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Assemblages of well-being and belonging in young adults' life-historical narrations: experiences from education and the labour market

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Abstract

This article provides an empirical study of assemblages of well-being and belonging in the everyday lives of young adults. Using a discursive-narrative reading, I analyse how a sense of well-being and belonging emerge in the life assemblages of the research participants. The article is based on an ethnographically grounded longitudinal life-history study (2019–ongoing) with six Finnish young adults. The analysis is based on the notion that all the interviewees seemed to have given up some education or work-related dreams they had in upper secondary school and that some of the assemblages they had previously viewed as suitable or desirable no longer seemed right. What emanated from the data were narrations about the search for a new situation in life in which the participants sensed well-being and belonging. The results of the data reading suggest that the overarching element of the assemblages is that they should enable the participants' sense of well-being and belonging. This meant neither an individually governed success story nor a materialistically rich life for the participants but instead meant enabling a softer, more 'my kind of' everyday life that included important social relations and a suitable tempo and support at work.

Keywords: young adults, life-history study, belonging, well-being, assemblage

Introduction

Globally, researchers in youth studies are well aware of the austerity-related, precarious situations that young people confront and have to deal with when aiming to enter working life (e.g., Filandri, Pasqua & Tomatis 2023; Farrugia 2021; Nikunen & Korvajärvi 2020). Ikonen and Nikunen (2019, 825) have argued that today's young adults often face a labour market that offers them less than it offered the generation of their caretakers. Even so, both the current education and work policy discourses of self-governance as well as the concrete training practices of enhancing the employability and, by implication, well-being of young adults are focused on individuals (e.g., McLeod & Wright 2016; Farthing 2015). Young people are encouraged to 'cultivate their inner potential' as individuals who are able to conduct responsible self-governing in aiming to attain what is considered to be a good life (see Niemi 2022; Coffey 2022, 68; McLeod & Wright 2016; Wyn, Cuervo & Landstedt 2014; Rose 1999, on self-governing). For contemporary young adults, career

building represents an important platform and route for shaping their subjectivities, and at the same time, belonging and well-being in their working life becomes even more essential (Farrugia 2021).

Based on an ethnographically grounded, longitudinal life-history study with six Finnish young adults, this article explores what kinds of assemblages of well-being and belonging the young adults search for in their everyday lives. During the longitudinal research process, all the interviewees seemed to have given up some education or work-related dreams from upper secondary school, and some of the assemblages that they previously viewed as suitable or desirable no longer seemed right. This empirical notion led me to reread the interview data from the viewpoint of well-being and belonging. I started examining the elements assembled in the episodes and descriptions when the young adults talked about their future visions of education and working life (see Kokko, Paananen & Hirsto 2023). An assemblage is seen as an overlapping set of connections, relationships and attachments, including work environments, places of residence, communities, social relations and even lifestyles (Deleuze 1996) within which the young adults experience well-being and belonging (Wyn et al. 2014).

This article contributes empirically, theoretically and methodologically to the current youth research discussions on young adults' own meaning-making and the discourses and practices that frame their everyday lives, especially from the point of view of well-being and belonging (Coffey 2022; McLeod & Wright 2016; Wyn et al. 2014; Cuervo & Wyn 2014). The research questions are as follows: 1) *What kinds of assemblages of well-being and belonging are the research participants searching for in their early adulthoods?* 2) *How does a sense of well-being and belonging emerge in these assemblages*? After describing the theoretical and analytical concepts and my research methodology and data, I introduce the results of the analysis through the three assemblages derived from the data reading. I then discuss my conclusions.

Theoretical and analytical concepts

On well-being and belonging

Both the concept and meaning of 'well-being' are very broad. Julia Coffey (2022) has claimed that the general discourse of well-being research draws mainly on an individualised, positive psychology-related understanding of human well-being as a matter of resilient and self-regulated subjects' proceeding on their paths towards adulthood. In this article, well-being is understood as a relational (McLeod & Wright 2016), multi-dimensional (see, e.g., Dodge et al. 2012) concept assembled through sociomaterial conditions and the processes of everyday life (see Coffey 2022). It is thus considered neither straightforwardly measurable nor a state of things built and attained through an individual's self-governing process. Rather, it is seen as evolved and shaped through various sociomaterial assemblages of everyday life. I see well-being as not only theoretical and analytical but also a strongly empirical construction that attempts to crystallise quality of life, as framed by social, historical and political conditions, such as safety, prosperity, sense of recognition and belonging (Wyn et al. 2014).

Despite attempts to measure well-being and its consideration as an indication of the quality of conditions surrounding a young adult's life (Wyn et al. 2014), its meaning can be subjective and blurred. Well-being can be built and felt within small and sometimes fleeting moments, encounters

and in nature experiences (see Coffey 2022). It can be supported by a person's social relations and material circumstances and resources (i.e., having money for food and accommodation) as well as by a personal sense of belonging, recognition and of being heard. On the other hand, well-being is shaken by fears, lack of means and adverse social relations; it can also be shaken by the pressure one can sense during study or work. I propose that the analytical and empirical power of the concept is that it can be examined simultaneously in varying moments of everyday life and in longer, deeper and more intangible processes within one's life course. In this article, the concept of well-being is utilised primarily to analyse the research participants' work- and education-related life assemblages.

I aim to analytically combine the concepts of well-being and belonging and propose that these two relational and experiential phenomena entangle with each other while also being interdependent. Drawing on the extensive body of previous research literature around the concept of belonging, Antonsich (2010) has stated how ill-theorised the concept actually is, although it is often utilised in the research literature of various disciplines. According to Antonsich (2010), belonging narrates about and is narrated by the self and is, therefore, a personal, intimate and even existential dimension of being in the world. What previous studies have often neglected is that belonging does not exist in a geographical vacuum but rather evolves as an emotional feeling towards a place (ibid., 647). In this article, it is not *a plac*e per se but a certain assemblage of life where people can feel 'at home' and which they see as being meaningful for them.

Antonsich (2010) has claimed that it is analytically difficult to differentiate questions concerning the formation of self from questions concerning feelings of belonging to a place, as a question of 'who am I' is also always interrelated with a question of 'where do I belong' (Antonsich 2010, 646; cf. Bamberg 2011). This is because having a sense of belonging in certain assemblages relates to the feeling of being 'oneself', and it relates, furthermore, to a sense of well-being. I consider belonging as a sense of belonging, a feeling of being at home within various locations, contexts, practices, groups and relationships (see Antonsich 2010; Yuval-Davis 2011). This entangles with a sense of meaningful life in which one senses well-being. Following Cuervo and Wyn's (2014, 905) analysis, I concentrate on 'the nature and quality of connections between young people and their worlds' in analysing the sense of well-being and belonging in their interview narration.

Assemblage as a tool for analysis

Käyhkö and Armila (2022) have claimed that the dynamics of youth and growing up cannot be packed and finalised into the closing interpretations in research. As the interviewees' situations in life change, a researcher cannot estimate what they will hear when they next meet the young adults (ibid. 283). This is particularly the case I have encountered in the course of this longitudinal research process. The participants' narrations about their current lives, plans, hopes and experiences, and the meanings they attach to these, have differed from the issues they raised in previous interviews. I became interested in how the participants talked about their education, work-related hopes and plans and the shifts in these. What emanated from the data were narrations about the search for a new situation in life in which the participants sensed well-being and belonging. Assemblage was a concept I found dynamic and useful in analysing the participants' narrations about searching for a change in their lives.

According to Deleuze (1996), assemblage can be understood as a whole landscape, background, context or a 'state of things' that is always multiple and greater than the sum of its parts. When people say they want a certain thing or a subject, they are already constructing an assemblage; wanting to change something in their life, they change or shape the assemblage. Material and spatial aspects entangle with assemblages. When analysing the participants' desires to shape their education or working lives to fit their own tempo and style, it was important to examine the wider context (the landscape) and the tiny things in it (e.g., styles, manners, ways of talking), as these invite people to come closer or distance themselves from each other. Compatibility and incompatibility of small details lead to an assemblage that we do or do not desire. According to Deleuze (1996, 22), each of us may find the 'state of things' that suits us.

I considered the analysed assemblages only through their operations by considering what they do (Paakkari 2020, 20). Therefore, my focus was on the young adults' navigation towards the assemblages that already at the plan level bring them a sense of well-being and belonging. As Coffey (2022) has written in relation to well-being as assembled, Paananen and Grieshaber (2022, 3) have noted as well that heterogeneous relations and components among human and nonhuman entities sometimes come together in unexpected ways that regulate the ways and directions in which people act. During my research process, nonhuman elements, such as clothing, works of art and sports but also pets, became increasingly important for the participants. In addition, elements of education and work policies, such as statements of special educational needs and requirements of a certain pace in the workplace, became plugged into assemblages and moulded and moved them (see Kokko et al. 2023). These sociomaterial elements are part of the assemblages that the interviewees are either searching for or detaching themselves from.

Methodology, research data and analysis

The longitudinal life-historical interview study I discuss in this article is grounded on our previous ethnographic study (2016–2019) investigating support practices and the participation of young people who were categorised as having special educational needs or a migrant background. Ethnographic fieldwork lasting a half year was conducted in 2017 at one vocational education and training (VET) institute and one general upper secondary institute (GUS), in southern Finland (see, e.g., Niemi & Jahnukainen 2020 & Niemi & Laaksonen 2020[1]), when the participants were 17 to 18 years old. I launched the current study *Diverse Paths to Adulthood* (2019–ongoing) with a small group of participants (originally ten people) with whom I had become acquainted and who I had interviewed once or twice during the previous study.[2] The aim was to investigate longitudinally the educational and working life paths of these young adults, but the focus has expanded towards multiple spheres of life courses of the interviewees (see Niemi 2022).

I have been meeting the participants at places they suggest (e.g., cafés, libraries, parks) and have been conducting the interviews every 12–20 months. My original plan was to meet the participants annually, but the COVID-19 pandemic slowed down the plan. I also discussed with the participants

[1]This study was supported by the Academy of Finland, Strategic Research Council, No. 303691.
[2] These interviews have dealt with the students' educational paths from the beginning to the present and towards their future plans.

the frequency of the interview meetings, and some suggested that we should meet less frequently. So far, I have conducted 28 interviews with six participants who were still involved in the study when I wrote this article.[3] The duration of the interviews has varied from about 30 to 100 minutes, with an average time of around 50–60 minutes.

All the interviews have been rather open and narrative, and they have developed conversationally, starting with the question, 'What would you like to tell me about your life at the moment?' I have raised points I found interesting from their former interviews and from my field notes (see Henderson et al. 2007) and discussed my interpretations concerning the former interviews. In addition to education and work experiences being the centre of the longitudinal project, the interviews have explored numerous topics, such as lifestyles, social relations, unemployment, (mental) health issues, politics, travel and leisure time. The research data also include my notes describing our informal discussions and shared walks during the interviews and the ethnographic fieldnotes from the previous study as contextualising data (see Gordon & Lahelma 2002).

The participants differ in terms of social categorisations, including class, 'race', dis/ability and gender, which intersect with each other (see Niemi 2022, 181; Gordon et al. 2008). The main sociodemographic features are specified in Table 1. All participants were born and went to school in Finland, and during their basic education, they studied in special needs education classes (SE-classes). Their length of time (from 1.5 to 9 years) in SE-class and reasons for SE-class displacement, such as learning difficulties or difficulties in concentrating, vary. Based on research ethical principles, I have not asked any information concerning the participants' possible diagnoses, but many have brought up these in the interviews. The type of classes in which the participants were studying were non-diagnosis–specific SE-classes located in mainstream comprehensive schools.

Table 1. Participants: social categorisations and backgrounds

Participants[4]	Gender	'Race' and home language	Educational level	Work sector and/or student position	Family background[5]
Leanna	woman	white, Finnish as a home language	VET qualification	commerce	middle class
Ian	man	white, Finnish as a home language	VET qualification	student in property maintenance	middle class
Sebastian	man	white, Finnish as a home language	VET qualification	commerce, student in carpentry	working class
Yen	man	person of colour, other home language than Finnish	VET qualification, currently studying at University of Applied sciences	student in social and health care	working class

[3] I am not able to reach four of the original participants anymore and, as a result of many attempts, have decided to give up contacting them. One possible reason for their withdrawal from the study may be that they have moved out of the country, and some have apparently changed their phone numbers. They may also have wanted to withdraw for some other personal reason.
[4] Participants' names are pseudonyms.
[5] These classifications are based on the participants' own description of their parents' educational background and labour status.

Tim	man	white, Finnish as a home language	GUS + VET qualifications	restaurant industry	middle class
Will	man	person of colour, Finnish & other home language than Finnish	GUS qualification	education and training	middle class

The longitudinal research process at its best can build trust with the participants and the informed consent can be negotiated among every interview session. Although a couple participants have withdrawn, I assume that those who take part in the interview year after year feel they get something from our appointments. When I asked whether they would take part in the future too, Tim stated: '*This has always been fruitful. In a way, nice for myself, because I have an opportunity to go through what has happened'*. The longitudinal research process has enabled me to gain access to deeper and more diverse ways of narration and topics of conversation (see Niemi 2022), with the interview structure somewhat fading away. At the same time, the approach has directed the interviews closer to the participants' everyday lives. This means that a participant might narrate a remarkable issue in their current life as an aside that can, surprisingly, become the most central topic of that particular interview (see Käyhkö & Armila 2022, 272).

I have utilised discursive-narrative data reading, by which I mean an analytical method that recognises 1) societal discourses and cultural narratives that frame the young adults' lives and their narration, and 2) ways, tone and content of their personal narration (see Niemi 2022; Tamboukou 2008; Riessman 2008). Discourses and implementations of education and labour policies are part of the assemblages that the young adults inhabit and make sense of in their narrations (see Paananen & Grieshaber 2022). A youth studies approach allows an appreciative stance towards the participants' narration, as the emphasis is on respecting and carefully analysing their viewpoints and ways of experiencing and making sense of their life assemblages. This methodological and research ethics–related approach entails both concrete analysis (how I have read, organised and analysed the data with theory) and also the process of writing (see, e.g., Ikävalko 2021; Renold et al. 2008; Niemi 2022). The latter means that I have tried to appreciate and visualise the rich and multiple narration of the interviewees with my wording and ways of writing with theory (Jackson & Mazzei 2013). I have aimed to understand and sense the data in all its complexity, and the analysis stretches towards theory-driven experiments on the data.

In concrete terms, I have based my reading of the research data on the above-presented concepts of well-being, belonging and assemblage (see Ikonen & Nikunen 2019). The analytical work started with travelling back and forth between the interview transcripts, notes and previous studies and with writing down summaries of the interviews regarding what was happening and how it was happening, as told in the data. I then extended and deepened the analysis through dialogue with the research literature. I use a way of writing that is often utilised in the analyses of ethnographic studies, in which results are presented around small episodes or narratives from the data and then elaborated in relation to the research literature and current policy discourses (see, e.g., Tammi & Hohti 2020; Niemi & Jahnukainen 2020; Lappalainen 2009). The interview extracts that I highlight and analyse more carefully in the following sections are from the most recent and the second-most recent interviews because the analytical interest is in the participants' search for a new situation in life. The narrations

are explored against those from their previous interviews. In the following sections, I analyse the assemblages *taking care and having influence on others*, *slowing down the speed* and *easy-going kind of life*.

Taking care and having influence on others

This section illustrates how searching for an assemblage in which one can do people work and help and have an influence on others was visible in Leanna's and Yen's narrations. Studying and working in tourism was Leanna's vocational plan from the age of seventeen to her early twenties, and she earned a vocational diploma in business administration. Since then, she has worked in various shops as a cashier. A half-year work experience abroad as an au pair strengthened her long-term dream of working with children. In her most recent interview, she narrated about getting more responsibilities and being trusted as an au pair, and she dreams about going abroad again. Leanna considered her current work as a cashier only *'as an asset to earn your living'*. She recounted her hopes of working in childcare and elaborated the reasons why she had not sought admission to the field before:

> *Anna-Maija: What is it in the au pair job, that inspires or interests you the most? Could you elaborate a bit?*
>
> *Leanna: Maybe it is that I can be with kids, because I very much like to hang around with kids and I've always got along with them well and I've done my on-the-job-trainings in kindergartens and got very positive feedback there. So that's the biggest factor why I'd like to continue that work.*
>
> *Anna-Maija: Yes, we have talked about that earlier too. So now, I come up with a question about, when you originally started thinking about seeking a study placement after compulsory school. Was the childcare sector in your mind or did you talk about that in any way?*
>
> *Leanna: Yes, it was, but my mum said that it's very difficult, that education. Or studying, 'cause my mum knows me so well, so she knows that my skills in mathematics are very bad, so that would have been a bit bad in that study field, 'cause it [mathematics] would have been needed surprisingly much. So, my mum said that it's maybe not worth applying. If you wish to apply in the future, go ahead then, but it wasn't timely at that time.*
>
> *Leanna, woman, 22*

According to previous research, students regarded as having special educational needs are not often guided towards health- or childcare sectors because of assumptions related to their learning difficulties in mathematics or because of other assumed unsuitability in relation to care jobs (Niemi & Mietola 2023). A statement about her special educational needs and learning difficulties may have worked as a machinic element in Leanna's search for admissions into post-compulsory education, moulding the assemblage by coding her as 'not suitable' to be a childcare worker (see Kokko et al. 2023). However, after taking care of her siblings and later working with children, childcare is what

specifically seems to bring Leanna joy. It is also the area in which she has received positive feedback and been trusted as a competent worker.

The importance of family members in Leanna's life, especially in her decision-making process and general future plans, emerged in all of her interviews. However, a 'detour' seemed to occur for Leanna; despite not having been encouraged by her parents to pursue studies in the childcare sector, she still maintained her vocational dream and later tried to gain employment in that field. Leanna started to rearrange the assemblage in order to strengthen her well-being. When describing her future plans, a sense of well-being and belonging assembled through social relations and caring seemed to be a determining element that Leanna was searching for in her life (Coffey 2022, 70). She planned her next steps – moving from her childhood home to another town in which some of her relatives live – according to her passion for horses and her family relations, not necessarily according to her study or work plans.

Leanna recounted the best parts of her au pair experiences by narrating that *'beside their house there was actually a barn and a pasture where the horses were, and we went there with the kids every day to say hello to the horses and so on, and that was very nice for me'*. Even though, as Tammi and Hohti (2020, 22) have claimed, care in human-animal relations cannot be taken for granted as it is always relational and complex, I have interpreted that Leanna experienced affective well-being in her life by working with children and horses, and part of that perhaps comes from the practice of caring, from her being a comforting adult and caretaker for children and horses. Horseback riding, caring for horses and working with children seemed to shape Leanna's life into a softer assemblage and, accordingly, to foster her sense of well-being and belonging in everyday life (see Coffey 2022, 68–70).

Yen also had a business administration diploma, and during his second-most recent interview, he strongly criticised the whole business field, his previous studies in the sector and his prospects for employment. Yen narrated his hopes of soon getting a placement in social work at a university of applied sciences. He talked about longing to study and for new content in his life. My analysis zoomed in on his ways of pointing out elements related to quality of life and well-being that he had concluded would be more easily reachable if he could work in social work sector instead of in business administration. Such reasoning had guided his recent decision-making related to higher education:

> *So I checked the options in the trade-related sector but when I started thinking about it, the trade-related sector, I don't even like sales, business, sales and marketing, so why would I apply […]. My sister told me one day to apply for a place at social work, it would be a good field for you. [I was just like] how come? In a way so, 'cause [you are] just, you like to take care of, to help people in small things […]. My sister [said that she] notices that kind of a character in me. Then I just said okay, I googled social worker, I checked, there is a lot of work, youth worker, child welfare, school social worker jobs. Then I thought, why not, you know?*
>
> *Yen, man, 22*

Yen's aspiration to work in an environment in which he feels well, which he thinks he is good at and through which he can contribute to the society was focal in his narration. After the extract above, in which Yen contextualised his turn from business towards the social work, he explicitly said to me that *'only after explaining this to you can I move on to the topic of why I want to [get employed] in this field',* and he continued:

> *I'm seeing kids, don't know if they are kids, maybe under 18, some are even my age [...]. They walk the streets, in (name of the neighbourhood), in the city centre, acting like tough guys [...]. [What I wanted to] say is that these kids of Helsinki metropolitan area, they are, I don't know from where they've got their manners. They've watched far too much gangsta rap videos or such. I think that the reason why I applied to study in the social work is that, in my opinion, these kids are a bit crazy. If I could somehow get in the future a good career in which I could talk to these kids and say to them to please go to school [...]. I'm thinking about our new generation, let's say so [...].*
>
> *Yen, man, 22*

He ended his description by asking, '*How does it sound to you that I would like to have an influence on these young people, so that they might calm down a bit'*, and I agreed after listening to him that it sounded like a good plan. The aspiration to have an influence on young people and do good to others was evidently interrelated with Yen's sense of well-being and belonging, and he narrated the change of career as vital to him (see Cuervo & Wyn 2014, 907). He had also been encouraged by his family to turn towards a field in which he could help others.

My analysis shows that a desire to shape the assemblage was central to Yen's narration, and his decision-making seemed to have previously been affected by the choice to just do something reasonable with an ideal income level after compulsory school. In contrast, the second-most recent interview was more about how social relationships and a personal sense of well-being and belonging exist in his life context and landscape and what kind of assemblage about influencing young people and the society they form together (Deleuze 1996). This interpretation indicates how both well-being and belonging are relational and socially conditioned processes (see Wyn et al. 2014).

Slowing down the speed

In his most recent interview, in line with the individualising narrative of well-being as a responsibility of the individual, Yen mentioned how busy he was all the time and how he had started to exercise in order to take care of his well-being (see Coffey 2022; Farthing 2015). That is, slowing down the speed was not a central element in the assemblage that he was searching for, whereas it was in Ian's and Tim's interviews. After graduating from VET (Ian) and GUS (Tim), they had worked part-time in low-paid jobs and started in new vocational programmes. Both of them had faced disappointments in the labour market, such as layoffs, which had been unclearly justified or based on their support needs or personal characteristics *('he's not quick enough'*). Ian and Tim pointed to well-being as structurally patterned (Coffey 2022, 69) by bringing up that they were searching for an assemblage in which the speed of work would be slow enough so that they would not burn out and could get along well enough.

Ian summarised his short-term work experiences in different job positions within the commerce and service industries:

> *Ian: Soon after I left (the traineeship as a caretaker), I worked in the airport. It would have been, it was very good job otherwise, but I wasn't able to do these shifts, they were terribly long. So, for that reason I got the notice that the contract would be annulled, but I got the statement from the doctor that, I was not suitable for this kind of a work. And then, it was discussed with the employer whether they could offer shorter shifts, within which one could continue that work. But it wasn't okay for them, so it was easier to resign at that moment, just before the beginning of COVID-19 the job ended. Then, was I unemployed for some time?*
>
> *Ian, man, 22*

Even though Ian had received a statement from the doctor that clarified his diagnosed support needs, his employer had not been ready to make any adjustments for him. After the termination of the contract, he worked in two different supermarkets and was finally dismissed from both places. His understanding for why he could not keep his job was that *'I am a bit slower than the others in shelving and learning these things'*. After having several work experiences in the commerce and service sector, Ian narrated about having realised that '*it's too hectic of an atmosphere to work'* and does not suit him. His narration illustrates the discursive category of a good employee in the capitalist labour market, against which he views himself. My interpretation is that, because he had not received the necessary support or recognition, Ian started to direct the need for change towards himself. The social aspects of (not) having a sense of belonging in a work community and the material aspects of working slowly and being 'slow in shelving' are entangled in this example. Here, Ian shows how difficult it is to be positioned outside of the set goals and to argue for alleviation of the goals in the workplace. Consequently, by becoming aware of the perceived realities in certain vocational branches and workplaces, both Ian and Tim started to question their previous vocational aspirations and future plans (see Ågren 2023, 9–10).

Tim expressed that, to avoid burnout, he needs to lower his standards for a study placement and at work, and he questioned his earlier orientation towards high performance. This is in line with the current education and work policy discourses of self-governing in enhancing young adults' employability and, by implication, well-being. Young people are regarded as individuals who conduct responsible and reflexive self-governing in their aims to attain suitable (working) life paths (see Coffey 2022; McLeod & Wright 2016; Rose 1999, on self-governing). After upper secondary school, Tim started in a study programme aimed at speeding up his application to a university of applied sciences but quit the programme:

> *It was in a way a slight disappointment that I quit that soon or gave up. But on the other hand, it was better that I forgive myself and quit than be burnt out [--] It's not easy to recover from burnout, or it takes a long time. So, I talked with my parents and [--] that was a very good decision and so [...]. Then I quit and I really noticed that my stress just eased off, or that it wasn't in a way similar anymore, that it relaxed very well.*

Tim, man, 21

An aspiration to 'build one's own life' by learning new things and working towards a demanding study path has been a central topic in Tim's interviews from the beginning (see Wyn et al. 2014, 63–64). However, he weighed the workload of studying in higher education against prioritising his sense of well-being. At the time of the most recent interview, Tim described being stuck in his low-paid service sector job, in which he has stayed because it is easy: *'one does not need to learn a million new things'*. Regarding working life, in the most recent interviews, all six interviewees emphasised taking care of one's own limitations or need of support in order to get along. Especially for Tim and Ian, recognition of their needs of study and work support were important aspects that characterised their narration. These perceptions shaped and framed the narration towards being more compassionate to themselves in searching for an assemblage that would support well-being.

The analysis of the interviews shows how discourses and practices of the labour market relate to inclusion and exclusion. These may define, condition and potentially limit a person's sense of belonging in each context (see Cuervo & Wyn 2014). My analysis drew out that Tim and Ian were aware of and criticised labour market practices; support and orientation in their workplaces often seemed unsuitable, nonadaptable and lacking recognition of diversity among new employees (see Niemi 2022; Ågren 2023, 8–9; Ågren & Kallio 2023). Particularly Ian experienced difficulties with employment opportunities for persons with support needs and with employers' attitudes and structural problems in supporting disabled persons. According to his narration, one of the structural and attitude-related barriers seemed to be that slowness is not accepted in the commerce and service sector. This links to what Ikonen and Nikunen (2019, 826) have written about employability as always signalling a person's suitability and potentiality and thus being about one's acquired and inherited attributes that equip young adults with different resources. However, Ian maintained his view of slowing down the speed and tried to shape the assemblage by seeking a new occupation in property maintenance, which he thought would offer him a better learning environment (*'one has started thinking about in which jobs one has been good at and managed')* and better financial options.

Easy-going my kind of life

Not all the interviewees have encountered similar disappointments; some spoke about primarily seeking a 'simple and good life', and work burnout did not appear as a threat in their narrations. In line with Nikunen and Korvajärvi's interview study (2020, 15), being happy was not clearly connected to success in study or work but was connected more to the participants' general experience and understanding of an easy-going my kind of life. This assemblage was described through various concrete examples, common to which was the core idea that the interviewees themselves could sense well-being, have people around them, work with a pace that is comfortable to them, and express themselves. I have interpreted this as a loose description of belonging, in which a person's sense of belonging also produces comprehensive well-being.

Sebastian had a vocational diploma in business administration, and over the course of the research project, he has been a part of a skateboarding community. He described skateboarding as a comprehensive way of life in which belonging to a community is the most important element. In the

most recent interview, Sebastian spoke about getting along with little money and consuming just a bit overall. He reflected on his values and way of life:

> *I've talked about it with some old-fashioned people, that if I could decide, I wouldn't work ever, I'd just chill and enjoy my life. Try to live as free as possible, so that's what I quite strongly think. Of course, work, that brings me money, it brings routine and something, what's the word, self-discipline, or something like that for sure. But so far, I've got along with quite little money, so I don't have to get 3,000 euro salary in a month. I get along and so I don't have to buy anything superexpensive.*
>
> *Sebastian, man, 23*

Sebastian's discontent with his business administration degree and education was evident during the research process, and he criticised his previous study programme soon after graduation. His narration concerning his change of sector, however, seemed more coherent in the later interviews. Even though he was not sure what he wanted to do to earn his living, he spoke about the process of shaping and changing the assemblage as relevant to him:

> *I realised soon after the previous interview of ours that, no, I don't wanna go down that marketing and business path, don't wanna be in this sales sector at all. I don't know at all what I'd like to do. I'm lost on this point. That's the reason I just wait, hoping I'll find a good system or so. I'd do something, how can I say it, with your hands, you know. I assume that something will figure out of these at some point [...]. You can't know. I'm not stressing about it at the moment. I have a job and a flat and quite a lot of free time anyway. If only one can still live here.*
>
> *Sebastian, man, 22*

During the research process, Sebastian had started talking more about the meaning and importance to him of manual skills and the arts. Interestingly, he stressed the importance of not planning or realising his plans in a hurry; they would either develop by themselves or come to nothing – or convert into a hobby. The ethos of living and searching for the assemblage in peace stood out in Sebastian's narration. Following Coffey's (2022, 74–75) analysis, I interpret that Sebastian was searching for or actually living in/with a new assemblage in which he sensed momentary well-being, and he seemed to look to the future with confidence. What is crucial to consider is that Sebastian could evidently think about various options safely because he had employment, lived in a fair-priced flat and had a close community of friends, as well as parents and relatives who supported him materially.

Concerning leisure time, all the participants, but especially Sebastian and Will, narrated about the importance of social relations and of nurturing them. Pretty soon after completing upper secondary education, Will started a university English programme, but he quit because he felt that studying in a foreign language was too demanding. At the time of the most recent interview, at the age of 21, he had substituted for teachers and school assistants at a comprehensive school for a year and was planning to seek a university placement in applied sciences in the social work and pedagogy sector. Will spoke appreciatively about his leisure time, saying that he did not want to sacrifice his life to

work; for example, he would not work evening or night shifts. Overall, he emphasised that he would like to live an easy-going life without thinking too much about either the past or the future. Describing his thoughts about studying, Will concluded that he is also looking for well-being: *'When you understand things much better and at a deeper level, it is easier and nicer to study.'*

Will described that once he got used to his workplace (the school) and learnt how things worked there, there was a good atmosphere, and the work was still interesting and he learnt new things all the time. A sense of belonging in that particular community emerged in Will's narration when he described that it was always easy to go there in the mornings and that he had never enjoyed any other workplace that much: *'I feel that at the moment I belong in that school'* (see also Cuervo & Wyn 2014; Antonsich 2010). The importance of belonging not only in his own life but in the lives of children and young people was a topic that Will highlighted in his most recent interview. In this respect, he also wanted to shape his everyday life to contain elements of helping and having influence on others, as in the examples of Leanna and Yen. Will described how he has shared everyday successes and failures with pupils and had talked with them about how he, being a person of colour and a former special education student, can influence potential representations available in schools. Like Yen, Will wanted to contribute to society and younger generations and thereby strengthen his sense of well-being and belonging (see Cuervo & Wyn 2014, 907).

Discussion and concluding remarks

My research task in this article has been to analyse, through a close reading of life-historical interview data of six young adults, *what kinds of assemblages of well-being and belonging the research participants are searching for in their early adulthoods* and *how a sense of well-being and belonging emerges in these assemblages*. The concept of assemblage has been examined and interpreted in the article by considering what the assemblages do and what they enable for the actors (see Paakkari 2020). The assemblages not only consist of separate things at various levels but also form a landscape or a state of things that points towards an affective site of living. I have taken advantage of the concepts of well-being and belonging in the analysis and propose that these two affective and experiential phenomena are entangled and interdependent. In the everyday lives of young adults, the elements producing well-being and belonging seem to act interdependently, and together, they shape a person's sense and experiences of a life assemblage that is 'good enough'.

Already when studying at the upper secondary schools, several of the interviewees narrated about uncertainty of current education and labour market paths and – in contradiction with the straightforward policy aims – expressed criticism towards too early, compulsory choice-making between VET and GUS (see also Farthing 2015, 1366–1369). The participants argued that they wished to have had more opportunities to explore educational options and that the choices, particularly the choice of seeking a VET placement, were often considered partially or even completely random: *'because I did not think up any better idea'*. It is thus not a surprise that in their early twenties, the participants were planning to search for or actively searching for a job, study placement and overall life style that could better fit their values, interests and needs. This is one of the policy- and system-level factors that becomes plugged into and then shapes one's life assemblage in early adulthood.

I have presented the analysis through three artificially separate assemblages (*taking care and having influence on others*, *slowing down the speed* and *easy-going my kind of life*), but it is important to note that these are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they partially intersect, with all six interviewees discussing topics related to all three assemblages. As a whole, the assemblages include various elements – educational decision-making and application processes, putting aside one's previous aspirations and reaching for new ones, labour market experiences – as well as traces of these elements in the young adults' reflections on the labour market and their position in it, giving up money-related dreams, the importance of social relations and leisure time, and the importance of subjective well-being and coping.

Based on my data reading, I propose that the overarching element of the three assemblages is that the assemblages should first enable the participants' sense of well-being and belonging. This meant for them neither an individually governed success story nor a rich life in terms of money but instead meant enabling a softer, more 'my kind of' everyday life that included important social relations, suitable work tempo and support. Striving for comfort and, for some, a laid-back approach appeared as a counternarrative to hurry, stress and performance-oriented narratives in societal discussions, which the interviewees seemed to be rather well aware of. This was a clear change from the interviews conducted when they were younger, in which many of them talked about the importance of money, vocational ambitions, entrepreneurship and their own responsibility in achieving these goals. I claim that the contradiction between the participants' earlier hopes and their concretised plans is a crucial element of this change. What explains this are the sociomaterial conditions that circumscribe their educational and working life experiences and positions, such as special education background, support from the family or mistreatment at the work place (see also Niemi 2022, 191).

Following Farthing's (2015, 1368–1369) findings, I claim that despite being born into the trend towards individualisation, the participants, especially during their most recent interviews, employ a critical stance towards the individualisation or practices of self-governing. Rather, these practices were not taken for granted; instead, the participants questioned the discourse but also the practices of disciplined self-governing towards successful adulthood by aiming at finding alternative assemblages (see Ågren & Kallio 2023). It seems that both setbacks, happy encounters and, for some, importantly, perceived structural inequality may have made them aware of social and discursive power structures within which they operate and which shape their everyday life. For some, it meant giving up dreams after having confronted setbacks during their studies or unequal labour market practices. For some, it meant a re-evaluation of their values and interests in general and a reorientation towards the moments of everyday life and the near future. However, as Ikonen and Nikunen (2019, 832) have noted, an individualised entrepreneurial mindset is not currently measured by only vocational success or money; it can mean a broader demand of constant self-development in which setbacks are seen as an important part of the process of creating 'I'.

In conclusion, I claim that all the participants seem to have recognised pressures related to education or the labour market, and they referred to them in their narration (cf. Käyhkö & Armila 2022, 282–283; see Ågren & Kallio 2023). Perhaps for that reason they paradoxically talked in line with the discourse of early (self-) intervention about the importance of taking care of one's well-being and not burning out with an unsuitable or too heavy workload. Thus, it can be also interpreted that even while

recognising the societal connections of well-being and burnout, these young adults cannot avoid making themselves responsible for finding a suitable life assemblage. I propose that the value of combining the concepts of well-being and belonging in the analysis is that belonging seeks to acknowledge reciprocity and interdependency of human beings as necessities for recognition and constant formation of the self (see Butler 2001). In addition to a sense of belonging in a certain place (Antonsich 2010), belonging carries the idea of being with others and a sense of solidarity as a basis for well-being. The young adults' longitudinal interview narrations illustrate how relations with others are a significant part of well-being in the education and working-life contexts. In some cases, these relations can prevent belonging when a person's participation and contribution is not recognised as valuable by others, as shown in some of the interview examples. However, these relations can foster belonging when a person experiences themselves as respected and receives enough support.

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