Affordances of Welfare Services – Perspectives of Young Clients

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ABSTRACT
In Nordic welfare states, the indications of the social exclusion of young adults are addressed with measures and services aimed at getting them back on the «right» track. In this paper we aim to emphasize young adults’ own viewpoints on their relationship to the services, which we consider vital for the development of the service system in a more empowering and inclusive direction. To this end, we apply the concept of affordance to explore how 18- to 29-year-old NEETs perceive what the service environment can offer and provide for them in order to get by and to advance in life. Drawing upon interview data, we claim that while the welfare services can afford young adults the opportunity to find a job, for example, there are other affordances that remain unarticulated but that may be significant from the young adult’s point of view. Our analysis identifies four types of affordances – beneficial, pressurizing, false, and hidden. We conclude that the affordance perspective is one way to go beyond the deficit-oriented perspective often ascribed to young clients of the welfare services; it shifts the evaluative focus away from young adults towards the service system, identifying both the enabling and the less explicit aspects.

Keywords
affordance, marginality, young adults, welfare services
INTRODUCTION
Public and political anxiety over young adults’ life transitions tends to intensify in times of economic turbulence, and in the aftermath of the 2007–2008 financial crisis young people once again have various demands and expectations heaped upon them. The anxiety revolves around those categorized as «NEETs», namely those not in education, employment or training, whose situation is recognized as a precursor of social exclusion (e.g. Eurofound, 2012). In Finland, one of the landmarks of the rising concern was a report published in early 2012 which stated that 5% of young adults in the 15 to 29 age group can be classified as being socially excluded, not in education or employment, and not undergoing post-compulsory education. According to the report, «There is a pressing need to locate socially excluded young people» (Myrskylä, 2012). In addition to locating NEETs, they have been targeted with measures aimed at inclusiveness, rehabilitation, and getting them back on the «right» track. An example of these tailored measures is the Youth Guarantee that was launched in Finland at the beginning of 2013 following EU recommendations to member countries (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2012).

However, despite being a new initiative, even the implementation of the Youth Guarantee is largely dependent on the functionality of traditional welfare services such as the employment and social services, within which young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 are regarded as a group with special requirements for tailored services. While the main emphasis of service development is argued to be on prevention, the remedial services form a vital part of the service sector. This begs the question of how they will manage to (re)include those considered to be at risk of exclusion. We have previously touched upon this theme from the service providers’ point of view (Aaltonen, Berg & Ikäheimo, 2016), but here we will concentrate on their relevance from the perspective of young adults.

These questions form the backdrop of this paper, which emphasizes the perspectives and agency of 18- to 29-year-old NEETs who are clients of the welfare services. Interaction between the welfare services and adult recipients is a common topic in social policy research, but there is a gap in the research concerning young adults as clients of these services (see, however, Munford & Sanders, 2015; Palola, Hanninkainen-Ingman & Karjalainen, 2012). Further, the public and political discussion on youth marginalization tends to ignore the perspective of the subjects of concern. Instead of top-down attempts to «deal with the NEET problem», there is a need to acknowledge the variety of lived experiences, individual conditions, and structural constraints. We aim to contribute to this discussion by adopting a perspective that emphasizes young adults’ own viewpoints on their relationship to the services. We will employ the concept of affordance to enquire how young clients of social, employment or targeted youth services perceive what the service sector can offer and provide for them.

1. The Youth Guarantee offers everyone under the age of 25, as well as recent graduates under the age of 30, a job, a study place, an on-the-job training position or rehabilitation within three months of becoming unemployed (Ministry of Culture and Education, 2012).
FOCUS ON THE INTERACTION BETWEEN WELFARE SERVICES AND YOUNG CLIENTS

We will draw upon the qualitative data that was produced and analyzed by Aaltonen and Berg in a consortium project entitled «Young People in the Service System» (see Aaltonen et al., 2016). The data were collected in two cities, Espoo and Kouvola, which represent different kinds of urban and semi-urban areas. Espoo (265,000 inhabitants in 2014, overall unemployment rate 9.7% in 2014) is located in the metropolitan area and is the second biggest city in Finland, while Kouvola (86,000 inhabitants in 2014, overall unemployment rate 16.3% in 2014) is located in South-Eastern Finland in an area that has witnessed structural change and a declining industrial sector (OSF, 2016).

We conducted thematic interviews with young clients of the following offices and services provided by municipalities: employment and economic development offices (job centres), social welfare offices, service centres for the long-term unemployed, outreach youth work, youth information points, as well as the Vamos service ensemble organized by the third sector. All in all, we included services focusing on employment and material well-being (sanctions, system-centred) as well as those focusing on rehabilitation (voluntary, youth-centred, flexible) (see Määttä & Aaltonen, 2016). Nineteen young clients – ten young women and nine young men in the 18 to 29 age range – participated in biographical interviews that focused on their position in and relations with the services. The young clients were contacted through the practitioners, who were also interviewed (N=10) but we will only draw upon the data on the young adults for the purposes of this paper. It should be noted that, since the young adults were recruited by the practitioners, they were presumably on good terms with the service system. Hence, our study did not reach the most critical ones or those abandoned by the services.

An overarching feature of the young informants was that they could all be categorized as NEETs. For the purpose of our study, a distinction was made between three types of NEETs identified in the data. We adopted this categorization to highlight their position as citizens and the expectations placed upon them by society and the services. The first group was designated «Troubled» (N=7) because there were factors in their lives such as mental health issues, bereavement, substance abuse, or lack of familial support that seriously hindered them in obtaining post-compulsory education or in finding a job. The young adults in the second group, «Worker citizens in the making» (N=9) had a history of interrupted post-school studies but although they were dealing with different kinds of issues in their lives, they hoped to gain an education or a job. By referring to the third group as «Victims of recession» (N=3), we wanted to highlight that although they had a degree from post-compulsory education and were motivated to find a job, they were still unable to find one due in part to economic circumstances.

Although our aim was to problematize the oversimplified NEET categorization, the division into three groups demonstrates yet another attempt to classify young adults according to their abilities. This is a common feature of the welfare services as well. Young adults are constantly evaluated regarding their needs and capabilities and whether they are

2. This project was conducted jointly by the Youth Research Society and the National Institute for Health and Welfare in 2014 and funded by the Ministry of Culture and Education.
using the right services. Their needs are assessed from the point of view of whether they are in line with societal aims – as stated in the Youth Act (Nuorisolaki, 2016) – of promoting active citizenship and goal-oriented activity in civil society. In the following sections we will build upon the above-mentioned division and to elaborate the perspective of the young adults themselves. How do they see the welfare system and what do they think is on offer for them through the services?

AFFORDANCE AS AN ANALYTICAL LENS ON YOUNG ADULTS’ PERSPECTIVES

One of the core questions in studying the interaction between welfare services and recipients has been the way in which these services manage to foster social inclusion. Some of the social policy studies addressing this question have highlighted the negative effects – the inflexibility and bureaucracy of the services, the growing dependency on the system, and the lack of genuine encounters – and have drawn the conclusion that the welfare services (also) contribute to social exclusion among the have-nots (e.g. Närhi, Kokkonen & Matthies, 2013). Another strand of research has adopted the capability approach initially developed by Amartya Sen (1985) as its analytical lens. This approach is seen to offer a client-centred perspective that aims to capture the benefits of the service by evaluating how they affect clients’ capabilities and allow people to make choices that they value (Edgell & McQuaid, 2016; Mason, Spinks, Hajkowicz & Hobman, 2014).

Both approaches offer valuable insights into how to evaluate welfare services, but we argue that they only manage to shed light on one facet of the issue at a time. Our aim has been to adopt a more comprehensive view of young adults’ perceptions of what is on offer to them through the services. This is achieved by employing the concept of affordance, which has previously been used in environmental psychology to explore what physical environments offer, provide and furnish for observers who perceive an environment according to their needs. To concretize the idea of an affordance in the context of welfare services, we see them as affording young adults the opportunity to find a job, find a place in an educational institute, acquire work training (work try-outs, workshops), improve their employability, or obtain treatment for (mental) health problems. These affordances can be material referring to such concrete goods as financial support and housing or symbolic referring to less tangible aspects that assist individuals to make choices and make sense of the world. From this perspective, the relationship between the observer and the environment is reciprocal and workers are understood as important mediators of affordances, having the power to introduce and refer clients to specialized services or block their access to them (see Määttä & Keskitalo, 2014). Further, affordances are not only beneficial but can also be detrimental (Clark & Uzzell, 2002), and it is this notion in particular that distinguishes our approach from the capability approach: we wish to grasp both the positive and the negative aspects of services. We will apply the concept by exploring

3. In environmental psychology studies, such lists of affordances can be extensive in relation to a neighbourhood and include such components as being active, being alone, being entertained or being noisy (Clark & Uzzell, 2002).
whether young adults perceive the affordances of welfare services and how they perceive what the service environment can offer and provide for them in order to get by and to advance in life.

In the following sections we will illustrate four affordances that we have identified on the basis of the existing literature (e.g. Gaver, 1991) and after close reading of the data, assign a term to each affordance, namely beneficial, pressurizing, false, and hidden. These types are not to be understood as exclusive or definitive categories but more as youth-centred perceptions that may overlap with each other. While the young adults shared similar experiences and interpretations, our aim is to be sensitive towards their various positions and to highlight some differences among them by referring the above-mentioned division into three groups.

**Beneficial affordances**

It was possible to identify several positive affordances that the young adults saw as having advanced their sense of agency or that supported their positive social identity. For some, the relationship with the practitioners even appeared to be warm and personal, as the following extract shows.

I can always contact them [at the employment office] and they always call back. We really do have a good relationship, so it’s actually nice to call them and visit and just to know that I can get help with anything from them.

Further, the services contained a promise of a better future by providing symbolic and material resources for the young adults to go forward with their lives. Besides fulfilling such basic needs as housing and living, they provided tools for healing and working with oneself, which was appreciated especially by those categorized as «Troubled». The following young woman had had a long history of substance abuse, mental health problems and homelessness but she was still hopeful of a brighter future, which appeared to be contingent upon a special health service. This extract also illustrates how the client and the social worker formed an alliance, «we», that tried to negotiate with another sector of the welfare system.

We [together with the social worker] have applied for three-year psychotherapy from Kela [Social Insurance Institution of Finland]. […] If I get it, I would have the possibility to go to work or to school, which is my goal.

As the previous extract illustrates, supporting wellbeing was a top priority for many clients and it was understood as a precondition for entering into education or employment. The steps towards becoming ready for post-compulsory education or work were sometimes moderate but valued nevertheless. For some interviewees, being a client of different services provided a way to find a daily rhythm, a weekly routine almost comparable to having a day job. The following respondent could be understood as an object of expenditure from the system-centred point of view, but he was content with his current situation because being a client together with owning a dog gave him a reason to get up in the morning.
On Mondays I come here to talk with my support person from the outreach youth work, on Tuesdays it’s the support group, on Wednesdays I go to the employment office, on Thursdays I go to the social worker, and on Fridays I go to Kela.

During the interviews, we brought up the notion of ‘experience expertise’, referring to a system in which people having firsthand experience of illnesses or addictions are trained to work as peer-instructors (see also Baillergeau & Duyvendak, 2016). For the older ‘troubled’ respondents, the idea of recognizing and utilizing the value of their life history with all its twists and turns through working as a peer instructor was worth considering. According to a young man who had overcome substance abuse, he thought of himself as being more suitable to talk to those in treatment «instead of a worker who has never even tried anything». Again, this symbolic and positively marked status was something that the service system was able to afford them.

Pressurizing affordances
Steering young adults into employment or education is a publicly expressed aim of the services and while it was a long-term goal of the young clients too, they felt that these affordances were demanding and almost oppressive when they were not able to proceed as expected. Those in the group labelled «Worker citizens in the making» were struggling particularly with mental health issues while balancing between the hopes and fears of obtaining a place in post-compulsory education. The following extract is a telling example of a situation in which pressure to find and accept a place in an educational institution is exerted on those who are considered to be ready to handle it.

I’ve honestly dropped out so many times because I just don’t have what it takes to be in school. And now when they all keep nagging me to apply and to go in for the entrance exam if I qualify, it’s kind of overwhelming to decide what to do. Like now, for example, when I got the notification yesterday that I got into the school, [my] head gets kind of messed up trying to figure out what to do – do I go or not.

Here the young woman had hopes and dreams but also a history of mental health issues and serial dropping out of vocational education, and hence had serious doubts concerning her ability to cope. Further, young adults, especially the «Victims of recession», felt the pressure to find a job even though there were structural and material obstacles that were not easy to overcome – no jobs in their hometown and no feasible way to commute to neighbouring towns.

I’ve heard there are people who get an education, are unemployed, get another education, are unemployed. No matter what education you have, this Kouvola is such a small place. […] There are jobs in the neighbouring town, but you have to have a car, and that is expensive.

Although an employment office can provide assistance when it comes to finding a job, it is not in a position to create jobs, and nor can it influence the way in which working life is becoming more precarious. While the problem lies in working life, the deficiencies are situated in the young adults as individuals who are seen as lacking qualifications.
False affordances
The service system tailored to young adults is broad and complicated and, as in all multi-faceted systems, there are occasionally some weak points. Examples of affordances that appeared to contain a promise of rehabilitation and encouragement but failed to deliver on that promise were indicated particularly in services outsourced to the third sector, as the interviewees revealed having discouraging experiences of some work try-outs or workshops. In the following extract, professionals had questioned the person’s abilities to function in a working environment because of her mental health issues, but from her point of view her health status was harshly ignored by the supervisors.

[W]hen I tried to explain my background and stuff they just said that everyone has their history but people have to carry on. Then in my final review they told me to my face that they had to give me the lowest marks just because they had to compare my performance to a regular employee with an education. I just asked how they could do that because nobody had trained me or shown me how to do things, but they expected me to know how to do everything, and then on the last day told me off […] when I’d had enough trouble just getting to the point where I was able to work.

In the short run, the work try-out was not able to fulfil expectations, but activation efforts of this sort may be false in the long run too if they repeatedly fail to provide a route to employment. Instead, the young adults may end up being labelled as passive and procedure-dependent in the eyes of a potential employer (see Standing, 2011).

A similar experience of false affordance is described in the following extract from an interview with an unemployed young man who had participated not once but twice in a course that focused on polishing one’s CV. However, there is not much to polish when you have been unemployed between the two courses.

From my point of view, these training sessions [CV courses] have been sort of revising, revising, revising. I’d rather spend that time at work, working.

As these examples illustrate, the idea of improving one’s employability by offering courses and activation is promising but may turn out to be counterproductive. Some activation measures may be described as loops that do not move young adults forward but send them back to the starting point instead to wait for the new procedure to commence (see Shildrick, MacDonald, Webster & Garthwaite, 2012). The critical point in these situations is whether the services manage to rebuild trust with the young adults.

Hidden affordances
While our aim has been to illustrate how young adults perceive the service system, it is worth noting that some services are beyond perception. Some of these remain hidden but some come to light unexpectedly as pleasant surprises. By bringing out the hidden nature of affordances we wish to underline the complexity of the ever-changing service system and the fact that young adults entering the system commonly start their service path uninformed, as this comment from one interviewee highlights: «I did not know about the work try-out before the social worker told me that it exists». Our informants credited profession-
als with directing them to services that benefitted them but they appeared to be particularly pleased when describing services that they themselves had «found».

I found care allowance when I was in the waiting room at Kela and picked up a brochure and was just like, «Oh what is this?» And it said that I had this option, too, and it was another miracle that I actually met the conditions for receiving it.

The service system is difficult for young adults to comprehend. Even the practitioners complained that they found it difficult to stay informed about all the opportunities afforded by other sectors but, nonetheless, they play a key role in introducing and acting as gatekeepers of hidden affordances.

**CONCLUSIONS**

Our aim has been to contribute to the understanding of the role played by welfare services in the lives of young adults from the point of view of the latter because their perspective tends to be overshadowed by a top-down approach. We have drawn upon relatively small-scale and somewhat biased data, which can be seen as a limitation of the study, but our results are also supported by earlier studies (e.g. Närhi et al., 2013; Palola et al., 2012). By applying the concept of affordance, we have sought to provide a nuanced understanding of the interaction between welfare services and recipients and to map both positive and negative experiences and perceptions.

While the services are arguably designed to support the agency and wellbeing of individuals, they can also be a source of disappointment, confusion and stress. Young adults who have several deficiencies in their wellbeing – the «Troubled» in particular – are expected to transform into professional clients and learn to navigate and be flexible in structures that in turn may be inflexible and punitive. In the context of the Nordic welfare society the services have an important role in shepherding marginalized young adults towards building their futures. However, it is important to acknowledge that their challenge lies in comprehending the various viewpoints and conditions of their clients, alleviating the burden of individualized stigma, and unravelling the hidden and false affordances of the welfare system.

We argue that in emphasizing young adults’ perspectives, both satisfied and critical voices are vital in developing the service system in a more empowering and inclusive direction. The affordance perspective is one way to go beyond the deficit-oriented perspective often ascribed to young clients of the welfare services; it shifts the evaluative focus away from young adults towards the service system, identifying both the enabling and the less explicit aspects.

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