations, transitions, work, education, gender, post-Fordism, postfeminism, media work, care work, Finland

TURUN YLIOPISTO
Yhteiskuntatieteellinen tiedekunta
Sosiaalitieteiden laitos
Sosiologia
EMMA LAMBERG: Becoming Workers: How Young Women Negotiate Their Imagined Futures in the Finnish Work Society
Väitöskirja, 146 s.
Yhteiskunta- ja käyttäytymistieteiden tohtoriohjelma
Joulukuu 2022

TIIVISTELMÄ

Tämä tutkimus tarkastelee, miten koulutuksen ja työelämän taitekohdassa olevat nuoret naiset tulevat työntekijöiksi ja kysyy, millaisina he näkevät tulevaisuutensa suomalaisessa työyhteiskunnassa. Eritoten tutkimus kartoittaa, miten kulttuurisesti jaetut, arkijärkiset työn liittyvät ihanteet ja arvot kytkeytyvät nuorten naisten työhön liittämiin merkityksiin, kokemuksiin ja tunteisiin. Näin tarkastellaan sitä, miten työyhteiskunnan normatiiviset ihanteet muovaavat erilaisissa yhteiskunnallisissa asemissa olevien nuorten naisten työtä koskevia toiveita ja pyrkimyksiä.

Tutkimus paikantuu sukupuolen, työn ja kulttuurin sosiologian sekä nuorisotutkimuksen risteykseen. Tutkimuksen teoreettinen viitekehys kiinnittyy laajasti sukupuolta, työtä ja minuutta jälkiteollisessa ja postfeministisessa yhteiskunnallisessa kontekstissa käsitteleviin keskusteluihin. Tutkimuksen aineisto koostuu vuosina 2017 ja 2018 kerätyistä haastatteluista 39 nuoren naisen kanssa. Tutkimuksen osallistujat opiskelivat kahdella koulutusalalla ja -tasolla: sosiaali- ja terveysalan ammatillisessa koulutuksessa toisella asteella ja media- ja viestintäalan koulutuksessa ammattikorkeakouluissa kolmannella asteella. Haastatteluaineistoa on täydennetty koulutusohjelmissa kerätyllä havainnointimateriaalilla.

Tutkimus koostuu kolmesta yksinkirjoitetusta, vertaisarvioidusta artikkelista ja yhteenveto-osiosta. Tutkimusaineiston temaattisen analyysin perusteella tutkimus tunnistaa nuorten naisten työhön ja tulevaisuuteen liittämiä vaatimuksia ja näihin vaatimuksiin kytkeytyviä ristiriitoja. Ensimmäiseksi tutkimus kartoittaa, miten lähihoitajiksi opiskelevat nuoret naiset pyrkivät välttämään “jämähtämistä” laitostuneeseen hoitotyöhön. Tulokset osoittavat, että hoitajana kehittymisen eetos määrittää opiskelijoiden ammatillisia ihanteita, mutta tämä ihanne on ristiriidassa kustannustehokkaasti järkeistetyn, kiivastahtisen hoitotyön todellisuuden kanssa, mikä saa osan opiskelijoista kyseenalaistamaan lähihoitajaksi jäämisen. Samalla tulokset kertovat hoitotyön sisäisistä, risteävistä hierarkioista, joissa tehostettu ja aliresursoitu laitostunut hoitotyö määrittyy etenkin rodullistettujen ja toiseutettujen maahanmuuttajanaisten työksi. Toiseksi tutkimus tarkastelee, miten media-alalle valmistuvat nuoret naiset neuvottelevat alalla pärjäämiseen liittämiään vaatimuksia alati itseään kehittävästä ja tuotteliaasta minuudesta. Tulokset osoittavat, että postfeministiset ja yrittäjämäistä minuutta korostavat jäsennykset rakenteistavat media-alaa opiskelevien naisten työelämää ja itseä koskevia ymmärryksiä. Tutkimus esittää kuitenkin, että nuorten naisten sitoutuminen näihin jäsennyksiin on

läpikotaisin ristiriitaista. Lopuksi tutkimus tuo yhteen media-alaa ja hoitoalaa opiskelevien nuorten naisten kokemukset ja osoittaa, että nuoret naiset jakavat normatiivisen ihanteen emotionaalisesti palkitsevasta työstä. Tutkimus tuo esiin, miten nuoret naiset ovat tunnetasolla kiinnittyneitä työhön ja osoittaa, miten oman minuuden linjaaminen emotionaalisesti palkitsevan työn ihanteen mukaiseksi edellyttää alakohtaisten, työhön liittyvien ristiriitojen ja epävarmuuksien käsittelemistä.

Kahta erilaista alaa ja niiden erityispiirteitä toisiinsa kontrastoimalla tutkimus piirtää monivivahteisen kuvan nuorten naisten kiinnittymisestä suomalaiseen työyhteiskuntaan 2010- ja 2020-lukujen taitteessa. Tutkimus osoittaa, että kulttuurisesti vallalla olevat käsitykset nuorista naisista yksilöllisinä, itseään kehittävinä ja autonomisina subjekteina jäsentävät haastateltujen nuorten naisten tapoja ymmärtää itseään ja työtä koskevia toiveitaan. Samalla tutkimus korostaa, että sitoutuminen näihin käsityksiin ei ole suoraviivaista tai täydellistä, vaan käytännöllistä ja ristiriitaista. Toisaalta tutkimus osoittaa, että postfeministiset kulttuuriset jäsennykset löytävät enemmän kaikupohjaa media-alalta, jossa ihannetyöntekijän oletetaan yrittäjämäisesti kehittävän omaa persoonaansa, kuin hoitoalalta, jossa ihannelähihoitaja määrittyy rodullistetuksi ja palvelualttiiksi subjektiksi. Lisäksi tutkimus esittää, että niin media- kuin hoitoalalla työntekijäksi tuleminen edellyttää emotionaalista itsetyötä, jota ohjaavat sosiaalisesti jaetut, työtä koskevat tunnesäännöt. Näin se tuottaa uusia teoreettisia näkökulmia työelämän sosiologiseen tarkasteluun lähestymällä jälkiteolliseen työhön liitettyä lupausta työstä itsen toteuttamisena feministisen tunteiden sosiologian lähtökohdasta.

ASIASANAT: nuorisotutkimus, siirtymät, työ, koulutus, sukupuoli, jälkifordismi, postfeminismi, media-ala, hoitoala, Suomi

Acknowledgements

My immense gratitude goes to the 39 young women whom I interviewed for this research. I literally could not have done this work without your participation; thank you for taking the time to share your stories and thoughts with me. I am also grateful to the educational institutions for granting me research permissions. My warmest thanks go to the teachers who let me observe their classes and shared their thoughts in informal conversations.

I am grateful to my supervisors, Suvi Salmenniemi and Mona Mannevuo, for their commitment at various stages of this work. Suvi, thank you for your support and for providing me with the space and encouragement to become an independent researcher and find my own way of doing research. Thank you also for providing an example – one which I have sought to follow – of how to do research that is at once attuned to the structural inequalities in contemporary societies and respectful of the experiences of people who seek to build their lives in such societies. Mona, thank you for your encouragement in one of my first gender studies courses as an undergraduate student, as well as for your continued support ever since. I would also like to thank you for sharing with me your enthusiasm for and dedication to research, as well as for teaching me how to persevere and value the time and effort that long-term projects like this one require.

I would not have been able to conduct this research without funding. Therefore, I wish to thank the Alfred Kordelin Foundation, the TOP Foundation, the Oskar Öflund Foundation, the Department of Social Research at the University of Turku and the University of Turku Graduate School for funding my work.

I wish to thank Christina Scharff and Lena Näre, the pre-examiners of this dissertation. Thank you for reading the manuscript and offering encouragement as well as constructive criticism, which helped me clarify the manuscript in its final stages. My research has definitely benefited from your feedback, while your own work – on gender, (post)feminism and cultural work and on the ethics and political economy of care in a changing welfare state, respectively – has been a constant source of inspiration for a beginning scholar. I also wish to thank Christina Scharff for agreeing to be my opponent in the public examination of this dissertation. In

addition, many thanks to Merja Anis for agreeing to chair the committee evaluating this research.

In the final stages of my work, I have had the pleasure of working as a researcher on two intellectually stimulating and societally relevant research projects. In the Equality to Economics, Feminism to Fiscal Policy (Femtie) project, I have had the privilege of studying economic policy and knowledge with Hanna Ylöstalo, Heini Kinnunen and Inna Perheentupa. I wish to thank Hanna for inviting me to work at Femtie. In particular, thank you for sharing your passion for reading and writing; your advice on how to plan and manage multiple writing projects was crucial for finalising this research. Heini, thank you for your contagious laughter and our inspiring discussions, both of which have made working together a great pleasure. Thanks also to the Kone Foundation for enabling our academic freedom in the Femtie project. More recently, I have become a member of the Taova research project, where I have had the joy of examining Finnish gender equality policy together with Anna Elomäki, Hanna Ylöstalo and Raisa Jurva. Thank you to Anna and Hanna for providing an inspirational example of how to put academic research at the service of society. Thank you, Raisa, for being such a wise companion as we have started to navigate the new terrain of policy documents and discourse. I would also like to thank the Finnish government for funding our work in Taova.

Thank you to my friends and colleagues at the Department of Social Research and beyond. I would especially like to thank Inna Perheentupa, Kia Andell, Harley Bergroth, Joni Jaakola, Henri Koskinen, Ella Poutiainen and others members of our doctoral researcher seminar group for their peer support and thoughtful comments. With many of you, we exchanged papers and provided comments to one another outside the seminar. In particular, I wish to thank Inna – in addition to my supervisors, you have been the most committed reader of my work; thank you for finding the time to read my work and both encouraging and challenging my thinking. For friendship and support, I would also like to thank Iida Kukkonen, Laura Heiskala, Johanna Nurmi, Irene Prix, Heta Pöyliö, Elina Sutela, Jukka Vuorinen and other former and present colleagues at the Department of Social Research. In particular, I would like to thank Elina Sutela for our discussions on life in academia, a crucial form of peer support. Thank you also to the Kultva researcher network at the Department for providing me with a sense of community and a space in which I could share enthusiasm for social research and theory.

I also wish to thank everyone who has provided me with help and guidance at various stages of my research. Before embarking on this project, I had the pleasure of learning how to conduct research from the members of the VoxClass research project, in which I worked as a research assistant. Thank you, Anu-Hanna Anttila, Harley Bergroth, Ralf Kauranen, Lauri Lahikainen, Kati Launis, Katariina Mäkinen and Jussi Ojajärvi. Special thanks go to Ralf, who acted as a mentor during the

project, and to Katariina, who read and commented on one of my early grant proposals and the first article related to this research. At the Department of Social Research, Irene Prix and Laura Kemppainen helped me at the very early stages of this research – Irene by commenting on the first grant proposals and Laura by commenting on my interview guide. In the process of conducting this research, I have also benefited from the insightful comments of the anonymous referees, whose thorough engagement with my manuscripts has helped me render them into published articles. Thank you also to the department and faculty staff members, most notably Marja Andersson, Outi Nieminen, Vesa Rautio and Jaana Tähti, who have helped me with the practicalities of doing research. I would also like to express my gratitude to Olli Jakonen, who designed a beautiful cover for this dissertation.

Finally, I wish to thank my friends and family. Nea, Anni and Sini, thank you for being the wisest and most supportive friends one could wish for. I also wish to thank Ammi, as many ideas presented in this research were developed during our runs. Thank you for pulling me out of the office and for sharing your insights. My thanks also go to Katarina – it has been so lovely becoming friends with you. I appreciate you taking me on adventures; a week spent shepherding sheep on a remote island in July 2022 was exactly what I needed after submitting this dissertation for pre-examination.

I am grateful for my loving and supportive family: my sister, Anna, my mother, Päivi and my father, Pekka. I would like to thank my grandparents, as well as my aunts and their families, for their encouragement; special thanks go to Pirjo, who provided me with a space when I needed uninterrupted time to write this dissertation.

Lastly, I wish to thank my partner, Ilkka, for all of your care and love.

Turku, December 2022

Emma Lamberg

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List of original publications

This dissertation is based on the following original publications, which are referred to in the text by their Roman numerals:

I Lamberg, E. (2020). Staying in place or moving forward? Young women's imagined futures and aspirations for mobility in care work. *YOUNG: Nordic Journal of Youth Research*, *28*(4), 329–346.

II Lamberg, E. (2021). Ambivalent aspirations: Young women negotiating postfeminist subjectivity in media work. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 24*(2), 464–481.

III Lamberg, E. (2022). Learning the post-Fordist feeling rules: Young women's work orientations and negotiations of the work ethic. *The Sociological Review*, *70*(5), 935–950.

1 Introduction

Young people's routes to employment are an urgent societal question. 'Steering youth to work is the best way to foster growth', announces the heading of a blog post written by a government official from the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (2022). In the blog post, the official reviews young people's employment prospects in the Finnish labour market and concludes by suggesting that 'in the end, having a skilled workforce is the most important natural resource and a way to promote exports in Finland'. If you flick through newspapers and magazines in Finland, you may find articles, perhaps even a list, celebrating passionate and dedicated young achievers who 'do work that changes our collective future' (Helsingin Sanomat, 2021). Continue leafing through the papers and you will come across articles on the growing care crisis, which will tell you that new generations of care workers, combined with immigrant labour, are acutely needed to solve the current labour deficit in the care sector.

While media and policy discourses generally perceive young people and their employment as crucial factors for the future of society (see Nikunen, 2017), this study sets out to examine how young people themselves perceive the meaning of work. It does so by mapping the kinds of futures that young women imagine for themselves in the Finnish work society. To approach Finland as a work society is to suggest that work has attained a broad societal meaning beyond its economic aspects, as it also shapes our everyday lives, identities and subjectivities (e.g. Kettunen, 2008; Weeks, 2011).

Gresa, who had moved to Finland as an adult, was one of the first women I interviewed for this study.[1] I met Gresa in 2017, when she studied to become a practical nurse. She entered vocational education through a preparatory programme intended for migrants seeking to become practical nurses, telling me that it had long been her dream to be a care worker. To the Finnish employment officials who suggested that she become a cleaner, Gresa recalled responding as follows: 'I don't want to become a cleaner. I want to work with the elderly'. At the time of our interview, Gresa was about to realise her dream by obtaining the qualification of a

[1] All names are pseudonyms.

practical nurse. Already before graduation, Gresa had experience of care work, as she temped in eldercare facilities alongside her studies, doing several shifts a week. Industrious and sociable, she was a well-liked employee: 'Whenever I go to work in a new place as a substitute, they call me the next day and ask if I can come again'.

Gresa said that the work conditions in these facilities were difficult. When we met, Gresa had just finished an evening shift, during which she was responsible for 15 elderly patients, many of whom had dementia. Gresa still insisted that being a care worker was 'the best occupation for her', as she enjoyed performing various care tasks and could help people feel better. However, although the work was important and meaningful, Gresa said that her priority was to earn her own money. She hoped to raise a family in Finland, a society that she described as much more stable than her country of origin. Her studies were part of this goal, with Gresa planning to apply for Finnish citizenship after obtaining her qualifications.

About a year later, I met Nora. A white woman in her mid-twenties, Nora was about to graduate as a graphic designer from a polytechnic. Since her childhood, Nora has cultivated her skills in drawing and all things visual, and her passion for graphic design was palpable. Her speech quickened when she said, 'I hope I can have a career in graphic design, which for me is not just a job but a way of life. Rather than just a livelihood, I would like a job that feels meaningful'. Child-free, Nora said that she had never dreamt of having a family. Instead, her priority was work, but not any kind of work: she shunned unimaginative and routine work and hoped for a career in which she could combine work with creative self-realisation.

However, Nora worried whether she would find a job in a competitive industry in which, she felt, being skilled was not enough. To land a job, even as a freelancer, 'you got to be a persona, have personality. I'm worried sometimes, if I'm just . . . you know, that I don't stand out'. These pressures, Nora told me, occasionally led to feelings of inadequacy and self-doubt: 'In the creative field, it feels like you put a part of your very own self into your work. If you are criticised, you can really feel it deep inside'. Therefore, Nora believed that in addition to cultivating her skills in graphic design, she had to work on her personality.

By examining the stories of women such as Gresa and Nora, who at the time of the interviews were at the threshold between education and employment, the study sheds light on how young women establish their identities as workers and make sense of their everyday lives, including the problems, contradictions and insecurities that they associate with their imagined futures. The study comprises three sole-authored peer-reviewed articles and this integrative chapter. The study is situated at the intersection of cultural sociology and the sociologies of gender, work and youth. It draws on and develops connections between previous theorising on post-Fordism, work, gender and subjectivity.

The study approaches post-compulsory education as a chapter in young people's lives during which they cultivate themselves as workers and adjust to working life by negotiating their aspirations. The study builds on interviews collected between 2017 and 2018 in Finland, when I interviewed 39 young women aged 18–33 years in the following two educational contexts: upper-secondary vocational education in social services and health care and tertiary education in media and communication programmes at polytechnics. The choice of these two education levels reflects the fact that in Finland, transitions from education to the labour market usually occur after finishing vocational upper-secondary or tertiary education. Furthermore, most research participants already had relevant work experience in their fields through temping, internships and clinical learning periods; in a way, they had one foot in education and another in the labour market. Therefore, the participants could discuss how their education was related to their actual work experiences. This kind of research material allowed me to uncover the contradictions that sometimes emerge between educational ideals and complex realities that characterised the participants' initial work experiences. I also conducted periodical fieldwork at the participants' educational institutions to complement and contextualise the interviews.

Young people's education-to-work transitions have been studied extensively in previous youth sociology, both in Finland and internationally. One key conclusion in previous scholarship has been that gendered, classed and racialised structures continue to constrain young people's labour market opportunities, despite the assumed individualisation and detraditionalisation of young people's biographies (e.g. Aaltonen & Berg, 2018; Devine & Snee, 2015; Furlong et al., 2011; Haikkola, 2021; McDowell, 2012). I share the focus of this scholarship on young people and their routes to employment. However, my research is not centred on transitions. Rather, I aim to increase our understanding of how young people become workers by mapping young women's imagined futures in the Finnish work society and showing how differently situated young women make sense of and engage with culturally widespread scripts, normative ideals and values of the work society.

I investigate how work-related values and ideals insinuate themselves into young women's aspirations and are lived at the subjective level by young women, such as Gresa and Nora. More specifically, I examine how young women negotiate the culturally widespread invitations to cultivate themselves as employable individuals, to invest themselves in their work and to seek pleasure in it. However, I do not suggest that young women uncritically adopt culturally dominant scripts and values. Rather, I show that young women engage with certain scripts and values to navigate the insecurities and challenges of their lives (see Illouz, 2008, pp. 20–21) while also resisting and pushing back against these values.

With this focus, I build on a long tradition of studies on worker identity and the production of work-related consent (Burawoy, 1979; Weber, 1905/2005; Weeks,

2011), while I also connect with a growing body of international scholarship that has used post-Fordism as a lens to study young people's identities as workers in contemporary economies in the Global North. This scholarship has shown that young people have been particularly targeted by the post-Fordist promise of self-realisation through work. Moreover, scholars have examined the new and old social divisions of labour in today's service-led economies, showing that young people's social positionings in post-Fordism's gendered, classed and racialised structures identify them as 'appropriate or inappropriate employees' for certain tasks (Farrugia, 2021; Farrugia et al., 2018; McDowell, 2012; McRobbie, 2016).

When theorising youth and post-Fordist work, there are good reasons to focus on young women. Feminist scholarship on economy and employment has shown that, despite many transformations in the organisation of work, post-Fordist work and economy continue to be organised around gendered, racialised and classed power relations, which are mirrored in the social division of labour (Acker, 2006; Ferguson, 2019; McDowell, 2009). That being said, a substantial body of feminist scholarship has also shown that young women in particular are perceived as competitive, entrepreneurial and individualised subjects of the post-Fordist economy, constituting 'unambiguous success stories of late capitalist societies' (Renold & Ringrose, 2008, p. 314). As the postfeminist narrative goes, young women benefit from supposedly having greater freedom than before in various spheres of life, including education and the labour market (e.g. Allen, 2016; Gill & Scharff, 2013a; McRobbie, 2009). However, this entrepreneurial and individualised mode of female subjectivity has been shown to be exclusionary, being mostly accessible to white middle-class women (Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008; Scharff, 2016).

I approach the questions of gender, subjectivity and post-Fordist work with my two-field focus. The two-field focus has allowed me to examine both the industry-specific features in the participants' stories as well as to look beyond such features and identify shared elements. However, my research design was not strictly comparative (see Scharff, 2018, p. 4). Rather, my aim was to contrast rather than compare and thus provide a multidimensional picture of young women's routes to becoming workers. Care work students prepare themselves for work that is emotionally rewarding and socially indispensable. At the same time, a broad body of feminist research has shown that care work remains a feminised, undervalued and cheapened form of work with internal gendered, classed and racialised hierarchies (e.g. Dowling, 2016; McDowell, 2009; Twigg, 2000). In the Nordic context, too, care work remains undervalued and underpaid (e.g. Hoppania et al., 2016; Selberg, 2012; Zechner et al., 2022). Media students, meanwhile, aim to become part of the creative, media and cultural industries. Media work is a paradigmatic example of work in the 'new economy' with its individualistic landscape, where young women

can supposedly overcome gendered obstacles. In media work, a passionate dedication to the job is a disciplinary requirement, especially for young women (e.g. Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018). At the same time, work patterns in the competitive, creative labour market are characterised by precarious work practices, like freelancing and project work (Alacovska, 2019; Duffy, 2017; Terranova, 2000).

As mentioned earlier, in this dissertation, I present the empirical findings of my research in three original articles. The articles answer the following research questions:

- *Article I: What kinds of futures do female care work students imagine for themselves, and how do they negotiate the expectation of not 'becoming stuck' in institutionalised care work?*
- *Article II: How do female media students aspire to become workers by negotiating the expectation of cultivating productive and individual subjectivities?*
- *Article III: How do young women imagine their futures by negotiating the contemporary work ethic and its emphasis on self-realisation and emotionally rewarding work?*

Each article examines a set of expectations that, based on empirical analysis, are central to young women's aspirations and self-cultivation as workers. Analysing how young women respond to such expectations, the articles reveal the appeal and ambivalences of these expectations for young women, connecting the discussion to the broader values and cultural scripts of the Finnish post-Fordist work society. Article I examines the care work students' narratives, which contained the expectation of constantly moving forward and not becoming 'stuck' in institutionalised care work. My analysis demonstrates that already in their education, care work students start considering whether to remain practical nurses or to advance to tertiary care education; however, classed and racialised dynamics inform the positions that care work students are prompted to inhabit. Whereas some – mostly white – students sought constant self-development and upward educational mobility, others – particularly those from migrant backgrounds – were expected to remain docile care workers who attend to the needs of others. Article II analyses the experiences of female media students in tertiary education and reveals the expectation of cultivating individualised and productive subjectivity. The analysis reveals the centrality of postfeminist and entrepreneurial imperatives to the imagined futures of female media students, yet it also emphasises young women's engagement with these imperatives as ambivalent. Finally, Article III shows that both the care and media students' narratives indicated the expectation of finding pleasure at work. Here, my findings show that young women become workers by aligning themselves

with the cultural ideals of emotionally fulfilling work, but such alignment involves navigating field-specific contradictions.

By synthesising these findings, this study makes multiple contributions to scholarship. The study presents an approach that examines changes and continuities in post-Fordist work and its gendered dimensions with theories of postfeminism, young femininity, aspiration and subjectivity. Consequently, the study suggests that the culturally dominant positioning of young women as autonomous, aspirational and self-optimising subjects is reflected in their narratives. However, the analysis emphasises that young women's engagement with this mode of subjectivity is not total and uncritical but pragmatic and contradictory. In addition, the study shows that young women's positions in the hierarchies of Finnish work society constrain their possibilities of inhabiting the culturally idealised, self-transforming and value-accruing subjectivity: the ideal practical nurse is still constituted as a gendered and racialised docile subject who stays in her place, while the ideal for female media workers is to cultivate an entrepreneurial and economised subjectivity.

Furthermore, the study demonstrates the need to consider how the culturally dominant work ethic, which invites people to approach work as a route to self-realisation, is lived at the subjective level through feelings. Approaching the post-Fordist work ethic using feminist theorising on emotions, the study argues that socially shared feeling rules play a crucial role in shaping young women's aspirations and how they become workers. Indicating shared understandings in the care work and media students' accounts, the study suggests that self-directed emotional work is crucial for young women as they seek to manage work-related uncertainty and align themselves with the ideal of pleasurable, emotionally fulfilling work.

This integrative chapter is structured as follows: Section 2 sets the scene by situating the research in the broader context of the Finnish work society. Section 3 considers the key conceptual and theoretical approaches underpinning this research. Section 4 discusses the methodology, including data collection, analytical choices and research ethics. Section 5 summarises the key findings and arguments of the research originally published in the three peer-reviewed articles. Section 6 concludes the dissertation by bridging the findings from the three articles and the two case studies and reflecting on the broader implications of my work; this section summarises the key contributions and outlines directions for future research. The conclusion is followed by the original articles, which comprise the empirical part of the dissertation.

2 Research context

In this section, I first position my research within the historical context of the Finnish welfare state. I pay particular attention to the transformations of work and the restructuring of the welfare state. I then examine persistent issues of gendered and intersectional inequality in Finnish working life. Finally, I discuss young people's position in the Finnish education system and labour market and present the contexts of the education programmes examined in this study.

2.1 Changes and continuities in the Finnish work society

In Finland, waged work is both a strong cultural norm and a way of sustaining and funding the services of the welfare state (Kettunen, 2008). In what follows, I provide a map of the historical shifts in Finland's economic structure and welfare state that have occurred after the Second World War. I argue that despite profound transformations in Finland's economic structure and the restructuring of its welfare state, work continues to play a key role in Finland.

The evolution of Finland as an industrial society started after the Second World War, later than in the other Nordic countries. In the post-war period Finland's economic rationalisation accelerated, partly driven by the fact that it had to pay large war reparations to the Soviet Union, yet until the 1960s, Finnish workers were likelier to be independent farmers than industrial wage workers (Kettunen, 2008; Väänänen & Turtiainen, 2014). Compared to the other Nordic states, Finland was also late in developing its welfare state. The formation of Finland as a Nordic welfare state was gradual, and the most intensive building period of the Finnish welfare state took place from the beginning of the 1960s to the end of the 1980s (Julkunen, 2001). Whereas the period of the agrarian society in Finland was characterised by stark social divisions, the period that started after the Second World War in Finland can be characterised as one of equalisation. In the mid-1960s, social mobility began to increase, and in the 1970s, investments in public education further strengthened equal opportunities (Roikonen, 2022). From the end of the 1970s onwards, Finland has self-identified as representing the Nordic welfare model (Esping-Andersen, 2015), which is internationally known for combining economic success with general

well-being and social and gender equality. The principles of universalism, the redistribution of wealth, progressive taxation and a strong social security system with high pensions and well-funded public services have been perceived as the Nordic welfare model's key characteristics (Heiskala & Kantola, 2010). The idea of full employment was also a political ambition in the emerging welfare state, and social and employment policies were harnessed to strengthen the normalisation of waged work (Kettunen, 2008, pp. 154–156).

As historian Pauli Kettunen (1997, 2008), among others, has argued, the equalisation that occurred in 20th-century Finland was characterised by the idea of the virtuous circles: increases in economic productivity promoted welfare and social equality and vice versa. Thus, Finland, a rapidly industrialising post-war welfare state, also developed a novel class compromise. The wealthy paid progressive taxes to cover public education, health care and social protection. In return, they benefitted from industrial peace and an educated workforce. In addition, the labour movement accepted the rationalisation of production as a precondition of social welfare, while the bourgeois groups accepted that labour unionisation and investments in workers' rights could bring about economically desirable results. These virtuous circles also decreased income inequality. Therefore, employees' and employers' interests were somewhat aligned, leading to cumulative economic success. This idea of the virtuous circles was centred on work functioning as both a right and a moral norm; in Finland, compared to other Nordic countries, the imperative to work was particularly strong (Kettunen, 1997, 2008).

Finland as a model Nordic welfare state reached its peak in the 1980s and has since been restructured in significant ways. The symbiosis of social equality and economic growth that characterised the virtuous circles has become destabilised over the last 30 years in favour of economic growth. (Julkunen, 2017.) However, the seeds of the welfare state restructuring were already sown in the 1970s, as the global proliferation of economic ideas emphasising market imperatives, economic growth and competitiveness were welcomed by some bourgeois groups and economic elites in Finland (Kärrylä, 2021; Wuokko, 2016), even though these ideas were not actively implemented before the 1990s. In the 1990s, following the demise of the Soviet Union, which halted trade between Finland and the Soviet Union, Finland experienced severe financial stagnation and a period of mass unemployment. The triumph of liberal market policies and ideologies was also aided by the ideological collapse of real socialism (Kettunen, 1997, p. 91). It is well established that the Finnish recession marked a shift to the competition state. Since the recession, Finland has entered a period of the post-expansive welfare state, during which gaining approval for policy initiatives that expand social security and protection has become increasingly difficult.

Thus, in the aftermath of the 1990s recession, the Finnish welfare state underwent a series of reforms that resulted in cutbacks to social benefits, a diminished public sector and the introduction of workfare and activation policies. The paradigm shift in economic ideals also meant that the goal of full employment, which characterised the Nordic welfare state until the 1990s, was abandoned. Instead, economic growth has been fostered by lowering taxation and wages as well as by cutting social security benefits to make work more rewarding. With this paradigm shift, the Finnish welfare system has gradually distanced itself from the principle of universalism, showing a clear trend of moving towards a needs-based approach to social security (Aaltio, 2013; Julkunen, 2001, 2017; Kantola & Kananen, 2013; Kettunen, 2008; Luhtakallio & Heiskala, 2006). The 1990s represented a paradigm shift not just in economic and social policies but also in underlying legitimation narratives, as the market imperatives of competitiveness, growth and efficiency gradually gained a stronger foothold in the Finnish welfare state. These shifts were reflected at the discursive level: although welfare and social investments were once perceived to be a priority, nowadays, the public sector is often depicted as inefficient, unproductive and wasteful (Eskelinen, 2017). Consequently, the class compromise that characterised the previous virtuous circles of well-being and economic growth has been gradually dismantled (Kettunen, 2008).

Since the 1990s, ideological emphasis in Finland has shifted from full employment to individual employability: with the introduction of workfare policies, individuals have been increasingly pressured to take responsibility for their employment, encouraged by activation measures, incentives and sanctions (Kantola & Kananen, 2013). Nowadays, the notions of workfare and activation are increasingly guiding social and employment policies in Finland, following broader trends in the European Union (Kananen, 2012; Outinen, 2012). Therefore, as Finnish public policy scholar Raija Julkunen (2017) has suggested, facilitating the labour supply involves cutting social security to make the benefit system more 'work friendly'. In addition, maintaining this approach to work requires activation measures to dismantle 'welfare traps' and moral campaigns to blame the unemployed (Julkunen, 2017). However, the introduction of activation measures can be interpreted as a part of long-term trends in the Finnish work society: Kettunen (2008, p. 96) has suggested that workfare policies can be seen as updates to the culturally long-standing belief regarding the role of work in maintaining social order and peace and in cultivating disciplined individuals. Therefore, if citizenship is a 'legal, political and social field of intelligibility' (Tyler, 2013, p. 73), the link between citizenship and work did not disappear during the period of welfare state restructuration. Instead, the idea of the competitive state has converged with new hierarchies of deservingness in Finnish society: the ideal is for citizens to become employable instead of being a burden for the nation (Mäkinen, 2017; see also

Kauranen & Lamberg, 2016). Recent ethnographic research has shown that the moral sanctioning of the unemployed and a focus on enhancing individuals' employability also characterise young people's encounters with the Finnish welfare state and its services (Haikkola, 2019; Krivonos, 2019; Paju et al., 2020). This requirement for citizens to earn their place in society implies an erosion of the previous ideal of universalism, which, even if it never fully included all members of Finnish society, characterised the ambitions of the Nordic welfare model.

These shifts in the Finnish welfare state have coincided with profound changes in Finland's economic structure, which from the 1980s onwards has become increasingly centred on knowledge and services as part of the developments in the global economy (Julkunen, 2008). The severe recession of the 1990s was followed by a period of exceptional economic growth during which the Finnish economy was retooled for knowledge and technology (Ojala & Pyöriä, 2020). This growth period was promoted by the rise of the Finnish technology sector, represented by Nokia, and lasted until 2008 (Koistinen, 2014, p. 32). In the 21st century, Finland can be characterised as a service economy because the service sector is now the largest employer in Finland (Parviainen et al., 2016). In addition, there is a strong emphasis on knowledge and technology. The development of the information and technology sector is often narrated as a success story, and a highly educated workforce and innovative start-ups are now routinely described as key to Finland's success in global economic competition (Koskinen, 2022). However, the public sector remains an important employer, particularly for those working in the social and healthcare sector. In 2018, approximately 400,000 people worked in this sector; of these people, 69% belonged to the public sector, 23.7% belonged to the private sector and the rest belonged to civil society organisations (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare, 2021). In Finland, temporary contracts are particularly common in the public sector, which underlines the fact that market principles of economic austerity and competitiveness were introduced into the welfare state in its post-expansive period (Julkunen, 2008, p. 111).

I collected the materials for this research in 2017, approximately two years after the centre-right Sipilä government, named after Prime Minister Juha Sipilä from the Centre Party, had taken office. In the 2010s, Finland's economy was slow to recover from the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 and the subsequent eurozone crisis. The Sipilä government sought to remedy the recession into which Finland had entered by implementing austerity[2] policies and thereby further dismantling the welfare state (Autto & Törrönen, 2019; Harjuniemi & Ampuja, 2019). Therefore, the

[2] Austerity refers to an economic ideology that supports voluntary deflation and economic adjustments aimed at increasing productivity by lowering wages and public spending (see Blyth, 2013, p. 2).

austerity landscape constitutes the context of my analysis of young women's experiences in the Finnish labour market.

In the European context, research has shown that younger generations' opportunities in education and the labour market decreased after the crisis (Allen, 2016; Antonucci et al., 2014; Coleman, 2016; Franceschelli & Keating, 2018; McDowell, 2012; Mendick et al., 2018). Although the aftermath of the crisis for young people was not as severe in Finland as in many other European countries, research by the Finnish Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment (Alatalo et al., 2017) has revealed that the prolonged economic recession has affected young adults' (25–34 years old) position in the labour market. For example, in the 2010s, youth unemployment was on the rise, and the employment prospects of recent graduates weakened, especially for youth with vocational secondary education (Alatalo et al., 2017). However, despite discussions on increasing precarity in the Finnish labour market, statistical evidence on long-term labour market trends does not support the claims of accelerating wide-scale uncertainty and flexibility (Pyöriä & Ojala, 2016). Furthermore, although economic inequalities have increased from the late 20th century onwards, most notably because of the rise in capital incomes and decreasing tax rates, Finland remains a relatively equal society (Roikonen, 2022). Nonetheless, recent research into Finnish financial elites suggests that the virtuous circles have been shattered: Finland's wealthiest 0.1% do not believe that social protection and benefits can increase equality and social mobility; instead, they believe that such protection can make people passive and unenterprising (Kantola & Kuusela, 2019).

In sum, in recent decades, profound transformations have occurred in the Finnish welfare state and its economic structure. However, what has remained constant is the central role of work, both in the 'old' welfare state and in the new competitive state. Despite changes in the labour market and the organisation of the welfare state, the idea of citizenship organised around waged work has remained strong. Therefore, studying work and its meaning for people remains an urgent task.

2.2 Gendered and intersectional inequalities in Finnish working life

In international comparisons, the Nordic countries are known for their relatively high levels of gender equality. Gender equality as a political ambition has been a key characteristic of the Nordic welfare states, which have supported women's labour market participation – for example, by providing childcare services and employing women in the public sector (Julkunen, 2010). The Nordic countries' international reputation as model countries of gender equality has, however, sometimes masked persistent gender equality paradoxes and the remaining gender inequalities. For

example, many Finns assume that gender equality in Finland has already been achieved (Holli & Kantola, 2007; Kantola et al., 2020.) This type of thinking was evident in the programme of the Sipilä government, which, as mentioned earlier, was in office when I collected the data for this research. In addition to the government introducing numerous austerity policies, the government programme was also the first one in 20 years to not include any measures for gender equality. Instead, the government programme claimed that 'women and men are equal in Finland' (see Elomäki et al., 2019).

In Finland, working life is a key area in which persistent paradoxes of gender equality become evident. Women's high level of labour market participation has underpinned the ideal of Finland as a 'women-friendly welfare state' (Hernes, 1987), as women's employment has been supported by a combination of work and family policies. Thus, in the Finnish welfare state, the imperative to work discussed above has also extended to women. In Finland, women's high participation rate in the labour market originated in the middle of the 20th century, in times of industrialisation and urbanisation, when the combination of motherhood and paid employment became a central goal and was supported by the state. The expansion of the welfare state increased women's labour market participation and provided them with possibilities of achieving financial independence. During the period of welfare-state expansion, women's previously unpaid care work became visible and remunerated: jobs in the social services and in the healthcare and education systems, in both the welfare state and the private sector, became women's jobs. Consequently, the gendered division of labour in families was generalised to the whole society (Julkunen, 2010; Kettunen, 2008).

Although the Finnish state extended the duty and the right to work to its female citizens, the expansion of the welfare state also created a gendered labour market with a dual structure, which consists of a primarily male-dominated labour market in the export-oriented private sector and a secondary female-dominated labour market in the public sector. Thus, despite the fact that the Finnish welfare state has employed a large number of women, it has done so at relatively low wages and by pushing women into feminised occupations (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018; see also Julkunen, 2010; Rantalaiho, 1997). By relying heavily on low-cost female labour, the state has also contributed to the emergence and maintenance of a segregated labour market and a gender pay gap (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018).

To this day, gender inequalities in working life are most strongly apparent in the stark gender segregation and the gender pay gap (Kantola, 2022), as the average salary for women is approximately 80% of that for men (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022a). In fact, labour segregation in Finland is stronger than in most European Union countries, as less than 10% of the labour force is employed in so-called 'equal occupations', in which gender distribution between men and women is

between 40% and 59%. Women's jobs are concentrated in the public sector and in private-sector service jobs such as cleaning staff and grocery store cashiers. By contrast, men often work in private-sector export industries, manufacturing and construction (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022b).

The issues of labour segregation and the pay gap are partly interconnected, as jobs and occupations dominated by men are associated with higher status and better salaries (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). These gendered hierarchies are also reflected in the cultural ideas of Finland as a competitive state. As Finland is a small, export-dependent country, export industries have managed to frame their interests as national ones (Kettunen, 1997). Concomitantly, the male-dominated export industries are typically valued for their status as the engine of the economy, while the female-dominated public sector has been portrayed as involving expenses that need trimming via austerity measures and cutbacks to public spending (Jokinen, 2017). In addition, in the Finnish corporatist system, male-dominated labour market organisations have controlled wage negotiations, whereas care workers working in female-dominated, low-paid public-sector jobs have found it difficult to achieve higher wages (Koskinen Sandberg & Saari, 2019; Saari et al., 2021). Moreover, strategic reforms of public social and healthcare services since the 1990s, and the acceleration of these reforms with the introduction of austerity policies in the 2010s, have hit the female-dominated and low-paid public sector particularly hard, deteriorating working conditions. Finally, the effects of cutbacks on gender equality have not been limited to the sphere of employment, as cuts to public expenditure in care and education, instead of reducing the need for care, have simply transferred it to the private sphere, with women doing most of the work (see, e.g., Hoppania et al., 2016; Zechner et al., 2022).

Furthermore, women's wages have not risen despite increases in women's educational achievements in Finland. Gender-based discrimination also persists in working life, as women and other minorities are likelier to encounter discrimination. Pregnancy discrimination and family-leave discrimination remain major gender-equality problems. Moreover, inequalities in unpaid work affect paid work, as mothers spend more time on parental leave than fathers, and long periods outside the labour market negatively impact pay, career development and employability. As for the type and quality of employment, women are likelier to have part-time, insecure employment. (Finnish Government, 2022a; Korvajärvi, 2016.)

In sum, given these persistent inequalities, there exists a gap between the widespread idea of the women-friendly Finnish welfare state and the reality of the unequal, gender-segregated labour market. As gender equality scholarship has shown, the Finnish welfare state has, in fact, contributed to the reproduction of gendered inequalities by employing women in low-paid public-sector work (Koskinen Sandberg, 2018). In addition, in Finland, mothers' employment rate is

lower than in other Nordic countries partly because of its family policies and cultural norms that together extend women's parental and childcare leaves (Näre & Wide, 2019). Postcolonial and antiracist scholarship has also contested the idea of the women-friendly Nordic welfare states, showing that this idea promotes the national myths of Nordic exceptionalism and revealing that the Nordic welfare state has mostly been friendly to white middle-class women while excluding and othering migrant and racialised women (Keskinen et al., 2020).

As for racial inequalities, in international comparisons, research shows that Finland and other Nordic countries have relatively high levels of inequality between ethnic majorities and minorities (Borchorst et al., 2012). This is also reflected in the Finnish labour market, where the division of labour is racialised, with migrants overrepresented in the lower-status service and care sectors (e.g. Näre, 2013; Nieminen et al., 2015). Furthermore, although Finland is generally considered a relatively equal welfare state, social class still has a distinct impact on people's social status and well-being (Blom & Melin, 2014). During the second half of the 20th century, broad social mobility, rising education levels, the growth of the middle classes and the increase in the share of expert occupations were distinctive developments in the Finnish welfare society (Blom & Melin, 2014; Silvasti et al., 2014). However, in the 21st century, the share of people belonging to the middle class has shrunk (Riihelä & Tuomala, 2019).

In sum, the gendered and intersecting inequalities in the Finnish labour market together show that there is a gap between the idea of the Finnish welfare state as egalitarian and the inequalities that continue to shape people's lives. This is also the case for the Finnish education system, as I will next discuss.

2.3 Post-compulsory education in the care and media fields

In Finland, compulsory education typically ends at the age of 16 years; then, students can either leave the educational system, which is very rare, or continue to upper-secondary education. Regarding young people's education choices, the main split occurs between general, or academically oriented, and vocational upper-secondary education. General upper-secondary education is meant to equip students with general knowledge and is more theoretical in orientation, whereas vocational education emphasises the practical skills needed in working life (Pehkonen, 2013). The general appreciation of the academic and vocational tracks is also divided, with general upper-secondary education being considered more prestigious (Brunila et al., 2013; Lappalainen et al., 2013). Both the general and vocational tracks last approximately three years and make one eligible for tertiary education, which in Finland is free for European Union citizens. In this sense, the Finnish education

system is relatively flexible: as scholars have noted, it allows for transitions between different trajectories because there are no 'formal dead-ends'. For example, it is possible to continue on to higher education with a vocational upper secondary education. However, the choice of the upper-secondary track strongly impacts later trajectories, as students graduating from general upper-secondary education continue on to tertiary education much more frequently than individuals graduating from vocational upper-secondary education. In Finland, tertiary education is also divided into two tracks, with the higher education system consisting of universities and polytechnics. There are two key differences between these tracks. First, in university programmes, students can advance to master's studies without having to take exams, whereas polytechnic programmes usually stop at the bachelor's level. (Heiskala et al., 2020.) Second, universities are more academically oriented, while polytechnics are more vocational in focus (Välimaa, 2019).

Although Finland has been characterised as a relatively open society with high levels of social mobility, today, the Finnish youths' education level is diminishing, and the education level of the Finnish population is near the average of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries (Finnish Government, 2022b). As for gender, girls and women typically choose education in the fields of social services, health care and education, with boys and men opting for the science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) fields (Brunila et al., 2013; Lappalainen et al., 2013). The Finnish Youth Barometer (Teräsaho & Keski-Petäjä, 2017) from 2016 found that when young people in Finland were asked about their desired occupations, young women most commonly wished to work in the social and healthcare sector (27% of the responses) and young men in technology (22%). Furthermore, in Finland, both quantitative and qualitative research have shown that race and migration continue to shape young people's positions in the education system (e.g. Kilpi-Jakonen, 2012; Kurki et al., 2019).

In sum, in education, as in Finnish society more generally, classed, gendered and racialised hierarchies affect young people's trajectories. The care and media education programmes examined in my research were embedded in these hierarchies. Vocational education programmes in the field of social services and health care is the first of the two research sites investigated in this study. Students who graduate from these education programmes obtain the qualification of a practical nurse, which usually requires 2.5 years of education. In the Finnish labour market, qualified practical nurses perform a wide range of tasks in the social and healthcare sector. Regarding employment prospects, care work in Finland is an example of a sector in which workers are needed, as care work continues to be indispensable for people's well-being. Furthermore, as the Finnish population ages, the need for care workers grows (Koponen, 2015). As a result of cutbacks to the care

sector, however, the appeal of care work has decreased (Aalto et al., 2013) and although practical nurses are likely to find employment, their work conditions are often precarious (e.g. Olakivi, 2018).

In the professional hierarchies of care labour, practical nurses are below registered nurses, who have tertiary education and can work as ward nurses. Practical nurses' tasks are also different from those of registered nurses. Registered nurses perform more specialised care tasks, such as administering medication and inserting catheters, while practical nurses' work often consists of what are considered to be embodied and 'dirty' aspects of care work. For example, in eldercare, such aspects involve washing, feeding and turning the patients. (Olakivi, 2018.) Practical nursing is a paradigmatic example of a female-dominated care profession: in 2021, around 88% of practical nurses, as well as 86% of students in vocational education for healthcare and social services in Finland were female (Official Statistics of Finland, 2022c; 2022d). The division of the various care tasks is also stratified according to the hierarchies of class and race. As Selberg (2012) noted regarding the Swedish context, the basic tasks of lifting, washing, feeding and moving patients, which require close contact with people's bodies, are usually performed by working-class and racialised nurses; by contrast, middle-class white women often work in highly specialised care tasks. The practical nurse qualification exemplifies such hierarchies: it is a care profession typically associated with working-class women, increasingly of migrant backgrounds (Laurén & Wrede, 2010; Näre, 2013; Olakivi, 2018). Indeed, in the Finnish labour market, a growing number of care workers, especially in the lower echelons of care work, come from migrant backgrounds. Migrant workers are seen as one solution to the labour deficit in the care sector, particularly in care jobs considered less 'attractive' by those belonging to the majority population. (Näre, 2013.)

My second research site involved media education programmes in polytechnics. I analysed programmes that typically last four years and are oriented towards a bachelor-level degree (Finnish qualification title: *medianomi*). Tertiary media education can be seen as opening doors to high-status, middle-class jobs in the creative and knowledge economy. However, in the 21st century, the landscape of media work has been changing rapidly. Transformations have affected not only large media companies but also the work conditions in the field. For example, in journalism, the 24-hour news logic of the social media environment requires faster journalist work than classical news coverage (Deuze & Witschge, 2018). In Finland, layoffs have become more frequent, and competition for available jobs has increased (Väliverronen, 2013). Simultaneously, the rise of social media and digital content production has provided tempting if precarious career opportunities in the media industry (Duffy, 2017; Pruchniewska, 2018). Employment prospects in the media field are also insecure because the labour market is overcrowded, as the number of

people being educated in the field is higher than the number of available jobs. A report by the Ministry of Economic Affairs and Employment in Finland has also shown that the global financial crisis of 2007–2009 may have made young adults' (25–34 years old) career development more difficult: between 2007 and 2014, the share of young adults in the information and communication industry fell from 36.9% to 34.3% (Alatalo et al., 2017). In line with these developments, Finnish educational policy discourses present media and information specialisations as 'bad career choices' for young people, with the authorities hoping that young people would choose education that is in sync with labour market needs (Nikunen, 2017, pp. 669–670).

Furthermore, although media work, as well as work in the creative and cultural industries more generally, is often hailed as 'cool, creative and egalitarian' (Gill, 2002), international research has shown that gendered, classed and racialised inequalities characterise this professional field (Banks & Milestone, 2011). In journalism, the number of female journalists has internationally increased significantly since the end of the 20th century, yet the field continues to be characterised by masculine values and unequal treatment according to gender (De Vuyst & Raeymaeckers, 2019; Franks, 2013). For example, male and female journalists work in different media sectors and write about different topics (De Vuyst & Raeymaeckers, 2019). Similar patterns of gendered disadvantage have been observed in the fields of digital media production and new media (Duffy, 2017; Gill, 2014). In addition, previous international scholarship has revealed the underrepresentation of Black and ethnic minority journalists in the traditional news media (Douglas, 2021).

Empirical evidence from Finland suggests similar patterns. For example, Finnish journalism has been female-dominated from the 1990s onwards, but masculine traditions are still reflected in the working cultures in the field (Ruoho & Torkkola, 2010). Research on the Finnish context has also highlighted deeply rooted gender inequality issues in both the content of journalism, evidenced in the tendency to interview men as experts rather than women, and in the gender-related disadvantages faced by female journalists (Ruoho & Torkkola, 2010; Savolainen & Zilliacus-Tikkanen, 2013). Higher education in the journalism field is the most common route to employment, with 80% of journalism students in Finnish higher education being women. However, in Finland, female journalists receive lower pay and face the glass ceiling and gender discrimination in their career development (Journalisti.fi, 2021). In Finland, research is scarce on the representation of ethnic and racialised minorities in media professions, but antiracist journalists and civil society actors have criticised the underrepresentation of brown and racialised people, both in media stories and among those working in the field (Ruskeat Tytöt, n.d.).

To summarise, this section has situated my research in the context of the Finnish work society, the education system and their perennial inequalities. The next section introduces the theoretical discussions and lenses on which I drew to theorise how young women imagine their futures in working life.

3 Theorising young women's imagined futures in the post-Fordist work society

In this section, I first discuss previous debates on gender and employment in contemporary work societies, which I consider to be post-Fordist. Second, I situate my analysis of young women and their aspirations within previous discussions on postfeminism, subjectivity and value. Third, I combine insights from research on the ideals and values of post-Fordist work with feminist theorising on the role of emotions in work. The structure of this section is as follows: the first subsection situates my research within broader debates on gender and the contemporary work economy, while the following subsections consider the conceptual approaches employed in the empirical articles that make up this dissertation.

3.1 Gender and the post-Fordist work society

My research, with its focus on young women and the futures they imagine for themselves in the care and media fields, builds on previous feminist theorising on work in contemporary capitalist economies. In what follows, I will first describe how I use the concept of post-Fordism to understand contemporary Finnish society. Then, I will discuss previous scholarship on gender and post-Fordist work to make sense of the gender relations in which the research participants were embedded. In particular, I situate my analysis in relation to previous theorising that has analysed the gendered aspects of care work and creative, media and cultural work.

The concept of post-Fordism has been widely used in previous research. At its simplest, the concept refers to a period that has followed Fordism and during which knowledge and services, rather than industrial work, have become central to the production of value. Thus, in the post-Fordist economy, work and value production at least partly depend on workers' emotional, communicative, creative and caring capacities. Consequently, the blurring of clear distinctions between the self and the job, between work and life and between production and reproduction have been examined as central features of post-Fordist work (e.g. Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Gregg, 2009; Julkunen, 2008; Kolehmainen & Mäkinen, 2021; McRobbie, 2016;

Parviainen et al., 2016; Warhurst & Nickson, 2009; Weeks, 2007, 2011; Ylöstalo et al., 2018).

As mentioned earlier, Finland was a poor agrarian society for a large part of the 20th century, which means there was no clear Fordist period in Finland. However, as the contemporary Finnish work society is largely centred on knowledge and services, it can be considered a post-Fordist society (Julkunen, 2008; see Section 2.1). The features associated with work in the post-Fordist economy also resonate with the cultural changes in Finnish working life. From the 1960s onwards, workers have been increasingly evaluated in terms of their psychological attributes, such as communication skills, resilience and motivation (Väänänen & Turtiainen, 2014). This has resulted in a shift in how the ideal Finnish worker is conceived: since the post-war period, the ideal of the rule-abiding 'Fordist' worker has been gradually replaced with that of an emotional and individualised 'post-Fordist worker' (Varje, 2018). With these developments, new phenomena, such as self-promotion and coaching, have emerged in Finnish working life, along with the commodification of the self that such practices invite (Mäkinen, 2012).

Despite the profound transformations associated with post-Fordism, the prefix 'post' should be met with some reservations. My understanding of Finland as a post-Fordist work society follows that of Finnish scholar Raija Julkunen (2008), who suggests that what defines post-Fordism is its multifaceted character, as changes are neither total nor universal. In other words, post-Fordism is characterised by the coexistence of different forms of labour, from industrial workers to knowledge and service workers and from increasing autonomy to Taylorist forms of control (Julkunen, 2008, p. 39). Internationally, feminist scholars have also exposed continuities in the social division of labour, suggesting that work in the post-Fordist economy is characterised by 'change, but no change' (Walby, 1994). For example, post-Fordist work and economy continue to be organised around gendered, racialised and classed power relations (Acker, 2006; Ferguson, 2019; McDowell, 2009). Thus, continuity rather than transformation characterises work in service-centred economies (McDowell, 2009). However, the service-dominated economy also produces new inequalities and divisions, such as the one between 'high tech' and 'high touch' jobs: the former category includes high-status, highly paid jobs, while the latter involves a form of embodied care work that, though indispensable, is often considered to be low status (Brush, 1999; McDowell, 2009; Wolkowitz, 2006).

In studying the post-Fordist work society, there are good reasons to focus on the experiences of women. In relation to gender, some authors have legitimately argued that post-Fordism's ideal worker is based on a white middle-class masculinist ideal of a free and self-fashioning individual, epitomised by Silicon Valley tech start-up entrepreneurs (Fraser, 2013, p. 220; see also Koskinen, 2022). Then again, other scholars have argued that in post-Fordism, supposedly feminine, emotional and

communicative skills have become standard requirements in an increasing number of jobs (e.g. Adkins, 2002; Adkins & Jokinen, 2008; Weeks, 2007), dissolving the former dichotomy whereby the private sphere was associated with emotions and femininity and the public sphere with rationality and masculinity (Jokinen, 2010; Mäkinen, 2021). However, research suggests that in the post-Fordist societies, men rather than women have benefited from their emotional and communicative skills by instrumentally harnessing them for the accumulation of cultural capital. This is because men's performances of 'feminine' skills are considered their own achievements, whereas women's performances of emotional labour and 'femininity' are 'natural' rather than 'skilful' (Adkins, 2002; Wolkowitz, 2006, p. 95).

Furthermore, debates on the feminisation of work have suggested that, with the structural transformations of work and economy, the conditions and characteristics previously associated with women's (unpaid) work have increasingly come to define many kinds of jobs (Adkins & Jokinen, 2008). In Finland, scholars such as Eeva Jokinen (2010) and Katariina Mäkinen (2021) have argued that in today's service- and knowledge-intensive economies, a significant portion of waged work resembles housework. The boundaries between 'outside' and' inside' of work have dissolved, and many jobs require one to juggle multiple tasks at once. Therefore, the skills that previously characterised women's unpaid housework are now increasingly integrated into post-Fordist value accumulation (Jokinen, 2010; Mäkinen, 2021).

Before unpacking how and why the care and media fields provide a productive vantage point for analysing the changes and continuities of the post-Fordist work society and its gendered aspects, I will discuss how I understand gender in this research. By gender, I refer to a socially structured relation. One defining feature of contemporary gender relations in the labour market is a binary, hierarchical duality according to which women and femininity are perceived as subordinate to men and masculinity (see Mäkinen, 2012, p. 27). I maintain that culturally shared powerful norms and stereotypes work to sustain this hierarchical duality. However, I do not understand gender as a fixed and uniform category; rather, I approach gender relations as social constructs that are open-ended and constantly reworked (see Federici, 2021, p. 55). Moreover, I do not argue that gender should be perceived as the primary hierarchy structuring the Finnish labour market; rather, I consider it to be one among many intersecting power relations. By intersectionality, I refer to the divisions and hierarchies that are based on ethnicity, racialisation, gender, class, age and other kinds of differences that together shape social structures, cultural understandings, institutional practices and individuals' everyday lives (e.g. Brah & Phoenix, 2004; de los Reyes et al., 2013). Of the many intersecting power relations, this research is mostly concerned with the gendered, classed and racialised hierarchies in the Finnish labour market.

In the remainder of this subsection, I situate my discussion in relation to previous feminist theorising of the gendered aspects of care work and creative, media and cultural work. First, I build on a broad body of feminist scholarship that has studied care work as a form of work that, despite profound transformations in the economy and the labour market, continues to be female-dominated and feminised. As mentioned, feminist scholarship of work and employment has suggested that the post-Fordist economy is characterised by continuity rather than change. This particularly true, when we consider feminised forms of labour, such as care work and public sector services, which continue to be dominated by women (e.g. McDowell & Dyson, 2011). In the post-Fordist gendered division of labour, feminised care jobs continue to be lowly paid as well as associated with a low status. As UK-based feminist scholar Linda McDowell (2009) has suggested, care work is culturally characterised by an association of femininity with 'caring, emotions, waste, smells, desire and fleshy embodiment' (p. 215). These gender norms then act together to code care as 'naturally' being women's work, which results in the sector's lower remuneration and precarious work conditions (McDowell, 2009, p. 215). Moreover, feminist sociologists of work have also observed that care is simultaneously characterised as valuable, essential and critical – in other words, as a vocation – and devalued on the basis of being a dirty, low-wage and low-status form of feminised work (McDowell, 2009; Twigg, 2000).

Given that care work is a socially essential and indispensable form of work, it is a paradox that care work is poorly paid and valued. Of course, care work's societal value is often symbolically and affectively acknowledged, but these forms of valuation are at odds with the systemic imperative to lower the costs of social reproduction – that is, of work that aims to maintain human capabilities – and so increase profitability (Dowling, 2016). Leading feminist political economists and theorists, such as Nancy Fraser (2016), have argued that rather than being accidental, this paradox is hardwired in the logic of the contemporary capitalist system. As Fraser (2016) puts it, 'On the one hand, social reproduction is a condition of possibility for sustained capital accumulation; on the other, capitalism's orientation to unlimited accumulation tends to destabilise the very processes of social reproduction on which it relies' (p. 100). In other words, although societies cannot survive or reproduce themselves without care, the economic value of both paid and unpaid care work is routinely ignored and made invisible. This lack of recognition creates a tendency to deplete social reproduction, which means that 'outflows' are bigger than 'inflows' and that capacities for caring cannot be replenished (Rai et al., 2014). This paradox underpins the perennial crisis of care, whereby care and profitability collide with each other to the detriment of the former (Dowling, 2022). The contradiction between the accumulation of capital and the stable conditions of care and social reproduction has deepened in the aftermath of the global financial

crisis of 2007–2009 and the subsequent austerity policies introduced by many countries (see Bakker, 2020).

Although the manifestations of this contradiction vary depending on the national context (Bakker, 2020), scholars working in the Finnish setting have shown that the long-standing strains on the care sector have also led to a care crisis in Finland. In recent decades, care work has changed significantly as profit motives have been introduced and both public and private care provisioning have been made 'more efficient' according to the principles of competitiveness and cost saving. Similarly, care services and structures have been commodified – that is, transformed into market products and financialised – and harnessed to benefit the accumulation of transnational capital (Hoppania et al., 2016, 2022; Jokinen, 2017; Olakivi, 2018; Vaittinen et al., 2018; Zechner et al., 2022).

A growing body of research has shown that these strains on the care sector have harmed care workers. Care is a particular kind of practice that follows the logic and rationality of care (Waerness, 1984). In other words, a human care relationship and situational responses to care recipients' changing needs are crucial parts of the job (Fisher & Tronto, 1990). However, these aspects of care work are not fully recognised, which contributes to the devaluation of care work (Dyer et al., 2008). In the context of the ongoing care crisis, this specific rationality of care is further compromised. In Finland, for example, public-sector care work has been re-rationalised according to the principles of the *lean* model, which originated in Toyota automobile factories. The lean model aims to increase productivity by optimising the use of resources and reducing the aspects of production with no economic value, yet its emphasis on cost efficiency and streamlining is often at odds with care recipients' needs. (Hirvonen et al., 2020; Jokinen, 2017.) Finnish scholars have also documented particularly severe consequences of the cutbacks for eldercare, as the intensification of work and a decrease in workers' autonomy have compromised care recipients' well-being, made it difficult to respond to their needs and increased care workers' risk of burnout (Hoppania et al., 2016). Ethnographic research on care work in a Swedish hospital has likewise documented the growing contradiction experienced by workers whose job satisfaction relies on their ability to respond to care recipients' needs but whose ability to do so is compromised due to the speeding up of their work (Selberg, 2012).

Second, by focusing on young women studying in the media field, my research taps into a wide range of literature on the creative, media and cultural industries. These industries are often considered paradigmatic providers of post-Fordist jobs, which rely on workers' communicative and creative capabilities in the production of value (e.g. Gill & Pratt, 2008). Particularly at the beginning of the 21st century, the creative economy was internationally celebrated in policy discourses as a new frontier for economic growth (Florida, 2002). In the Nordic context, too, the creative

economy discourse has emphasised the economic significance of creative work (Pyykkönen & Stavrum, 2017). However, previous research has repeatedly associated work in this sector with uncertainty and atypical forms of employment, such as freelancing and project work. Consequently, work in the creative and cultural industries is said to exemplify the normalisation of risk and flexible forms of employment. Empirical research suggests that in such a context, workers are encouraged to cultivate a hopeful and entrepreneurial disposition: the constant demand to self-develop and demonstrate passion and entrepreneurial attitude entails a form of governmentality to which creative, media and cultural workers become accustomed (e.g. Alacovska, 2019; Gill & Pratt, 2008; McRobbie, 2016; Threadgold, 2018).

Simultaneously, scholarship has described creative work as an exemplar of 'lovable' jobs that produce passionate attachments to work (Banks, 2014). Therefore, commentators have suggested that creative and media workers epitomise the subjects of the new economy, who have traded occupational security for the promise of autonomous, creative and passionate work. Angela McRobbie (2016), a leading feminist scholar of creative work, has suggested that work in these industries is characterised by a 'creativity dispositif' (see also Reckwitz, 2017), whereby the promise of self-realisation becomes paired with uncertainty about work and employment.

A growing body of research has started mapping out the contradictions related to uncertain yet passionate work in the creative, media and cultural sectors as they are lived at a subjective level by creative workers themselves. My study builds specifically on previous analyses that have approached these contradictions by examining their gendered aspects. Previous research suggests that in creative, media and cultural industries, young women in particular are encouraged to 'do what they love' and find emotional fulfilment in work, while commentators have also highlighted the deleterious effects of this gendered romanticisation of work (Gill, 2014; McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018).

For example, in her empirical study of digital content producers in the US, Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) argued that young women's aspirations for fulfilling work in digital media sustain exploitative patterns of unpaid work. By analysing female classical musicians based in London and Berlin, Christina Scharff (2016, 2018) showed that competition and precarity combined with passionate work orientations produce an injurious mode of interiority for female cultural workers. In the UK, Kim Allen (2014) revealed that a classed rhetoric of aspiration encourages young women pursuing media careers to 'become successful', examining how classed hierarchies shape young women's possibilities of aligning themselves with this orientation (see also Subsection 3.2). Taken together, these studies demonstrate the costs of entrepreneurial femininity as a mode of governmentality for (young) women

working in the creative, media and cultural industries. Furthermore, these costs are often individualised, as the widespread perception of the sector as meritocratic and egalitarian renders gendered, classed and racialised inequalities unspeakable (Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2018).

In this subsection, I have reviewed previous feminist discussions of gender and work in the post-Fordist context to establish a crucial metanarrative for my analysis in this study. By building on this scholarship, I seek to provide a nuanced and multidimensional analysis of the work society's values and lived contradictions as they are negotiated by young women at the threshold between education and employment. In the next two subsections, I provide a more detailed account of the analytical approaches that I employed in Articles I–III.

3.2 Young femininity and subjectivity in a postfeminist landscape

In this subsection, I relate my study to previous discussions on young femininities and young women's aspirations in contemporary work societies. More specifically, I draw on debates on postfeminism, subjectivity and value to theorise how young women's aspirations are related to culturally idealised modes of young femininity.

A broad body of international scholarship has investigated how young women in the Global North have been positioned as individualised and meritocratic subjects in the context of contemporary economies. Although young women remain, in many ways, disadvantaged in the labour market, they have been hailed in policy and media discourses as distinctively individualised, meritocratic and self-transforming subjects of social change who can overcome past gendered, classed and racialised obstacles if they choose to do so. Concomitantly, young women have been associated with new 'freedoms' and opportunities in various life spheres, such as education, work, sexuality and reproduction, and consumption. (E.g. Allen, 2014; Harris, 2004; Gill, 2007a; Gill & Scharff, 2013a; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007.) These new freedoms and possibilities have been elucidated in feminist and youth studies with figures such as the 'can do girl' (Harris, 2004) and 'top girl' (McRobbie, 2009), which have been used as heuristic tools to conceptualise the changing social landscape and its effects on young women's lives (see Threadgold, 2020).

This hopeful positioning of young women as autonomous and individualised subjects reflects the broader assumption that gender equality has already been achieved (see also Subsection 2.2). As Angela McRobbie (2009) summarises, in a landscape of assumed social change, gendered power dynamics are characterised by 'an illusion of positivity and progress while locking young women into "new-old" dependences and anxieties' (p. 10). In feminist media and cultural studies, the

concept of postfeminism has become a key means of analysing the effects of these contradictions on young women's lives.

Although the concept of postfeminism has been deployed in various ways (see Gill & Scharff, 2013b, pp. 3–5), in my research, I follow McRobbie (2007, 2009, 2015), who has approached postfeminism as a social and cultural landscape characterised by an entanglement between feminist and antifeminist ideas. In other words, postfeminism refers to a set of understandings that pair an emphasis on young women's meritocratic achievements with positions that depoliticise, individualise or mask structural power relations. Furthermore, my understanding of postfeminism has been informed by the work of Rosalind Gill (2007a, 2017; Gill et al., 2017), who has suggested that postfeminism should be understood as a sensibility, thus pointing towards an emotional, or affective, dimension of postfeminist ideas. Following Gill (2007, 2017), I do not consider postfeminism to be an analytical stance; rather, to approach postfeminism as a sensibility means to approach it as a constantly changing and open-ended object of empirical analysis. Therefore, to 'speak of postfeminism as a sensibility is to speak of a constellation of beliefs, ideals and practices that are dynamic, that travel, and that change' (Gill et al., 2017, p. 230).

Questions of subjectivity have been at the heart of much previous scholarship on postfeminism, young femininity and the individualisation of gender, and they are also central to my investigation of how young women become workers. Scholars have suggested that postfeminism calls into being autonomous and individualised female subjects who are expected to constantly self-transform, repudiate feminism, approach all life spheres with a meritocratic and entrepreneurial attitude and strive for perfection. A major conclusion in these previous discussions has been that the postfeminist landscape subjects young women to demands of self-enhancement and self-responsibility that mirror the political rationality of neoliberalism (Gill, 2009; Gill & Scharff, 2013b; McRobbie, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014; Scharff, 2016). Focusing on women's experiences, studies have empirically exposed the proliferation of postfeminist ideas in education (Allen, 2016; Crofts & Coffey, 2017; Ikonen, 2020; Kanai, 2019; Ringrose, 2007, 2013) and the workplace (Gill, 2014; Gill et al., 2017; Mäkinen, 2012; Pruchniewska, 2018; Ronen, 2018; Scharff, 2018; Swan, 2017). In fact, these studies have identified education and employment as key areas of postfeminist regulation.

In addition, previous empirical studies have shown that young women's possibilities of inhabiting the position of an individualised, postfeminist subject depend on the broader social and cultural inequalities that constrain their choices. In the UK context, Walkerdine (2003, p. 239) has suggested that young working-class women's attempts to align themselves with the ideals of entrepreneurial femininity are bound to result in a sense of failure because the postfeminist 'neoliberal subject is the autonomous liberal subject made in the image of middle-class' (see also

Walkerdine et al., 2001). Kim Allen (2016) has interrogated the experiences of young women undergoing their education-to-work transitions in the UK landscape of the financial crisis. Allen argued that there is a growing disjunction between the calls that address young women as top girls and the lived realities of the labour market and education, which are characterised by persistent inequalities further exaggerated by the financial crisis of 2007–2009 (Allen, 2016; see also Allen, 2014). These findings parallel those of Hanna-Mari Ikonen (2020), whose study of young white women's experiences in Finland also suggested that class positions shape how young women seek to adopt an individualising top-girl mindset.

Although much of the previous research on postfeminism has focused on Anglo-American contexts, postfeminist and individualistic gender discourses are also prevalent in Nordic countries. As Nordic scholars have suggested, the comparative and linear framework emphasising relatively high levels of gender equality in Nordic countries produces a contradictory experience for young women, who are often socialised to believe that gender equality has already been achieved (Melby et al., 2007). In other words, young women in the Nordic countries are surrounded by 'a political and social imperative that girls can and should be whatever or whoever they want to be, and that they can transcend the remaining injustices while simultaneously living and experiencing these injustices' (Formark & Brännström Öhman, 2013, p. 5). Simultaneously, critical feminist and antiracist scholarship on girlhood in Finland has shown that the notion of equality as a marker of Finnishness has been used to exclude immigrant and racialised girls (Honkasalo, 2013). Furthermore, previous research has demonstrated the similarities between longstanding Finnish state feminist understandings of equality and individualistic, postfeminist discourses (Kolehmainen, 2022). In Finnish working life, postfeminist understandings are related to the culturally prevalent ideas of Finnish women as strong and independent (Mäkinen, 2012). Therefore, postfeminism can be approached as a 'travelling' sensibility that is domesticated in context-specific ways and imbued with country-specific inconsistencies (see Dosekun, 2015; Salmenniemi & Adamson, 2015).

By focusing on the care and media fields, my study sheds light on how young women's engagements with the cultural scripts of autonomous, agentic and self-reliant young femininity differ between the two examined fields. My analysis of the female care work students' aspirations (Article I) maps the effects of culturally dominant, individualistic discourses on the lives of young women, who, because of studying to become practical nurses, are not usually considered forward-moving top girls. To theorise their imagined futures, my analysis draws on the work of Beverley Skeggs (2004, 2011). A British feminist sociologist and class theorist, Skeggs has analysed how, in the context of contemporary capitalism, cultivating oneself as a subject of value, or as an exchange value, becomes a marker of legitimate subjectivity as well as good and proper citizenship. As Skeggs argues, contemporary

modes of production encourage individuals to invest in value-accruing, forward-moving subjectivities, while those who fail to do so are excluded and positioned outside the dominant symbolic logic. Concomitantly, the ideal of cultivating a mobile disposition is based on a classed conceptualisation of value and is thus a privilege that is not equally attainable by everyone (Skeggs, 2004, 2011).

In the context of the UK, Kim Allen and Sumi Hollingworth (2013) have drawn on Skeggs's work to show that social and spatial constraints structure young people's possibilities of claiming the position of a cosmopolitan subject associated with employability in the new, creative economy. Parallel to their examination, my analysis asks how classed and racialised – or migranticised (see Näre, 2013) – hierarchies of the Finnish education system and labour market constrain care work students' possibilities of aligning themselves with the ideal of 'moving forward'. In my research, approaching mobility as a resource became a means of theorising female care work students' imagined futures due an empirical observation. This observation indicated that during their education and initial work experiences, care work students come to associate some care jobs for practical nurses with 'becoming stuck' and institutionalised, while other jobs are associated with 'moving forward' and self-development. In Article I, mobility thus does not strictly refer to educational, geographical, social or class mobility, although higher education was perceived by some students as a way of 'escaping' institutionalised care work settings. Rather, it refers to the participants' different opportunities to move 'up' in the hierarchies of care work, with students describing certain jobs as 'moving forward' because these jobs are perceived as more varied and offering more possibilities for self-development.

In highlighting the racialised hierarchies that constrained the participants' possibilities of moving forward, my analysis is related to previous empirical studies on the racialised structures through which migrants are channelled into low-rank care jobs. In Finnish policy discourses and care employers' recruiting migrant workers has been presented not only as a solution to the care labour deficit but also as a way of reducing labour costs, given that migrants' bargaining power is often weaker than that of the majority population (Krivonos, 2019; Näre, 2013; Näre & Nordberg, 2016; Olakivi, 2018). In particular, my analysis resonates with the empirical findings of Daria Krivonos (2019), who has shown that in Finland, migrant and racialised minority youth are constituted as gendered migrant workers, and migrant women in particular are depicted as natural carers.

However, I do not argue that those who 'stay in place' as practical nurses should be perceived as immobile or uninspiring. Rather than simply equating aspiration with higher-rank care jobs, I draw on US cultural theorist Lauren Berlant's (2011) conceptualisation of aspirational normativity. With her notion of aspirational normativity, Berlant suggests that for people who are at risk of being excluded from

normativity, a conventional and 'burdensome' life can also become something to strive for. As Berlant (2011, p. 167) writes, '[t]o understand collective attachments to fundamentally stressful conventional lives, we need to think about normativity as aspirational and as an evolving and incoherent cluster of hegemonic promises about the present and future experience of social belonging'. Aspirational normativity captures a form of agency that is defined by bargaining with the world by holding on to a deferred sense of hope (Berlant, 2011, p. 171). I suggest that this notion can be deployed to explain why landing a precarious job in the care sector was an object of hope for some of the young women with whom I spoke. I will argue that the notion of aspirational normativity provides a useful way of theorising young people's attachments to the work society in a context in which work is not only a route to the 'good life' but also a key marker of 'good post-Fordist citizenship' and a prerequisite for inclusion (see Berlant, 2011). Aspirational normativity thus refers to an optimistic disposition in which work is associated with hopes for a better life (see Article I).

In Article II, I continue theorising young women's aspirations, this time focusing on media students' stories. In doing so, I explicitly consider postfeminist debates, as reviewed earlier, drawing on an emerging body of scholarship in feminist cultural studies that has suggested that postfeminist sensibility is not only an individualised register but also an increasingly psychologised one. Elements of such a psychologised sensibility include an emphasis on confidence and resilience as dispositions that women should cultivate to overcome the gendered obstacles that constrain them. These imperatives highlight that an emphasis on a positive attitude is central to postfeminist projects of self-improvement (Gill, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018). However, scholarship on postfeminism, gendered neoliberalism and their costs has also exposed the dynamics of self-blame, anxiety and exhaustion stemming from the individualised register of entrepreneurial femininity (Gill & Scharff, 2013b; McRobbie, 2015; Scharff, 2016, 2018).

My analysis mobilises these insights to map the economised and entrepreneurial mode of femininity that the media students' associated with employability in a competitive labour market; this focus also relates to previous research that has identified the cultural and creative industries as paradigmatic examples of sectors that demand entrepreneurial subjectivity (e.g. Gill, 2014; Scharff, 2018; see Subsection 3.1). Further, my analysis of young female media students' aspirations employs Brooke Erin Duffy's (2017) notion of aspirational labour. Duffy has developed the concept for her study of gender and precarious labour patterns in the digital economy, and it describes how young women engage in forward-oriented, productive activities with the hope of turning their unpaid, aspirational activities into fulfilling careers in digital media production. In my analysis, I argue that the effort

that the media students invested in cultivating productive and confident individuality can be understood as a form of inward-oriented aspirational labour (Article II).

Duffy's (2017) analysis of aspirational labour is also relevant to my analysis of media students' aspirations in another way because it is concerned with how power works in ambivalent ways in contemporary capitalism. Duffy suggested that aspirational labourers' consent to unpaid or underpaid work is not a by-product of their unwitting compliance with individualised ideologies; rather, this consent is propelled by the promise of doing what you love. As I will demonstrate in Article II, a similar ambivalence also characterised the media students' aspirational work on the self. I understand ambivalence as a 'form of double coding and being of two minds about something that suggests there is some space in between' (Skeggs & Wood, 2012, p. 150). With the idea of ambivalence, I have sought to avoid a reading that assumes a straightforward incorporation of capitalist and entrepreneurial logic into young women's subjectivities. Thus, my analysis echoes Renold and Ringrose's (2008, pp. 313–316) observation that resistance to postfeminist regulation can be momentary rather than 'grand' and that there is always space for alternative subjectivities.

In sum, this section has situated my research in relation to previous studies on young femininities, postfeminism, aspirations and subjectivity that informed my research. My analysis will demonstrate the costs of autonomous, agentic subjectivity for young women in different positions, as well as their different possibilities of inhabiting such subjectivity. However, I will also suggest that young women's engagements with postfeminist and individualised ideas of young femininity are both pragmatic, as they help young women deal with the challenges that they face in their everyday lives, and ambivalent, as they do not hold absolutely. By approaching these engagements as pragmatic and ambivalent, I intend to avoid a reading that assumes a straightforward and mimetic relationship between culturally dominant interpellations and young women's responses to them because this would pose the risk of depicting research participants as 'individualised and duped' (see Skeggs & Wood, 2012). Instead, I have sought to take the participants' critical capacities seriously, seeking to understand how and why they are engaged with certain meanings (Illouz, 2008, p. 4). This approach has also characterised my analysis of young women's engagements with the post-Fordist work ethic and its emotional conventions, which I will discuss below.

3.3 Values and emotions at work

In the previous subsection, I discussed how my research is situated in relation to previous studies on the gendered scripts that position young women as autonomous, self-optimising and forward-moving subjects in the postfeminist cultural landscape.

In this subsection, I focus on the cultural legitimations and work ethics of post-Fordism, connecting these discussions with feminist theorising on the role of emotions in work.

According to Weber's (1905/2005) classical argument, capitalism is not an autonomous force but one that must find traction in the surrounding culture: for the capitalist economy to sustain itself and manufacture consenting subjects, it must establish moral legitimations for its existence. As mentioned earlier, a key claim about work in the post-Fordist economy is that individuals are now increasingly encouraged to develop intimate relationships with their work as subjectivities become fused with work identities. As I will now discuss, this relationship between work and its subject has become a central feature of discussions on the norms, values and morals of the post-Fordist work.

In their modern classic *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) traced the shifts in managerial discourses in France to show how the relationship between the self and the worker became reconfigured in the shift from Fordism to post-Fordism. A defining feature of this shift was the emergent 'new spirit of capitalism', whereby the ideals of self-realisation, happiness and tending to workers' emotional needs have become crucial managerial concerns from the 1960s and 1970s onwards. This shift was a response to the countercultural and 'artistic' critique of the New Left, which criticised corporate culture as dull, alienating and demanding self-denial. By recuperating this artistic critique, capitalism established more effective moral legitimation by presenting work as a means of self-actualisation. This led Boltanski and Chiapello to argue that a critique of capitalism does not threaten the latter's existence, as capitalism can use critique to renew and strengthen its legitimation strategies. In sum, Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) suggest that by promoting workers' identification with their jobs, the new spirit 'guarantees the workers' commitment without recourse to compulsion, by making everyone's work meaningful' (p. 76).

The idea of self-investment in work has also been discussed by British sociologist and anthropologist Paul Heelas (2002) in his theoretical examination of typical ideal shifts in the work ethic. Heelas's analysis resonates with Boltanski and Chiapello's arguments above, as he suggests that contemporary capitalism is characterised by the emergence of a 'self-work ethic'. In this iteration of the work ethic, the ethical duty to work on the self becomes extended to all areas of life, and the time spent outside of work comes to be viewed as a potential opportunity for cultivating and developing oneself as a worker. According to Heelas, self-work refers to a forward-oriented activity through which individuals seek to cultivate, develop and transform themselves to achieve future rewards in the labour market (Heelas, 2002). As discussed in the previous subsection, the imperatives to cultivate a productive self that are central to the self-work ethic are also gendered, as women

and young women in particular have been subjected to intense demands to become responsible, self-improving subjects (e.g. McRobbie, 2009). Heelas's (2002) notion of the self-work ethic as inviting forward-oriented work on the self also resonates with Duffy's (2017) analysis of aspirational labour, which I discussed earlier.

As I will show, by focusing on young women's work values (Article III), my study engages with theorising on the post-Fordist work ethic, which positions work as a source of self-realisation and emotional satisfaction. In doing so, I draw on the work of political theorist Kathi Weeks (2011), who has investigated the notion of self-realisation in the contemporary work ethic. Starting with the Protestant ethic, Weeks has analysed three historical shifts associated with the work ethic, with each shift 'creating' different workers by producing new work-related subjectivities. As Weeks suggests, the entanglement between the self and the job has become tighter with each shift. For example, even the Protestant ethic (Weber, 1905/2005) owed its effect to approaching people as individuals who could gain personal rewards from devoting themselves to work. Weeks (2011) argues as follows:

> The ethic is advice not just about how to behave but also about who to be; it takes aim not just at consciousness but also at the energies and capacities of the body, and the objects and aims of its desires. The ethic's mandate is not merely to induce a set of beliefs or instigate a series of acts but also to produce a self that strives continually towards those beliefs and acts. This involves the cultivation of habits, the internalization of routines, the incitement of desires, and the adjustment of hopes, all to guarantee a subject's adequacy to the lifetime demands of work. (p. 54)

The two later shifts involved the industrial work ethic and the post-industrial work ethic, whose development Weeks has analysed in the US context (Weeks, 2011, pp. 37–77). Over the course of the work ethic's historical transformations, the object of the work ethic – namely, work – has remained constant: rewards have been promised to those who dedicate themselves to waged work, which is framed as an end in itself (Weeks, 2011, p. 46). However, the goals, or promises, of the work ethic have been flexible. The Protestant ethic fostered commitment to work as a means of achieving religious salvation, while the Fordist work ethic promised material rewards and social mobility. With the transition from industrial to post-industrial production, the boundaries between work and subjectivity became even more porous, as the distinction between work and leisure that characterised the Fordist work ethic weakened. Nowadays, the post-Fordist ethic promises emotional fulfilment and self-realisation to those who devote themselves to work. Therefore, in the post-Fordist economy, the ethical imperative to become a worker has become more powerful than

ever before, as the goal of work is not just status or social recognition but also personal meaning (Weeks, 2011, pp. 37–77).

Scholars Jessica Gerrard (2014) and David Farrugia (2021) have applied Weeks's notion of the post-Fordist work ethic to study education, youth and employment. Gerrard has theoretically examined how the ideas and discourses of learning and education have become culturally compatible with the post-Fordist work ethic's prompts to approach work as a means of self-realisation. As a result, the significance of the 'nexus between learning and labour' has grown in contemporary economies (Gerrard, 2014, p. 864). Studying young workers in Australia, Farrugia (2019, 2021) drew on Weeks's (2011) notion of the work ethic to theorise how young people become subjected to the normative requirement to cultivate the self in relation to work, showing how young people themselves understand the imperative to cultivate an economically productive self (Farrugia, 2019, 2021). Farrugia's work belongs to an emerging body of youth sociology, which stems particularly from the Australian context. This body of research has revealed that the post-Fordist economy poses normative requirements for young people that go beyond the demand for certain skills and, instead, encompass the fabric of subjectivity (Coffey et al., 2018; Farrugia et al., 2018; Threadgold et al., 2021; Sharp et al., 2022).

In many aspects, these discussions echo those on the 'enterprising self', which is most prominently linked with the work of Nikolas Rose (1990, 1992), who has developed Foucauldian theorising on governmentality to analyse the production of new worker subjectivities. In his work, Rose has argued that contemporary working life invites people to become constantly self-optimising and self-governing individuals, with the result that the self itself becomes a marketised commodity. Crucial to the formation of this entrepreneurial subjectivity is the 'obligation to be free', which compels an individual to 'render his or her life meaningful as if it were the outcome of individual choices made in furtherance of a biographical project of self-realisation' (Rose, 1999, p. ix). As subsequent research has suggested, the idea of the entrepreneurial self informs contemporary conceptions of youth, education and employment. In the US context, political theorist Wendy Brown (2015, pp. 175–200) has argued that in the contemporary economic context, the role of education has changed to encourage people to approach themselves as self-investing human capital. Empirical research into EU policy discourse has also suggested that entrepreneurial understandings of the self have increasingly started to inform EU youth policy discourses, which foster self-investing, self-managing subjectivity by promoting short-term education and training programmes (Mertanen et al., 2020). In Finland, researchers have demonstrated the prevalence of entrepreneurial understandings of the self as human capital, both in the Finnish education system

and in the context of young people's labour market activation (e.g. Brunila et al., 2013; Haikkola, 2019; Keskitalo-Foley et al., 2010; Paju et al., 2020).

The contemporary work ethic, which frames work as a route to self-realisation and invites powerful identification with work (Weeks, 2011, p. 12), also mirrors the dominance of therapeutic values and motifs in contemporary working life, a phenomenon that has been described using the concept of therapeutic culture. Therapeutic culture has been theorised in different ways. However, this concept generally describes how psychological discourses have become key cultural motifs, including in the sphere of work, since the middle of the 20th century (e.g. Davies, 2015; Illouz, 2008; Rikala, 2013; Salmenniemi, 2022; Swan, 2010), along with a proliferation of psychological discourses and theories beyond therapists' offices and the scientific discipline of psychology (Madsen, 2014). With its focus on self-realisation and achieving one's full potential, therapeutic culture has a wide reach because it targets not just 'sick' but also healthy 'selves' (Swan, 2010, p. 3). In other words, self-development and self-realisation are elusive goals that can never be fully realised; therefore, they require constant work on the self (Illouz, 2007, 2008).

In this study, I approach young women's engagements with the post-Fordist work ethic by considering how emotions can sustain the norms and moralities of the work society. My focus on the role of emotions is rooted in my empirical findings: the idea of pleasurable and emotionally fulfilling work was central to my participants' work values and their ideas of meaningful work. However, instead of approaching young women's emotions as false or true, I wanted to understand how emotions function as signposts for young women looking to find their place in the work society (Article III).

Young women's ways of associating work with emotional fulfilment are related to the fact that work has been positioned as a central 'happiness object' in post-Fordist work societies. In her influential analysis of the culturally dominant 'happiness imperative', feminist cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2010) has suggested that the things people associate with happiness do not originate with individuals but are shaped by social expectations, norms and moralities. Therefore, the things that subjects strive for with the hope that they will make them 'happy' are the result of social norms through which happiness becomes associated with certain objects. Ahmed's analysis of happiness is related to her longstanding interest in how emotions are used to sustain and reproduce social norms. She has argued that, instead of originating with individuals, emotions are connected to objects through the values, morals and ideals of the surrounding culture (Ahmed, 2004). I suggest that the cultural association between work and happiness is connected to contemporary imperatives, whereby to love one's job is a normative ideal that all workers are encouraged to strive for, even if people's possibilities of finding lovable jobs are drastically unequal (Cabanas & Illouz, 2019, pp. 99–100; Weeks, 2017).

In my discussion of gender and post-Fordism in Subsection 3.1, I suggested that continuity rather than change characterises post-Fordist work societies. Similarly, feminist scholarship on emotions and work has shown that the connection between love and work is not a new or 'post-Fordist' phenomenon but a gendered construct that relies on culturally and historically constituted notions of femininity and 'women's work'. Indeed, commentators have suggested that the love associated with women's unpaid domestic work has become a template for all jobs in the post-Fordist economy (Jarrett, 2015; Mäkinen, 2021; Weeks, 2017).

While Marxist feminists have long argued that framing labour as love contributes to making invisible the exploitation of women's unpaid domestic, care and reproductive work (e.g. Federici, 1995), studies have also shown that women's emotions are exploited in waged labour. The analysis of feminised emotional labour was pioneered by Arlie Russell Hochschild (1983/2012), who, in her study *The Managed Heart*, investigated the emotional labour of American airline hostesses, describing the impacts of emotional labour in service work, where emotions and the 'heart' are instruments of the job. Airline hostesses suffered from exploitation and alienation related to the ways in which their personalities were made part of value production. Hochschild's influential analysis showed that loving one's job – not in the sense of 'surface acting' but 'deep acting' – became a crucial part of work for 'pink collar' service workers (Hochschild 1983/2012). Furthermore, Hochschild's findings reveal that women are employed not only based on their skills but also due to their dispositions (see Skeggs, 2004, p. 74), with these dispositions being essentialised as part of female workers' 'natural' femininity, as discussed earlier.

Although Hochschild's (1983/2012) study is most known for its conceptualisation of emotional labour, my analysis of young women's work ethics draws on another concept from the same study – namely, feeling rules. The concept of feeling rules refers to a set of social norms that define what feelings are 'appropriate' or 'inappropriate' in a given situation. Feeling rules, which can be both explicit and tacit, describe how power, or social norms, work through feelings. Recent feminist research has deployed Hochschild's work on feeling rules to empirically examine, for example, young femininity in the mediated landscape (Gill & Kanai, 2018; Kanai, 2019), postfeminist masculinity (Goedecke, 2021) and influencer mothers' regulation of emotions (Lehto, 2022). In her studies on young women's gender performances online, Akane Kanai (2018, 2019) examined how young women manage the emotional demands of contemporary capitalism. Kanai suggested that normative youthful femininity is lived as a set of feeling rules and requires managing emotional contradictions. For example, young women are required to control their feelings to appear pleasant in the eyes of others (Kanai, 2018, 2019).

Hochschild's (1983/2013) original analysis distinguished between private-sphere emotional work and public, paid emotional labour. However, Kanai (2019) suggested that these distinctions have become porous in the contemporary postfeminist landscape, in which young women are invited to continuously work on cultivating an entrepreneurial individuality so that the private and public selves become entangled. These findings also resonate with my analysis in Article III, which shows that for young women in the post-Fordist work society, a fulfilling job is culturally framed as a key element of the 'good life' (Berlant, 2011) and legitimate subjectivity. Scholars have also sometimes distinguished between outward-oriented emotional labour in the service industry and inward-oriented emotional work on the self, which has been described as characteristic of white-collar creative and knowledge work (e.g. Gregg, 2009, p. 11). Although care work could be seen as an example of the outward-oriented emotional labour because it involves high levels of interaction and requires emotional performance, my analysis of media and care work students' accounts focused mostly on the inward-oriented emotional work on the self. In fact, as my analysis will demonstrate, both care work and media students worked on the self as they sought to align themselves with pleasure and fulfilment as central elements of their work values (Article III). Thus, my findings resemble those of McRobbie (2016) who has argued that in the post-Fordist economy, passionate work has become a marker of intelligible subjectivity for young women.

Building on the discussions reviewed above, in Article III, I develop the notion of post-Fordist feeling rules. Using this notion, I seek to describe how young women's normative and moral understandings of work – that is, their work ethic – are lived at the subjective level as a set of feeling rules. In keeping with my discussion of postfeminism, young women's possibilities for claiming the position of a self-realising and passionate subject idealised by the post-Fordist work ethic are unequally distributed (see Farrugia, 2019).

Moreover, I show how becoming aligned with feeling rules involves managing field-specific uncertainties associated with one's views of employment. The uncertainties of contemporary work and employment have been the object of many scholarly debates. These debates have often drawn on concepts of precarity and precariousness, which however have been framed in various ways in different geopolitical contexts and research traditions (Puar et al., 2012). Theorists have focused on different aspects of precariousness, such as novel class formations (Standing, 2011), new modes of neoliberal governance and social control (Lorey, 2015) and the broader condition of ontological and existential insecurity and vulnerability (Butler, 2004). Scholarship on precarity and precariousness has further debated whether work is more insecure than before and if precarity is a minority or majority condition (e.g. Doogan, 2009). As mentioned earlier, statistical evidence on labour market trends in Finland does not support the thesis of wide-scale uncertainty

and flexibility (Pyöriä & Ojala, 2016). However, elements of precariousness do characterise the working conditions of both fields that I studied in my research. Media work is characterised by patterns of freelancing and project work, while the insecurity of care labour is related to precarious working conditions in the public and private healthcare sectors. That being said, the degrees of precarity are drastically different for, say, a foreign-born practical nurse without formal citizenship and an aspiring graphic designer who can rely on her middle-class parents' financial support. Although the debates on precarity have not played an important analytical role in my research, this study speaks to these discussions by examining how the contradictions of contemporary work – pleasurable and autonomous on the one hand and uncertain, insecure and flexible on the other – are handled by young women (see also McRobbie, 2016; Scharff, 2018). In particular, by showing how young women seek to manage the gulf between their ideals of work and the actual work conditions and uncertainties in their fields (Article III), my study contributes to scholarship on the emotional dimensions, or structures of feeling, of precariousness (e.g. Berlant, 2011).

In summary, this section has introduced the theoretical framework of my research. First, it showed that the literature on gender and post-Fordist work provides a theoretical metanarrative for my study of young women's experiences (Subsection 3.1). Then, it situated my discussion in relation to previous debates on aspirations, young femininity and subjectivity in the postfeminist landscape (Subsection 3.2). Finally, this subsection reviewed previous discussions on post-Fordist work values and ethics and connected them to feminist theorising on the role of emotions in work. In the next section, I will discuss my methodological choices.

4 Methodological considerations

Following Skeggs (1997, p. 7), I approach methodology as a 'theory of methods which informs a range of issues from who to study, how to study, which institutional practices to adopt (such as interpretative practices), how to write and which knowledge to use'. In line with this idea, I will consider these issues in relation to this research. First, I discuss how I collected the research materials. Then, I present the analysis process. Third, I discuss research ethics. Throughout the section, I reflect on my role in the course of the research, from the planning stage to data collection and interpretation, building on the notion that knowledge is situated and, as such, inevitably partial in terms of perspective (Haraway, 1988).

4.1 Collecting research materials

As mentioned, young people in Finland usually leave the education system and enter the labour market after completing vocational upper-secondary or tertiary education programmes; this research took such programmes as its object. More specifically, I analysed interviews and observations I collected at care and media education sites between 2017 and 2018.

The research design was informed by the goal of analysing similar questions in different educational and field-specific contexts. Although the aim was not to conduct strictly comparative research, I have sought to contrast the findings from the two settings. In general, I examined young women's narratives and their connections with the educational and labour market contexts of the care and media fields. I consider this research to be mostly a qualitative interview study, but I also conducted observation to familiarise myself with the participants' educational contexts. In this way, the study also contains elements of institutional ethnography (Smith, 2005), as the institutional contexts of the education programmes have provided background context for my examination of the participants' imagined futures.

My research design also shares some similarities with a longstanding tradition in youth sociology, which has ethnographically analysed how young people become workers through education. Research in this tradition has suggested that it is central to examine links between education cultures and ideologies and the inequalities of the work society, which can be approached by studying young people's experiences

(e.g. Willis, 1977; Skeggs, 1997; Walkerdine et al., 2001; Käyhkö, 2006; Tolonen et al., 2012). For example, in his classic study *Learning to Labour*, Paul Willis (1977) ethnographically studied the culture of working class 'lads' to find out 'why working-class kids get working class jobs'. Willis showed that young men's resistance to official structures and authorities and their morality, most notably in school, contributed to the reproduction of their classed subordination in the labour market.

However, as my study is not situated in sociology of education, the focus is not so much on how young people are created as worker subjects through educational practices; rather, I focus on how young women become workers through negotiating work-related scripts, values and ethics. That being said, it was clear to me that I did not just want to do separate, one-off interviews but as an outsider to both of the fields analysed in this study, I wanted to spend time learning to understand the research participants' study contexts and to embed their accounts within these contexts.

Hence, in both fields, I started by observing classes and events in education, after obtaining research permissions from the institutions. The first period of fieldwork involved young women studying in the upper-secondary vocational education programme in the field of social services and health care. I collected the data in one institution, and my intention was to become familiar with the participants' study contexts. After negotiating field access and presenting the research plan in a teachers' meeting, I was assigned two groups whose classes I would follow. The students in the field can choose from eight competence areas, and the students whom I observed and interviewed were final-year students specialising in the competence areas of nursing and care, and children's and youth's education and care. For care education, I spent approximately 50 hours periodically observing the education programmes over one year. With the fieldwork, my aim was to get a general sense of the educational context. In particular, I attended specific classes on themes related to working-life skills. I chose these classes based on research subject of 'becoming a worker' and included simulation days, work-related projects and labour-union info sessions.

The second site of this research was bachelor-level (Finnish qualification title medianomi) media and communication programmes in two polytechnic institutions. The research participants from this field specialised in programmes providing competences for working in various jobs in the areas of journalism, graphic design and digital media. In the media field, I observed education programmes in two different institutions over a period of one year. In the media education programmes, my fieldwork was different from my time with the care work students, as I was not assigned particular groups to work with. Rather, I followed different groups of students in their work. Again, I participated in classes on issues connected to working life: for example, CV workshops, project work and career planning. However, as in

the care education, I also observed other classes to get a broad sense of what the different education programmes were about. In the media education programmes, I spent approximately 30 hours observing the classes.

In both contexts, in addition to observing classes, I had informal discussions with the students and their teachers. Particularly in the care education programme, where I had gotten to know the students better because I mainly followed particular groups, the students sometimes invited me to join them in the cafeteria during breaks. Further, although the field notes did not play a significant role in my published articles, the fieldwork not only helped me recruit the interviewees but also guided the interviews. For example, in the interviews, we often discussed things that had happened during the classes that I had followed.

I recruited the interview participants from their educational institutions. I approached students during observation, contacted them via mailing lists and obtained further interviewees through snowballing. My interview material consisted of 39 interviews with young women: 19 interviews with young women in secondary care education and 20 interviews with young women in tertiary education in the field of media and communication. The age of the participants was between 18 and 33 years, with most participants being in their early or late twenties. This age range resonates with the sociological idea of youth understood not in terms of biological age but rather as the blurring of the distinction between youth and young adulthood, with the transition from education to the labour market often being prolonged and occurring in one's late twenties or early thirties (Woodman & Wyn, 2015).

All the participants were approaching the end of their education. As mentioned, most had one foot in education and the other in working life, as many participants already had relevant work experiences in their fields through internships, clinical learning periods, summer jobs and temping. Therefore, I focused on this blurry boundary between youth and young adulthood. By examining this particular chapter in the participants' lives, I sought to better understand a phase in their lives in which the participants were crafting their selves as worker citizens and working subjects (see Brunila et al., 2013; Farrugia, 2021). In both groups, the interviewed students mostly came from working- and lower-middle-class backgrounds, and their educational choices represented horizontal or upward mobility compared to their parents. At the same time, the participants' own class positions were still in formation; for example, many practical nursing students aspired towards further education to become registered nurses, a profession represented as more skilled and associated with middle-class femininity. Because of this, I did not particularly focus on analysing the participants' experiences in relation to their own class positions. Rather, when it comes to class, I was interested in the differently classed contexts of the two education programmes. Further, reflecting the racialised hierarchies in the Finnish labour market, the media students were all white and Finnish, while five of

the care work students were foreign born, and three of these foreign born students had not yet acquired formal Finnish citizenship. Although the whiteness of my participant sample in the media field is an unfortunate limitation, it is connected to the fact that the groups whose classes I followed were overwhelmingly white.

In both fields, the participants' educational backgrounds varied. In care education, some had entered the programmes directly after compulsory schooling or preparatory education for vocational education, while others had completed general upper-secondary education before entering vocational education; many care work students also aspired to continue their studies in tertiary education. In media education, some had vocational and others general upper-secondary education. Some media students also planned to continue their education at a university. Therefore, the fact that there are no 'dead-ends' in the Finnish education system (*see Subsection 2.3)* was reflected in the details of the participant sample.

The interviews were semi-structured (see Kvale & Brinkman, 2009, p. 130) and roughly consisted of the following four thematic blocks: (1) one's route to their current education, (2) experiences of education, (3) experiences and general ideas of work in one's field and (4) thoughts about one's future after graduation. In addition to these thematic blocks, I also asked the participants about their thoughts on society more generally – for example, what their thoughts were on the social issues that mattered to them and how they perceived political participation and trade unions. As I was interested in how inequalities constrain young women's opportunities, I asked general questions related to gendered and other inequalities in education and work. For the most part, the participants' responses focused on gendered and racial (in)equality, although class and other inequalities were sometimes also discussed.

Further, although the interview guide was divided into the four thematic blocks, in the interview situations, I tried to let the participants steer the conversation as much as possible to keep it open to the issues that the participants considered important. Therefore, the questions varied somewhat from one interview to next, but the main themes were covered in each interview. In line with my goal of letting participants speak openly, I paid special attention to how I phrased the questions. For example, I tried to avoid closed questions or questions starting with 'why' because such questions do not encourage open answers. In fact, 'why' questions can make interviewees defensive by making them feel as if their choices are questioned.

I conducted the interviews in Finnish and they lasted between 40 minutes and 2.5 hours, but most interviews lasted 60–90 minutes. All interviews were recorded and transcribed word for word, with laughs, cries and longer pauses marked. The quotations that I have used in the three articles are translations from Finnish to English. I conducted the interviews in different places; most I conducted in empty classrooms or other spaces in the participants' educational institutions. In some cases, I met the participants in cafés or in their places of work. I also asked some of

the media students to show me their internet portfolios of work-related social media accounts if such were mentioned in the interviews. Seeing the carefully curated portfolios helped me understand the many practices of 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2017) that the participants engaged in to find employment in a competitive industry.

The participants were generally enthusiastic about participating in the research interviews and sharing their experiences. Some wanted to participate because they saw the interviews as a good opportunity to reflect on their experiences and think about what they wanted to do after graduation. Others said that the interview provided a good opportunity to 'rant' about their education programmes. Finally, some saw me as a fellow student whom they wanted to help with her research. As I will discuss in Article I, particularly with the care work students, I felt that the well-performing students were the ones who mostly participated in my interviews. In fact, having spent time with the specific groups, I noticed that some students were struggling with their studies and often did not participate in the classes. From the teachers I heard that some students also struggled with their clinical learning periods, which were a significant part of the education programmes. Therefore, in care education, I also interviewed two teachers to establish a broader picture of the student body. I drew on the teachers' views particularly in Article I. Although I aimed for a group of participants of various backgrounds and experiences, the fact that the research invitation attracted mostly people who fared well in their studies can thus be considered a limitation.

My own position as a white Finnish woman and a PhD candidate also affected the interviews. When conducting the interviews, I was in my late twenties, and, therefore, I was of a similar age as many of the participants, who often asked me about my age and personal work and education history. They also asked me about my future plans, and as someone who was writing her dissertation, I could sympathise with the participants' worries about not quite knowing how to find one's place in the labour market. I felt that these 'similarities' helped me connect with the participants, though I do not wish to downplay the power dynamics that are always present in interview settings (see Oinas, 2004). That being said, my own position differed from that of the participants also in crucial ways. For example, my experiences are drastically different from the experiences of, for example, the foreign-born interview participants, who experienced their range of options in the Finnish labour market as highly limited.

My gender and relatively young age also came up regularly when I presented my work at scientific conferences. Often, I noticed becoming quite irritated when receiving questions from the audience about how my participants' experiences related to my own experiences as a 'young woman'. While these questions most often felt benevolent, I also had the strange feeling that such questions would not be posed to a middle-aged man; that as a young woman myself, I was suspected of using

research to study questions that are meaningful to me personally. Despite my initial irritation, these encounters also made me reflect on my own relation to the research topic and the complexity of my position, identity and motivations. However, although my research perspective was partial and intersected in complex ways with my own position and identity, the same is true for all research (e.g. Liljeström, 2004).

Rather than waiting to have the whole interview material collected before starting the analysis, I started listening to the interviews and reading through the materials after conducting the very first interviews, maintaining this practice throughout the data-collection process. This practice helped me identify interview questions that did not work or seemed difficult for the participants to understand. In addition, listening to the recorded interviews made me painfully aware of the times when I had been too eager with my follow-up questions and had interrupted the participant too soon. In the course of the research, I learned not to be afraid of silences in interview situations, as I noticed that the participants often continued narrating after a little pause if I did not rush to ask my next question (see also Hyvärinen, 2017). I think that my process of developing as an interviewer is reflected in the fact that the interviews became lengthier as the research progressed. I realised that if I, as a researcher, am too eager to ask my next question, the participant starts to adjust their behaviour accordingly and limits the length of their response. Therefore, throughout the interviewing process, I made little tweaks to the interview guide and adjusted my behaviour as an interviewer. I believe that as a result, the interview accounts became richer as the research progressed.

4.2 Analytical reflections

In simple terms, the analysis process can be seen as taking place after the collection of materials. In practice, however, these two phases often overlap and cannot be separated from each other. This was also the case for this research. As noted above, I started familiarising myself with the materials already during data collection, and I began developing initial ideas for the analysis already at this stage. However, in the research process, there were two particularly intense periods of analysis: the first occurred when I finished interviewing the care work students and the second after I had interviewed the media students. Each of these periods was characterised by an intense ‘immersion’ in the research materials. I read the interviews multiple times, familiarising myself with the material, taking notes and searching for repetitive patterns. First, I read the interviews very openly, making notes of all things that seemed ‘interesting’ in the materials. Then, I started to preliminarily group and classify my observations according to repetitive patterns. I also took notes and made plot summaries of each interview to get a sense of the key narratives and themes.

Throughout the research, I used the NVivo programme, which is designed to support the process of qualitative analysis. First, I used NVivo to try and make sense of my initial thoughts, and later to classify the materials according to more abstract themes. The early stages of immersion were followed by more focused periods of data analysis, during which I examined the materials from the perspective of the article that I was working on at the time. Although the articles of this study involved somewhat different analytical processes, some aspects were similar.

In analysing the interviews, I have approached the interviews as stories situated within the wider social world. My interest in interview research stemmed from my understanding of language and narration as social and cultural resources that people draw on to make sense of the social world and their identities in that world (Lawler, 2008). As Steph Lawler (2008, p. 37) has argued, narratives 'bridg[e] the divide between self and other, individual and "society," and (…) past and present'. Despite the fact that my interviews were semi-structured rather than narrative based, these aspects were present in my interviews. The interviews contained many 'small stories' (Bamberg, 2004), but the research material was also a 'narrative' in the sense that I was interested in the participants' biographies: where they had come from, where they were at the moment of the interview and where they saw themselves as going.

With narratologists, I share an interest in how stories are told and why they are told in particular ways (Riessman, 1993). However, I would not call the research approach as strictly narratological; rather, I have thematically analysed narrative features in the participants' interviews. The method of qualitative thematic analysis is aimed at identifying and analysing reoccurring patterns in the interview materials (e.g. Tuomi & Sarajärvi, 2009). In thematic analysis, researcher has a key role in classifying and interpreting the materials, as themes are not just discovered but actively constructed (Braun & Clarke, 2012, p. 63). Furthermore, while interpreting the interviews, I did not approach the interviews as containing 'facts' that would connect with the participants' 'real' experiences in a straightforward manner. Rather, my analytical approach is informed by discourse analysis in the sense that I perceive language as constructing, shaping, and reproducing social phenomena, rather than a route to some reality 'behind' it (e.g. Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Phillips & Hardy, 2000).

My approach to negotiations and narratives as culturally, socially and historically embedded also situates my work within the broader tradition of cultural sociology. I think that Eva Illouz (2008), a sociologist who has focused on the study of emotions and therapeutic culture, has aptly described the task of cultural sociology. Illouz (2008, pp. 8–12) has listed the core features of cultural sociology, of which three in particular resonated with this research. First, Illouz suggests that, at its heart, cultural sociology is interested in 'who we are' and how we make sense of these questions

by using culturally shared narratives, moralities, values and meanings. Second, Illouz claims that the cultural sociology is concerned with how some meanings become more binding than others and how some meanings have more 'institutional resonance' (Illouz, 2008, p. 9) than others. These reflections informed the research approach. Given the central meaning of work in people's lives, I believe that it is important for sociologists with a hermeneutic orientation to analyse how the hopes, fears, meanings and ideals around work shape people's understandings of themselves and others. In addition, given the centrality of work to maintaining the 'social order', values related to work, such as the work ethic and in its different reiterations, have significant institutional resonance.

Third, Illouz (2008, p. 11) calls for more attention to the role of emotions in cultural sociology and suggested that emotions should be considered 'the central missing link connecting structure and agency'. Instead of being precultural or presocial, emotions are imbued with social and cultural meanings and should, therefore, be an object of study for cultural sociologists. Illouz's thinking resonates with the positions of Sara Ahmed (2004, 2010) and Arlie Hochschild (1983/2012) discussed above. That being said, interviews help researchers encounter expressions of emotions rather than the actual emotions themselves (see also Kantola, 2020). As Kantola (2020, p. 916) suggested, a focus on emotions helps to answer why people act in the ways they do, beyond simply describing how they do it. In this research, I found that a focus on emotions (Article III) was helpful in understanding my participants' attachments to work.

Furthermore, in all three articles, my theoretical interests were connected with data-driven, 'bottom-up' observations. Although each of the articles is clearly shaped by my theoretical interests as a researcher, my empirical observations also affected my chosen theories. In fact, my interpretation process involved a back-and-forth between my empirical materials and previous literature. In qualitative interview research, it makes little sense for researchers to decide what is relevant before conducting the interviews (Oinas, 2004, p. 214) or to approach research materials using strictly predefined theoretical and contextual frameworks. Rather than just 'testing theory', I have sought to remain analytically flexible and go beyond my initial paradigms, leaving room for the unanticipated (see also Cerwonka & Malkki, 2004). Regarding this position, I also took a cue from Skeggs (2015), who claims that theories must have explanatory power and not just trending status; by saying this, Skeggs also warns sociologists against the tendency to try and fit their empirical materials within popular theoretical grids even when less trendy theories may be more helpful in interpreting one's materials.

The analytical processes used in the three articles are presented in detail in each article, but a short summary of these processes is necessary. In Article I, I focused on narratives more than in the other articles, as I got the basic idea for the article

after creating plot summaries for each interview. In this article, my perspective was shaped by an unanticipated observation: that already during the education process, many future practical nurses doubted whether they would want to stay as practical nurses. Thus, in this article, I combined thematic and narrative approaches to construct a 'map' of young care work students' imagined futures, which they seemed to understand in terms of mobility and fixity. Likewise, my perspective in Article II was shaped by my empirical observations, namely that young women in media work seemed to make sense of the demands of their industry using a language that paid a lot of attention to one's personality. I used thematic approaches to make sense of these processes as a form of self-oriented 'aspirational labour' (Duffy, 2017) while looking for ruptures and resistances in the women's narratives. In Article III, I wanted to connect the materials from the two fields. Therefore, I was particularly interested in the similarities between the two corpora of interviews. This was not an easy task because the contexts in which the participants' narratives were situated were highly different. However, the major similarity was that most participants used emotional language to explain their aspirations. As this parlance had a strongly normative dimension, I decided to mobilise Hochschild's (1983/2013) concept of feeling rules as an analytical tool.

4.3 Ethical questions

In this subsection, I discuss the ethical questions related to my research. In this study, I paid special attention to following formal guidelines on research ethics and responsible conduct in research. Furthermore, I consider research ethics to be processual and something that must be constantly revisited (Cerwonka & Malkki, 2004). As I will show below, in research based on qualitative interviews with an ethnographic dimension, ethical questions must be considered at each stage of the research process.

First, ethical questions arose during my periodical fieldwork. Although I obtained formal research permissions according to the guidelines of each institution examined in this study, I also had to constantly negotiate access on a more situational basis. Usually, on my observation days, I negotiated access as follows: I began by contacting the teacher whose classes I wanted to follow, either via email or in other ways, to receive permission before the classes. I was granted permission almost without exception, though sometimes I was told that the class might not be particularly interesting – for example, if the group was only going to watch a movie. On such occasions, I sometimes changed my plans and tried to observe another class instead. Although I always got 'consent', there were tensions related to my method of asking for access. For example, in care education, one teacher seemed bothered by my presence. I got this impression when I asked in person if I could observe the

teacher's class, and the teacher responded with something along the lines of 'I suppose you can', in a tone that seemed to convey the opposite meaning. It is possible that because the research had been approved by the institution in question, the teacher may have found it difficult to decline my request. After observing one class, I did not attend any more of this teacher's classes. Even though this choice prevented me from gaining more knowledge about the educational context, I decided to emphasise the principle of consent because I interpreted the teacher's consent as not genuine. Moreover, my perspective was guided by the social relationships in the educational institutions: over the course of the research, I got to know some teachers better than others, and these teachers sometimes provided me with recommendations for the classes that they thought I should observe.

Whereas some ethical dilemmas related to obtaining consent for observing classes involved teachers, it was even trickier to make sure that the students in each class consented to my presence. Before each class, I introduced myself and the purpose of the research. I always said that I would leave if anyone felt uncomfortable with my presence in the class. I explained that my aim was not to evaluate or observe individual students' behaviours but to understand what their education was about. Consequently, I did not include descriptions of individual students' behaviours during classes in the articles based on my research. However, I think that power dynamics might have made it difficult for individual students to state that they were not comfortable with my participation because my presence had already been approved by their teachers. Similarly, there was an occasion in one of the media education programmes when my participation in a class might have prevented a student from participating in this class. I was observing a class during which students gave slide presentations of their own works. On this occasion, I contacted the teacher via email before the class, and the teacher let the students know I would be joining them. It was only after the class that the teacher told me that one student had cancelled their presentation after hearing that I would be observing the class. Although the teacher told me that it might not have been related to my presence in the classroom, I could not be certain.

Given the power relations and ethical dilemmas related to consent and observation in institutionalised settings, when I approached students to ask if they wanted to participate in the interviews, I always made sure to emphasise the voluntariness of participation. Before the interviews, I also carefully explained the research aims and ethical principles, such as the voluntariness of participation and the right to withdraw consent, to all participants. Before asking the participants to sign a consent form, I made sure to enquire whether they had any questions related to the research or their participation.

Ethical questions also arose during the interviews. Before starting the interviews, I was worried about not connecting with the participants. However, when I started

interviewing the participants, I mostly felt that they trusted me and were open to discussing their experiences. Sometimes during the interviews, the participants brought up sensitive experiences (experiences of violence, abuse and family tragedies) that, for me, seemed to not be connected with the research aims, at least not in a straightforward manner. Although I generally tried to encourage the participants' own narrations and not disrupt the 'flow' of the interviews, in these instances, I looked for an emphatic yet firm way of steering the discussion away from sensitive subject matter, as I felt that it would not be ethical for me to collect sensitive information unrelated to the research aims.

I approached the interviews as an interactive process between the researcher and the participant, as the researcher's presence always shapes the interview situation. Therefore, the interactions between me and my participants were encounters that could not be reproduced by other scholars (Oinas, 2004). Consequently, the reliability of my research stemmed not from its replicability but from the way in which I made the process and interpretations transparent. Furthermore, interviews do not take place in a vacuum; rather, they are shaped by social, cultural and historical contexts, as well as by power dynamics. As mentioned earlier, this is precisely what makes interview research worthwhile for sociologists: in the interviews, I was not interested in the participants' experiences as atomised and isolated 'personal' experiences; instead, I saw these experiences as socially embedded and thus reflecting the values, norms and ideals of their broader context (see Lawler, 2008). Then again, as the three articles will demonstrate, various normative ideals and scripts crept into the participants' narratives, as the conventional narratives of achievement, success and failure structured the participants' speech (see also Allen, 2016, p. 810). The normative narratives of success and failure are clearest in Article I, in which I consider how some participants discussed their shame or guilt for not moving forward. Although these instances also helped me identify the culturally hegemonic expectations and requirements of the work society, I felt sorry that the interview situations might have provoked feelings of failure for the participants.

Analysing and reporting the research material also involved specific ethical questions. In the research articles, I assigned pseudonyms to all participants. However, as I was worried that the participants might recognise one another – after all, they studied in the same groups and institutions – I slightly modified or withheld some interview details to protect the participants' anonymity. For example, I disclosed the participants' ages, but for foreign-born students, I withheld their countries of origin, and I referred to all teachers simply as 'teachers'.

Over the course of my research, I have come to understand the analysis of people's interviews as a rewarding yet significantly difficult task because at this stage of the research, the participants themselves are not present, and it is the

researcher's responsibility to interpret participants' narratives as justly, transparently and respectfully as possible. I have sought to treat the participants' narratives with 'critical respect' (Gill, 2007b), and I hope I have done justice to the narratives of the research participants. Furthermore, although I have sought to clarify the rationale behind my interpretations in the three articles, I acknowledge that my interpretations are not the only possible ones. However, it was key for me to avoid casting the research participants as cultural dupes – that is, as people who are simply unwitting subjects of greater ideological forces. In fact, remaining attentive to the ambivalences and contradictions that characterise participants' narratives is an ethical choice aimed at treating the participants' narratives fairly. This focus stems from my belief that life is messy, complex and full of contradictions. Thus, in the articles, which I will summarise in the next section, I have attempted to remain attuned to the different 'in-betweens' – to the fact that experiences are often not black-and-white but characterised by multiple on-the-other-hands.

5 Summary of findings

This section summarises the key findings of the three publications that comprise the empirical part of the study.

5.1 Article I. Staying in place or moving forward? Young women's imagined futures and aspirations for mobility in care work

The article draws on interviews conducted with women studying in vocational education for social services and health care. The article asks what kinds of futures young women studying to become practical nurses imagine for themselves. In particular, I am concerned with how and why young women in the process of becoming care workers invest in 'moving forward', as they imagine their futures in care work.

The article's starting point is the following empirical observation: during my fieldwork and interviews, I often heard that practical nurses have no troubles getting employed due to the labour deficit in the Finnish care sector; however, many participants repeatedly told me that simply getting employed was not enough for them, and many considered the possibility of pursuing further higher education, typically at polytechnics. Often, the participants emphasised that it was important to move forward rather than become stuck in jobs considered mundane and repetitive. These aspirations for mobility prompted me to analyse why and how some aspects of care work were perceived as 'getting stuck'.

The article approaches the care labour market as an 'inequality regime' (Acker, 2006) marked by a gendered, classed and racialised division of labour. Auxiliary care work, such as that of practical nurses, is often done by women, working-class people, migrants and ethnic minorities; these intersecting inequalities are intimately connected to the undervaluation, underpayment and underresourcing of care (England, 2005; McDowell et al., 2005; Näre, 2013; Wrede & Näre, 2013). Thus, the article focuses on the experiences of those who are not perceived as the empowered, high-achieving subjects addressed by postfeminist encouragements to move forwards and upwards (e.g. McRobbie, 2007). However, the prompts to move forward have become culturally hegemonic markers of intelligible subjectivity, as

the calls to become aspirational and forward moving are widespread in contemporary societies (e.g. Mendick et al., 2018). Notably, the ethos of moving forward rather than staying in place is related to classed modes of subjectivity and middle-class ideas of value-accruing individuality (Skeggs, 2004, 2011). Instead of understanding mobility strictly in terms of social mobility, the article is concerned with how the ability to cultivate a forward-moving self becomes a marker of valuable subjectivity, and how the participants' different positions in the hierarchies of care work and education enable or foreclose investments in such subjectivity.

The analysis starts by noting that many of the women I met stated that some care jobs included a risk of 'becoming stuck', which most participants associated with doing the same repetitive tasks day after day, with too little time to engage with those cared for. The women saw that some jobs for practical nurses as not appealing and drew on their experiences from side jobs and clinical learning periods to make distinctions between better and worse jobs for practical nurses. Generally, home assistance and eldercare were perceived as the least desired jobs due to the often-repetitive nature of this kind of work combined with precarious, under-resourced work conditions. In such conditions, the women said, there was a risk of becoming 'institutionalised', an expression they used to describe how care work comes to feel like routine, assembly-line work. The participants referred to 'institutionalised work' as alienating due to the constant lack of time and resources. During the classes I observed, the teachers also warned against institutionalisation because it might stall students' professional development: the teachers and participants alike shared the ideal of constantly developing new skills.

Many of the young women talked about having met older nurses who had become embittered because of staying in unrewarding and consuming care jobs; the participants linked staying in jobs characterised by repetition and high touch care tasks with becoming 'fed up' with one's life. However, rather than considering that being overworked and underpaid might inform the work orientation of these 'bitter nurses', the failure to move forward from an unrewarding job was articulated in terms of individual failure. At the same time, encounters with depleted, older employees also prompted some participants to consider whether they can stay on as practical nurses without becoming burnt out and depleted.

Some participants clearly approached vocational care education as a stepping-stone towards higher education; they perceived the education of a practical nurse as increasing one's opportunities by allowing one to become familiar with a wide variety of care tasks and then deciding what kind of higher education programme to pursue. The participants' aspirations for higher education were supported by the Finnish education system, in which there are no formal dead-ends, meaning that a vocational upper-secondary education grants eligibility to advance to tertiary education. Higher education was also perceived as an opportunity for finding more

rewarding and autonomous care work – for example, by obtaining the tertiary education of a registered nurse.

Although students' aspirations of moving forward were encouraged, I found that their possibilities for doing so were divided along classed and racialised lines. Approaching the desire for mobility as a privileged mode of subjectivity allowed me to examine how the ideas of mobility and fixity function as a mode of distinction: some are expected to stay in place so that others can move forward. The idea that migrants make good eldercare workers because of their assumed docility and respectful character was particularly prominent among the teachers and Finnish-born students. Meanwhile, interviews with migrant participants revealed that the racialised structures of the Finnish labour market had channelled them to become practical nurses, foreclosing other options. However, with the notion of aspirational normativity, I suggest that investments in care jobs some, particularly white Finnish students, associated with staying in place, can also be perceived as hopeful and aspirational. The notion of aspirational normativity captures a form of agency that is defined by bargaining with the world by holding on to a deferred sense of hope (Berlant 2011, p. 171).

In summary, the article contributes to debates in youth sociology on aspirations and mobility by providing a map of practical nurse students' imagined futures, marked with dead-ends, stepping-stones, and pits and hollows. The interviews revealed that the ideas of mobility and lifelong learning have become markers of valuable subjectivity, echoing the ideologies of meritocracy and continuous self-development. By contrast, staying in a job that is not experienced as fulfilling and only performing 'assembly-line' care tasks was said to pose a risk of becoming stuck and institutionalised, which was understood in terms of individual failure. However, migrants were perceived as content to stay as practical nurses and perform repetitive tasks because they were essentialised as coming from more 'caring cultures'.

Because mobility is associated with valuable subjectivity (Skeggs, 2004), many participants' wishes of moving forward could be characterised as efforts to cultivate the self according to culturally powerful interpellations that prompt young women to move upwards and 'become someone'. However, the article argues that many participants' aspirations for mobility seemed to be motivated by pragmatic wishes to secure rewarding and less tiring work, which was seen as being within reach through higher education. Therefore, as the labour deficit in the Finnish health sector continues to worsen, this article provides important empirical evidence as to why youth question the possibility of staying on as practical nurses. I suggest that these timely insights help understanding the current care crisis from the perspective of future care workers. Ultimately, the article suggests that the structural devaluation of gendered care work, particularly in 'doubly unreproductive' eldercare, steers young women away from practical nursing. When trying to escape becoming

overworked and undervalued, the only solutions within the students' reach were perceived as individual ones.

5.2 Article II. Ambivalent aspirations: Young women negotiating postfeminist subjectivity in media work

This article discusses young women's aspirations and their processes of cultivating themselves as workers by focusing on women studying to work in the media industry. Drawing on 20 interviews with young women studying in the media and communications programmes, the article analyses how women negotiate the gendered invitations to become aspirational and successful postfeminist subjects. By highlighting the ambivalent ways in which these invitations are received, the article complicates the findings of previous research that have shown how postfeminist gender discourses produce entrepreneurial subjects while obfuscating structural inequalities. The notion of ambivalence, included in the article's title, refers to how the media students simultaneously resist and reinscribe the postfeminist imperatives to become entrepreneurial and meritocratic subjects.

Being female and future creative workers, young women in the media field are constructed as mobile, entrepreneurial and successful meritocratic subjects (Allen, 2014; Scharff, 2016). To analyse how the young women themselves negotiate such constructions, the article takes up discussions on postfeminism from feminist media studies and cultural sociology that deal with a set of discourses combining feminist ideas of women's empowerment with values of entrepreneurialism and individualised responsibility (Gill, 2007a; McRobbie, 2009; Tasker & Negra, 2007).

More specifically, the article builds on the idea of a 'turn to character' (Bull & Allen, 2018) – that is, the increasing emphasis placed on personal characteristics rather than merely skills in contemporary media work. Indeed, research on postfeminism has identified the emergence of an increasingly psychologised logic that entices individuals to cultivate confident and resilient mindsets and attitudes (Gill, 2007a; Gill & Orgad, 2015, 2018). The article connects the psychological emphasis on self-development with Duffy's (2017) notion of 'aspirational labour', which refers to a temporal orientation to the future and to present-day, often-unpaid activities that are engaged with in the hope of securing future work. In other words, I combine Duffy's notion of aspirational labour with the observation of the psychological turn in postfeminism to examine how the present-day self is developed in relation to hopes of achieving future rewards and employable subjectivity. By engaging in the aforementioned debates, the article contributes to an expanding body of research on how postfeminist ideas are lived and negotiated by young women in the creative, media and cultural industries (Allen, 2014; Scharff, 2016; Duffy, 2017).

This article's starting point stemmed from the following empirical observation: reading and analysing the media students' interviews, I noticed that the cultivation of an employable and productive self was perceived as highly important in participants' negotiations of what it takes to become employed in the competitive media labour market. At the same time, these negotiations were imbued with ambivalence and contradictions, as the participants both tried to align themselves with such demands and resisted them. Therefore, my analysis of the interview materials focused on patterns of compliance and non-compliance in the participants' interviews.

In my analysis, I found that for the young women studying in the media field, the postfeminist ideological invitations culminate in two key imperatives: the individuality imperative, whereby one's personal character is perceived as a key instrument of self-work, and the productivity imperative, whereby becoming a productive individual and demonstrating such productivity through extensive investments in work is key.

The analysis of the individuality imperative focuses on how young women negotiated refashioning their personalities and cultivating the 'right' dispositions associated with employability. The participants claimed that being skilled is not enough: to become employed, one's personality is as important. In other words, knowing how to cultivate the 'right' dispositions, such as confidence and resilience, were seen as a competence that had to be learned. Particularly, the importance of confidence was also emphasised in the educational context in ways that sometimes obscured gendered structures in the labour market by arguing that women often seem less confident and advising students to overcome their insecurities by fixing their voices and postures. Such well-intentioned advice implies that it is women's own lack of confidence rather than patriarchal structures that needs to be remedied (Gill, 2017; Gill & Orgad, 2018; Rottenberg, 2014; Banet-Weiser, 2018, p. 93). The women themselves also said that they employed confidence-building techniques and mantras, such as 'fake it till you make it' and connected increased confidence with labour market success. In the interviews, the demand for confidence was also connected to the requirement to actively brand and promote oneself and one's work, which the participants thought was increasingly demanded in the media industry, as well as the requirement to learn how to stifle feelings of pain and disappointment when faced with rejection or criticism in one's work. In these ways, postfeminist ideas of developing one's character were mobilised as resources that helped young women to negotiate the demands of a competitive labour market.

At the same time, the individuality imperative was also met with reluctance and anxiety, as the participants sometimes worried that they would have to become something they are not in order to match the 'ideal personality' they associated with the field: outgoing, confident and self-promoting. Therefore, my analysis also shows

that the participants rejected the postfeminist imperative to transform themselves, which they feared would lead them to compromise their own personalities in favour of employability. One participant described that there is a pressure to 'become a full-on chameleon'; yet the participants saw that to wholly refashion one's personality would not only be impossible but also pretentious and unethical.

Analysis of the second key imperative, the productivity imperative, focuses on the participants' aspirational labour of cultivating themselves as productive and efficient workers. With the notion of the productivity imperative, I aim to capture both the individualising logic that shapes subjectivities by encouraging individuals to become entrepreneurs of themselves and capitalise on all aspects of their lives (Brown, 2015; Scharff, 2016) and the 'always-on' work culture of media work, which entails constant activity and long hours. The analysis shows that young women buy into discourses that present individual productivity as something that can be developed and perfected because they connect such efforts with employability. Although these efforts are sometimes equated with extra hours, at other times, they are driven by ideas of optimising work, along with the mantra of 'work smarter not harder'. Sometimes, the productivity imperative also extended to the so-called free time, as the participants revealed a pressure to become a productive subject in all spheres of life (see Adamson, 2017, p. 317).

At the same time, the expectations of productivity and doing 'as much work as possible at a really fast pace', as one interviewee put it, produced a profound sense of anxiety and alienation, and the participants, somewhat like care work students, worried that the work patterns in their field would prove individually unsustainable and lead to burnout. Many of the participants also rejected the productivity imperative at a broader level and suggested that the ideology of productivity in the pursuit of constant economic growth is ecologically and socially unsustainable. In the interviews, many participants discussed the political goals of preventing an ecological crisis, and some questioned the taken-for-granted position of paid work in hegemonic social imaginaries. The article suggests that the ethico-political negotiations of the productivity imperative and its underpinnings show that young women's aspirational efforts went beyond individual efforts of perfecting the self as a productive subject.

In conclusion, the article lends evidence to earlier research documenting that postfeminist invitations addressing young women as individualised and entrepreneurial subjects are recognised by and resonate with young women. In the interviews, the media students deployed postfeminist discourses as cognitive and emotional resources to make sense of the demands of the competitive media labour market. However, the participants also actively challenged and resisted the ideological imperatives characteristic of the postfeminist context. Therefore, the findings also revealed that the women were not just self-interested subjects

strategically invested in enhancing their employability; rather, the findings resonate with Skeggs's (2014, p. 15) argument that 'living with the logic of capital does not prefigure internalisation'. The article suggests that the ambivalence between compliance and resistance is what characterises the 'messy empirical actualities' (McKee, 2009, p. 473) in which young women become workers in the postfeminist context. The article contributes to discussions on postfeminism by revealing limitations to the extent to which postfeminist ideas are embraced. The article suggests that acts of non-compliance should be taken more seriously in debates on postfeminism, which often focus on how the postfeminist context produces self-perfecting, self-interested subjects.

5.3 Article III. Learning the post-Fordist feeling rules: Young women's work orientations and negotiations of the work ethic

This article analyses the interviews with both care work and media students to investigate how the currently powerful scripts of 'passionate work' (McRobbie, 2016) inform young women's processes of becoming workers. Flexibility, contingent contracting and precarity characterise work practices in both of the analysed fields, but the promise of self-realisation through work remains as powerful as ever.

Discussing the meaning of work in their lives, the research participants from the care and media fields alike emphasised the importance of emotionally fulfilling work. These narratives resonate with earlier research according to which youth and young women are at the forefront of calls to align their subjectivities with the imperative to find self-realisation and pleasure in work (McRobbie, 2016; Farrugia, 2021).

To conceptualise such work orientations, the article combines insights from Kathi Weeks's (2011) theoretical work on the post-Fordist work ethic and Hochschild's (1983/2012) conceptualisation of feeling rules. Using these approaches, this article asks how young women negotiate the post-Fordist work ethic, which encourages individuals to approach work as a means of self-realisation. Previous research on the post-Fordist work ethic has mostly been theoretical (Gerrard, 2014; Weeks, 2011), while empirical research on youth's negotiations of the work ethic has remained scarce. However, recent critical youth sociology has employed the notion of the post-Fordist work ethic to show how young people cultivate themselves as workers (Farrugia, 2019, 2021). My article contributes to this emerging literature by exploring the ways in which young women negotiate the emotional and industry-specific effects of the post-Fordist work ethic.

The contributions of this article are two-fold. First, the article proposes the concept of post-Fordist feeling rules as a tool for analysing how young women become workers by managing the emotional requirements and contradictions of contemporary work. The concept describes how young women normalise pleasure in work and distinguish between those who approach work as a route to emotional gratification and those who fail to do so. Second, the article examines how care and media students mobilise these feeling rules in context-specific ways and argues for the importance of empirical studies on how the post-Fordist work ethic is negotiated and felt in different industrial contexts and work hierarchies. By developing these arguments, I respond to calls to study the ways in which power in contemporary capitalism works through feeling rules (Gill & Kanai, 2018, p. 319) and how the post-Fordist work ethic is connected to the labour processes of specific industries (Farrugia, 2021, p. 138).

According to Weeks (2011), the post-Fordist work ethic, as the latest iteration in the history of the work ethic, demands 'not just the labor of the hand, but the labors of the head and the heart'; consequently, the 'willingness of workers to dedicate themselves to work as the center of their lives and as an end in itself' assumes unprecedented importance (p. 69). Weeks's work has been deployed to show that education is a key site (Gerrard, 2014) and youth is a key phase (Farrugia, 2019, 2021) in the cultivation post-Fordist work subjectivities. The article builds on and expands previous theorising by considering how feelings, gender and industrial context inform young women's engagements with work and their processes of becoming workers.

As mentioned, to interrogate the normative emphasis that the participants placed on pleasure in work, the article engages with Hochschild's (1983/2012) concept of feeling rules, according to which feelings reflect socially shared scripts, and moral judgments about feelings direct behaviour. Such rules become visible when a mismatch occurs between a feeling and an event – for example, when an individual's feelings do not match the social expectations to feel sad at a funeral or unhappy at a wedding (Hochschild, 1983/2012, pp. 59–68). Recent empirical research has used Hochschild's work on feeling rules to examine how normative youthful femininity is lived as a set of feeling rules that require managing emotional contradictions (Kanai, 2019). Continuing this line of work, I sought to examine how the role of the (care or media) worker prescribes appropriate feelings and attitudes.

The empirical part of the article first presents the notion of post-Fordist feeling rules by showing that most care and media students use a normative vocabulary of emotional fulfilment to describe their work orientations. Based on the normalisation of positive feelings as prerequisites of cultural intelligibility in work, the article argues that young women engage with the post-Fordist work ethic by mobilising feelings of passion and love. The analysis demonstrates that the emotional obligation

to find pleasure and enjoyment in work is a 'master feeling rule' that prescribes enjoyment, liking, passion, enthusiasm and pleasure as appropriate ways of feeling about work. Concomitantly, feeling rules render instrumental work orientations unintelligible, as evidenced by the fact that most interviewees perceived a lack of zeal for work and negative feelings towards work (e.g. unhappiness, hate, bitterness and irritation) as undesirable states requiring intervention. As a set of feeling rules, the post-Fordist work ethic normalised work orientations structured around the promise of emotional fulfilment and called for intervention against any negative feelings about work.

Second, the article analyses how women in the care and media fields sought to align themselves with these feeling rules, finding that the participants' efforts to make the self fit the feeling rules provoked anxieties and contradictions related to the particular emotional regimes of the care and media industries. The analysis demonstrates care work students' difficulties in staying in line with feeling rules in a professional setting in which their work is constantly devalued. The care work students oriented themselves towards work as a source of pride and joy while keeping their distance from those who exhibited what they considered to be bad attitudes and negative feelings towards care work. In this way, the figure of the bitter nurse (see Article I) also emerged in the context of the post-Fordist feeling rules as a marker of failed individuality and unintelligible subjectivity. The practical nurse students' ways of connecting fulfilment with tasks associated with autonomy and variance further show that post-Fordist feeling rules are in contrast with the repetitive and monotonous aspects that characterise much of high-touch care work.

In many ways, media students seemed to embody the passionate and enthusiastic ideal subjects of the post-Fordist work ethic, as they mobilised a middle-class distance from necessity to emphasise autonomous, creative fulfilment at the heart of their work orientation. Many participants described the imperatives to do what you love and to invest the self in work as characteristic of the media work culture and of their own work orientations. Regulating feelings and performing emotional work on the self were demands faced by media students as they sought to not let work take too much of the self and attempted to tame their enthusiasm to avoid patterns of 'free labour' (Terranova, 2000).

The article concludes by contrasting the findings from the care and media settings and reflecting on their broader implications. The results show that the promise and hope of emotionally fulfilling work was widely shared, transcending the participants' different positions in the social division of labour in Finnish society. However, post-Fordist feeling rules also reproduced these hierarchical positions. Therefore, my ecamination of the post-Fordist work ethic lends empirical evidence to Sara Ahmed's (2010) poignant observation that structures get under our skin through feelings: my article reveals how the post-Fordist feeling rules work to

strengthen individuals' engagement with the work society – feeling rules are lived out through efforts to align oneself with the promise of emotionally fulfilling work, even if the present conditions and experiences contradict this promise.

The article provides a sketch of how post-Fordist feeling rules, with their tacit reminders of how work should feel, inform young women's processes of becoming workers as they navigate industry-specific emotional dilemmas. I hope this research can start a discussion on post-Fordist feeling rules and how they operate across the work society's classed, gendered and racialised hierarchies.

6 Conclusion

In empirical, qualitative sociological research, spatial metaphors and expressions are common. Sociologists set out to map, trace or track how their research participants navigate and orientate themselves in the terrain of the social world. These metaphors are, perhaps, particularly common in youth sociology, where enquiry has been aimed at understanding how and why young people come to choose their paths and how their different starting points and positions inform the routes that they take, as well as the directions in which they are encouraged to turn. The metaphor of the map has also been used in cultural sociology, to which this study belongs. For example, Illouz (2008, pp. 240–241) suggested that maps and culture work in a similar way: they do not describe the landscape as it is but provide codes and symbols that help people orient themselves in a given terrain. As such, these codes – metaphors, narratives, values and symbols – function as signposts and provide a sense of direction that encourages people to take certain paths rather than others.

The social terrain examined in this research was the Finnish post-Fordist work society. Beginning with the experiences of young women, I sought to understand how they become workers by negotiating culturally shared work-related ideals, invitations and scripts and thus interpret the meaning of work and navigate their imagined futures in their working lives. As I have suggested, in the Finnish work society, work is normatively framed not only as a way to earn a living but also as a route to the good life and a way of becoming a deserving and productive citizen. Therefore, the ideal for young women in post-compulsory education is to become employed after graduation. However, as this research has shown, young women's different starting points shape the aspirations within their reach and, accordingly, the directions that they follow. In other words, not only do young women strive to inhabit certain spaces, but certain nooks and crannies in the labour terrain become available for specifically positioned subjects.

In this study, I analysed the imagined futures and aspirations of young women in two different educational contexts: vocational education in social services and health care and tertiary education in media and communication. I mapped the uncertainties and hopes that young women associate with their imagined futures and examined how these uncertainties and hopes are negotiated. More specifically, I

considered the requirements and expectations that young women associate with cultivating themselves as workers. To conclude, I bring my various findings together and discuss the main conclusions of my overall research. These conclusions are divided into two main parts. First, I contribute to the existing research that has analysed how young women are positioned as autonomous and 'aspirational' subjects in a postfeminist social and cultural landscape. Second, I contribute to the broader scholarship on the legitimations and ethics of post-Fordist work. With these contributions, this study increases our understanding of post-Fordist work and its gendered dimensions as they are lived at the subjective level.

In analysing how young women in two different fields engage with postfeminist modes of thought, I both provided evidence and complicated the findings of previous research that has identified postfeminism as a commonsense, hegemonic gender discourse. With its focus on the care work and media students' narratives, the study revealed how the culturally dominant positioning of young women as meritocratic and individualised subjects structures young women's understandings of work and of themselves as workers in formation. My analysis of the care work students' narratives found that the expectation to 'move forward' from institutionalised care work settings was crucial to the students' understandings of their imagined futures. The media students' narratives illustrated their engagement with the expectations of cultivating an entrepreneurial, confident and constantly productive subjectivity.

However, I suggested that young women's engagements with these expectations should be understood as at once pragmatic, contradictory and ambivalent rather than as straightforward evidence of their compliance with hegemonic and individualising interpellations by which they are surrounded. For example, I showed that young women studying to become practical nurses went beyond the meritocratic mindset when cultivating forward-propelling subjectivities. My analysis revealed that they had seen how older care workers had exhausted themselves in repetitive and poorly resourced care work. Consequently, they did not wish such futures for themselves. Thus, although the care work students articulated the need to move forward using an individualised framework and perceived 'bitter nurses' as only having themselves to blame, I suggested that their quests to avoid 'becoming stuck' in institutionalised care work cannot be explained solely by their compliance with culturally hegemonic, individualising scripts that prompt young women 'to become someone' in a postfeminist framework. In fact, these quests to avoid certain care jobs were also rooted in the devaluation and precarious work conditions of specific care work settings. Building on these insights, I argued that female care work students' aspirations to move forward can also be interpreted as a pragmatic way of resisting and escaping the routine, assembly-line care work as it has been re-rationalised according to the principles of cost efficiency.

Moreover, I showed that female media students' engagement with postfeminist aspiration scripts partly stemmed from the way in which these scripts helped women navigate the insecurities related to their imagined futures. In other words, postfeminist strategies for overcoming gendered obstacles and cultivating the dispositions of confidence, resilience and productivity provided the participants with ways to manage the uncertainties of a highly competitive industry. As female media students had become emotionally invested in their aspirations for creative work, they also saw the need to develop their confidence not only to boost their employability but also to protect themselves from criticism and hurt. However, my analysis also showed that the female media students' resisted the pressure to invest their whole personalities into their jobs and to transform themselves according to the labour market demands. Therefore, by emphasising young women's ambivalent responses to postfeminist and entrepreneurial modes of thought, my analysis of the female media students' narratives complements previous scholarship on the costs of entrepreneurial and individualised femininity (e.g. Scharff, 2016).

Based on these findings, I argue that for both groups, the prevalence of individualistic values and ideals in young women's narratives does not mean that the participants were individualised and duped; rather, they sought to build meaningful lives in conditions not of their own making. Elaborating on my findings, I suggest that postfeminist cultural sensibilities provide young women with pragmatic resources that help them negotiate the uncertainties that they associate with working life.

In addition to demonstrating why young women draw on postfeminist scripts, my study also shed light on young women's different possibilities of claiming the culturally celebrated position of an autonomous, agentic and forward-moving female subject. More specifically, the study showed how seemingly universal scripts and ideals work to reproduce racialised hierarchies, as was the case with the assumption that migrants enjoy the repetitive and routine tasks of basic care, which many white Finnish care work students associated with becoming stuck. In addition, my findings indicated the different attributes of the ideal worker in the care and media fields, thus helping clarify the divisions and hierarchies of labour in the Finnish work society. The ideal practical nurse is constituted as docile and migranticised, while the ideal media worker is an entrepreneurial and autonomous self-realising individual. Consequently, despite the prevalence of individualistic norms and expectations in young women's narratives, these ideas find more resonance in creative work with high levels of autonomy than in embodied and feminised auxiliary care work.

Further expanding on these insights, my study contributes to previous research on the false promise of gender equality that characterises the Finnish welfare state and its labour market. As mentioned earlier, the postfeminist and Finnish gender equality discourses are similar in the sense that both ideologically emphasise the idea

of gender equality as having progressed linearly or even as already having been achieved. This gulf between the ideal of equality and the actually existing inequalities situated the participants in a paradoxical situation. For example, in the supposedly egalitarian media field, where young women are still disadvantaged compared to their male counterparts, young women are invited to overcome gendered obstacles through individualised means. In the female-dominated care sector, the hierarchical, stubborn devaluation and misrecognition of care workers' societally essential work are even more at odds with the ideal of the equal labour market.

In addition to contributing to the scholarship on postfeminism and gender individualisation, my study advances the discussion on the ethics and emotional conventions of post-Fordist work and how they shape young women's processes of becoming workers. My empirical analysis suggested that young women were emotionally invested in their futures as care and media workers. More specifically, my findings demonstrated that the participants perceived the imperative to find pleasure in work as a prerequisite for intelligible subjectivity. Thus, my research contributes to previous scholarship on the post-Fordist work ethic (Weeks, 2011) by suggesting that young women interpreted this ethic as consisting of a set of feeling rules (Hochschild 1983/2012) that emphasise the imperative to find pleasure in work. I suggested that aligning oneself with these feeling rules was central to the participants' processes of becoming workers. Again, I do not mean to suggest that young women are unwitting subjects falling for an ideological ploy. Rather, I claim that the appeal of emotionally fulfilling work makes sense because it stems from young women's aspirations for meaningful lives in a work society in which labour consumes so much of our lives.

My analysis also illustrated the similarities between care work students' and media students' ways of orienting themselves in relation to work as a source of pleasure. Furthermore, the participants across the two fields also shared the contradiction between the promise of work as pleasurable on the one hand and the uncertainties related to work and employment on the other (see also McRobbie, 2016, p. 105). Moreover, aligning oneself with the post-Fordist feeling rules also entailed managing field-specific uncertainties related to work and employment. Thus, based on my findings, I emphasised that managing contradictions was crucial to the emotional work on the self in which young women engaged while cultivating themselves as workers. As I have shown, for the care work students, one of the most crucial contradictions was that between their aim to care for others – an idea central to their understandings of emotionally fulfilling work – and the realities of the cost-efficient, lean rationalisation of care. Although previous research into care work has shown that this contradiction is central to care workers' experiences amidst the current care crisis (Selberg et al., 2021; Zechner et al., 2022), my study revealed that

trying to manage this contradiction also structures how new generations of young women make sense of their identities as care workers. Parallel contradictions were experienced by the female media students. My study showed that media students also had to negotiate the gulf between emotionally fulfilling work – which for them meant creative self-realisation – and the uncertain prospects of employment in the competitive media field characterised by project work and freelancing.

Elaborating on these findings, the study suggested that the emotional and affective dimensions of pleasure on the one hand and the uncertainty of actually existing conditions on the other characterised young women's negotiations of their imagined futures. Thus, my study also speaks to the issues of precarious work as they are lived, felt and negotiated by new generations of workers. The study increases our understanding of the 'structures of feeling' (Williams, 1977) of post-Fordist work, but also of its 'feelings of structure': building on the thoughts of feminist cultural theorist Sara Ahmed (2010, p. 216), I suggest that feelings constitute a part of the mechanism by which the structures of the post-Fordist work society get under our skin.

In addition to the theoretical and empirical contributions listed above, my research provides societally relevant and topical knowledge about young people and the work society. It demonstrates young women's commitment to waged work and to their futures as workers, suggesting that young women do not see work only as a route to financial remuneration but also perceive work as central to their identities, as well as a route to social belonging. Therefore, my research highlights the strong cultural meaning of work in Finland (Kortteinen, 1992) as it is perceived from the vantage point of young women at the threshold between post-compulsory education and employment. However, this study also provides a critical account of the problems in today's working life. For example, the fact that already in education, future practical nurses start questioning whether they want to stay in the occupation is an alarming and topical finding in the context of the deepening care crisis and the dismantling of the Finnish welfare state. Furthermore, my findings on the highly individualised pressures faced by young women entering jobs in the creative, media and cultural industries provide timely insights related to the current debates on youth's well-being and mental health problems in education and working life (e.g. Madsen, 2022). My study dissects young women's struggles in the face of gendered demands for achievement, but it also shows how the media students challenged the entrepreneurial ethos of contemporary working life because of its tendency to prioritise growth and productivity at the cost of equality and environmental concerns. Taken together, the findings suggest that although young workers are well informed about the unsustainable practices hardwired in the structures of the contemporary work and economic systems, they feel that their possibilities of intervening in these issues are limited.

Finally, I would like to consider some of the study's limitations and present directions for further research. First, in a study that sets out to consider how young women negotiate the process of finding their place in the work society, one limitation is the lack of longitudinal analysis. I contemplated adopting a longitudinal approach when planning my research, but I had to abandon this idea because collecting and analysing data at two different sites proved more time consuming than I, as a beginning researcher, had anticipated. Although the women I interviewed for this research often had some work experience, drawing on it in their interviews, a longitudinal approach that would have followed them after graduation would undoubtedly have produced a fuller picture of how they become workers. Therefore, I call for longitudinal research into how young people become workers in 21st-century labour markets.

Second, this study has focused on ideals, narratives and values. I hope to have demonstrated that such cultural dimensions are not trivial but rather crucial to how work (or capitalism in a broader sense) gains its legitimacy. However, an approach connecting the analysis of narratives and ideologies more firmly with an analysis of the capitalist economy might have resulted in a more profound examination of young women's routes to the post-Fordist labour market. Therefore, I suggest that tapping into existing avenues of research may provide interesting insights for sociologists wishing to analyse youth and the post-Fordist economy from a feminist perspective. More specifically, although an emerging body of scholarship on the political economy of youth (e.g. Côté, 2014; Farrugia, 2021; Kelly, 2018) has started investigating young people's employment in relation to capitalist economic systems, such research has remained surprisingly silent about gender. At the same time, analyses of young women's experiences in the postfeminist landscape have mostly focused on the 'economy' as it extends to subjectivity (see Subsection 3.2). Thus, to conclude, I encourage youth sociologists to consider what a feminist political economy of youth might look like.

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TURUN
YLIOPISTO
UNIVERSITY
OF TURKU

Painosalama, Turku, Finland 2022

ISBN 978-951-29-9085-6 (PRINT)
ISBN 978-951-29-9086-3 (PDF)
ISSN 0082-6987 (Print)
ISSN 2343-3191 (Online)