

**YOUTH'S FUTURE ORIENTATION AND WELL-BEING:  
MATERIALISM AND CONCERNS WITH EDUCATION AND CAREER  
AMONG TURKISH AND NORWEGIAN YOUTH**

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**Abstract:** Youths' well-being and subjectivity are strongly related to prevailing political, economic, and social conditions. Neoliberalism has extensively permeated societies worldwide, changing the way individuals, especially youth, make sense of their surroundings and themselves. There is thus an increasing need to investigate how youth subjectivities are influenced in contemporary societies that are under the influence of neoliberalism. Through an analysis of the future orientation of youth, we can investigate discourses that shape youth subjectivities. In this study, we perform a Foucauldian discourse analysis of the future orientation of youth — high school students, from two national contexts, Turkey and Norway — who were asked to write an essay on their personal futures. We investigate what dominant discourses are revealed in the youths' writings and how they may influence their subjectivities and well-being. We detail two frameworks of discourses, one pertaining to materialism and the other pertaining to education and career, that our participants drew upon in their writings. We relate these discourses to neoliberalism and discuss the extent to which youth constitute themselves as neoliberal subjects of their respective societies. We discuss how these discourses may also be related to their well-being in diverse ways.

**Keywords:** youth future orientation, neoliberalism, materialism, subjectivity, well-being

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Youth attitudes, values, and well-being are strongly related to prevailing political, economic, and social conditions (e.g., Gillespie & Allport, 1955; Greene, 1990; Nurmi, 1991), reflecting the complex and embedded nature of subjectivity (Berger & Luckman, 1966; Burr, 2003; Gergen, 2009). In various spheres of life such as education, the job market, and media, youth are exposed to changing discourses and ideologies on local, national, and global levels that influence their development (Apple, 2001; Roberts & Peters, 2008; Türken, Nafstad, Blakar, & Roen, 2016; Walkerdine, 2006; White, 2015; Wyn & Dwyer, 2002). Scholars have described these current changes as having to do with globalization and interrelated ideas, and practices associated with neoliberalism, consumerism, and individualism (e.g., Arnett, 2002; Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005).

Neoliberalism in particular has been conceptualized as *pensée unique* of the globalization era and is thus particularly relevant for youth subjectivity. Neoliberalism has further been conceptualized as an overarching hegemonic global discourse shaping common sense (e.g., Bourdieu, 1998; Harvey, 2005) and as a metanarrative within which all other ideas relating to political economy as well as social, institutional, and cultural life are expected to operate (Roberts & Peters, 2008). For example, neoliberal ideas stress the economization of the social (Foucault, 1978–1979/2008; Harvey, 2005) and therefore have led to economic thinking entering into the personal, social, and public spheres of life (see Lemke, 2001; Nafstad, Blakar, Carlquist, Phelps, & Rand-Hendriksen, 2007; Rose, 1999). Rose (1999), in line with Foucault (1978–1979/2008), argues that neoliberalism has led to the establishment of new conditions in liberal democracies under which individuals understand themselves as solely responsible for their own well-being and fate, for their successes and failures. Hence, given the dominant power of neoliberalism, individuals increasingly understand themselves as free, autonomous, self-regulating actors and as a source of capital. Each individual becomes “the bearer of a human capital, who must seek to maximise her own self-value” (Weidner, 2009, p. 406). Neoliberalism has accordingly also led to the weakening of solidarity and individuals’ ties to collectives (Bourdieu, 1998; Foucault, 1978–1979/2008; Rose, 1999). At the same time, individuals are required to accept responsibility for their well-being, for managing every sphere of life, and for tackling the risk and uncertainty created by changes in the structural elements of society (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999; Walkerdine, 2006). Youth experience such pressures to an even greater degree (Arnett, 2002; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Heggli, Haukanes, & Tjomsland, 2013). Overall, these changes seem to enhance ambiguity, complexity, and the unpredictability of the future (Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007); weaken institutions that have traditionally provided stability such as family, the job market, and the welfare state (Ranci, 2010); increase uncertainty and individualize risk (Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992; Dean, 2010); lead to identity confusion (Arnett, 2002); and provide more diversified and individualized ways of being (Buchman, 1989; Leccardi, 2005; Woodman, 2011).

Consumerism is also central in neoliberal societies in which individuals are increasingly conceptualized as consumers, with their identity and well-being increasingly linked to material possessions (Bauman, 2007; Dittmar, 1992; Miles, 1998; Rose, 1999). This applies especially to youth, who to ever greater degrees are exposed to the mantra of “To have is to be” (Fromm, 1978, p. 25). Rose (1999), particularly connecting individualization to neoliberalism, argues that the subject of neoliberal societies is required to assemble her or his own way of life, and that that is usually achieved through consumption. Thus, in neoliberal societies subjectivity, and consequently, the well-being of individuals, is conditioned by consumption.

As indicated above, these societal changes affect young people’s subjectivity — their sense of themselves — as well as their ideas and goals for the future. However, as subjectivity is dynamic and subject formation takes place across multiple social contexts and in contradictory ways, how societal changes influence youth is not always predictable. In the present paper we will investigate youth’s future orientation in order to gain insight into the ways in which contemporary discourses related to neoliberalism either open up or limit opportunities for the development of youth subjectivities and well-being.

Orienting toward the future is an important feature of human life: individuals think and act, set goals, plan, explore options, make commitments, and thus develop themselves and their identity based on their expectations for the future (Adamson, Ferrer-Wreder, & Kerpelman, 2007; Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2003). According to Nurmi (1991), future orientation involves three processes: motivation, planning, and evaluation. First, youth set goals based on their values and expectations of the future. Next, they sketch out ways of realizing and reaching these goals. Finally, they evaluate the possibility of realizing their goals and dreams and actualizing their plans. Overall, if youth are uncertain about or hindered from achieving their most central goals related to their futures, their well-being will suffer. The possibilities for youth to achieve their goals are strongly related to socio-structural and historical conditions in a given society (Gillespie & Allport, 1955; Kleiber & Manaster, 1972). To researchers, future orientation may thus function as a mirror of current times, reflecting the structural elements as well as the ethos of society with its social and cultural norms, and may provide crucial knowledge about possible directions in which society may be heading (Hicks, 2002).

Obtaining higher education and employment is often central to future orientation. With increasing neoliberalization, the pressure to obtain higher education seems also to increase. In terms of increased competition between individuals and reduction in state services, neoliberalization has led to a reconfiguration of education as a commodity (Giroux, 2008; Roberts & Peters, 2008). Education becomes an investment and youth may accordingly view the obtaining of higher education as necessary to becoming successful adults. Youth feel the pressure both from their parents and from political discourse, especially given neoliberal demands for individual responsibility (Harden, Backett-Milburn, MacLean, & Jamieson, 2012). Indeed, as children and youth are often posited as a society’s future, social and economic policies are put in place to turn them into responsible “citizen-workers of the future” (Lister, 2006). Responding to

the changed economic conditions, most western governments have made far-reaching revisions of their educational goals since the 1980s; revisions which, according to Wyn and Dwyer (2002), emphasize the economic importance of educational qualifications on the one hand and raise uncertainty about the predictability and security of outcomes on the other.

Research shows that future orientation among youth, almost independently of culture, generally relates to concerns about family, education, and career, and about self or identity, and self-esteem (Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2003). But changing conditions of society under globalization influence the way youth see the future and develop themselves. For instance, Lindfors, Solantaus, and Rimpelä (2012), studying future orientation of Finnish youth, report an increase in fears regarding health, death, loneliness, and relationships since the 1980s. Haid and colleagues (2010) also report fears about the future among Turkish, Italian, and German adolescents. Adamson et al. (2007) emphasize that there is a need to pay more attention to why young people view their futures in the ways they do, especially for those who work in the field of youth care, which is also undergoing changes due to neoliberalism (White, 2015). Our investigation specifically aims to add insights into this complex subject matter by explicating discourses that high school students from two distinct nation-states, Turkey and Norway, draw upon in voicing how they view their future.

### ***The Present Investigation***

This paper presents discursive research examining how youths in two nation-states make sense of themselves and their surroundings, as revealed in essays written by them about their own future. We investigate dominant discourses that emerge from these essays, drawing upon a Foucauldian approach that suggests that individuals constitute themselves by negotiating discursively available subject positions that reflect society's existing material and social order (Foucault, 1978–1979/2008; Hook, 2001). More specifically, discourses construct, promote, or strengthen ways of being, and offer subject positions which, when taken up, have implications for how individuals experience and act in the world (Burr, 2003; Hook, 2001; Willig, 2009). According to Gergen (2014), discursive research aims at investigating, revealing, and critiquing discourses that may be “prejudicial, oppressive, unjust, or misleading” (p. 52; see also Parker, 2005; Willig, 2009). We will thus discuss how the discourses as revealed in youths' writings are related to neoliberalism and whether or not these discourses may promote social control through making available certain ways of being and thinking while constraining others.

### ***The Socio-historical Context of Norway and Turkey***

Norway and Turkey are similar on some dimensions, such as membership in international and global institutions like the United Nations, the World Trade Organization, the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, and the European Union; but very different on others, such as culture, religion, and heterogeneity of population. The two societies also differ regarding the well-being and happiness of their citizens. Levels of well-being, as measured by the World Values Survey, have been higher in Norway than Turkey since the start of these measurements in 1981 (e.g.,

Diener, 2000; Selim, 2008). International reports by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD; 2011) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP; 2015) also confirm differences in reported levels of well-being, with Norway scoring high not only on measures of overall life-satisfaction but also on other issues such as community, environment, and safety. Living in an egalitarian society with high social consensus, a high degree of inclusiveness, low wage inequality, substantial redistribution of wealth, and good public services such as education and health seems to play a major role in Norwegians' personal fulfilment and well-being (OECD, 2011; UNDP, 2015). Turkey's score on the other hand is below the OECD average: it is in fact one of the unhappiest countries in the study. Selim (2008) reports that Turkey also shows the highest standard deviations of life satisfaction and happiness compared to other developed countries, which seems to indicate sociocultural differences and unequal income distribution among Turkish people.

Apart from these differences, both societies are going through large-scale transformations associated with globalization and are increasingly permeated by neoliberalism. In spite of a history of an extensive public system rooted in strong social-democratic welfare-state values, Norway started, albeit slowly, implementing neoliberal policies in the 1980s by cutting back on public expenditures. The increase of neoliberal policy in Norway led not only to a restructuring of the economy through deregulation and privatization, but also toward value shifts in society, from the collective to the individual, observable in Norwegian media language (Nafstad et al., 2007). Privatization, contracting-out of public services, and implementation of more cost-efficient ways of offering health services such as elder care have become increasingly common (van Riemsdijk, 2010). While Norway remains a strong welfare state (UNDP, 2015), both older and more recent research have shown that youth have become more concerned with consumption and material possessions. An early study by Tiller (1969) reported materialistic discourse among urban youth. Tiller's participants understood themselves in terms of "I am what I own": a positive future for these urban youth involved coming into possession of material goods, which resulted in a positive self-identity. This was not the case for rural youth who were more oriented towards social ties and belonging. However, with increasing urbanization, living standards, and neoliberal influence there is a reason to expect that such a discourse of materialism is becoming more widespread among youth in Norway. For instance, Brusdal and Lavik (2008) report that consumerism has become a part of daily life for young Norwegians, while Hoffman, Iversen, and Ortiz (2010) found evidence (albeit slight) of materialism as forming part of key life experiences for Norwegian youth.

The neoliberal shift in Turkey occurred in the 1980s with economic restructuring and incorporation into the global economy, and the introduction of new values related to individualism and consumerism (Cizre & Yeldan, 2005; Emrence, 2008). These developments have brought about a tension in Turkish society between collectivistic values of solidarity and belongingness on the one hand, and individualistic values of freedom and entitlement on the other (Neyzi, 2001). According to Cosar & Yegenoglu (2009), the neoliberal influence in Turkey

has been successful to such a degree that the state has implemented neoliberal policies that have greatly diminished its responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. Neoliberal and other policies, especially those implemented in the last decade, have changed the educational system, with the emphasis now being on employability, efficiency, and competition (e.g., Kaya, 2015). The social security system has changed as well, curtailing the rights of the working population, increasing the cost of social insurance, and limiting the levels of benefits received (Cosar & Yegenoglu, 2009). Moreover, there has been an abrupt change in the way Turkish youth are conceptualized: the prevailing construction of youth as politically active defenders of the state in the pre-1980s era has been replaced by a construction of youth as apolitical individualistic consumers (Neyzi, 2001) who now develop consumer identities (Lüküslü, 2009).

### **Method**

We employed the qualitative method of essay writing to gather data (see Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Heggli et al., 2013). This method minimizes researcher intervention and provides participants the opportunity to write as they please. Data were gathered from samples of high school students in Turkey and Norway. The Turkish sample comprised 236 students (83 girls and 153 boys) from three high schools in three different middle-sized towns. The Norwegian sample comprised 106 students (67 girls and 39 boys) from two different schools located in an Oslo suburb. Students were all attending the last year of high school, and were thus approaching a phase of their lives in which they would be making important choices concerning their futures. Participation took place during school classes and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The study met the requirements for data privacy of, and was approved by, the Norwegian Social Science Data Services. We also received permission to collect data from the local educational authorities in Turkey. Additionally, principals of all schools in both national contexts approved the study. The first author, who speaks both Turkish and Norwegian, supervised all essay-writing sessions. Students were informed about the voluntary nature of participation and that their responses were anonymous. In this paper, participants are identified by their nationality, gender, and an assigned number. The students were asked to write an essay based upon the following question: What are your hopes, expectations, ideals, and worries for the future? They were explicitly informed that there were no right or wrong answers, and to write in as much detail as possible. The length of the completed essays ranged from half a page to four pages.

### ***Foucauldian Discourse Analysis***

We took a Foucauldian approach to conducting a discourse analysis of the youth essays. Discourse analysis can provide knowledge of how particular understandings of the self and the world are diffused in society; as “discourses tend to define how the social world is ordered and organized, then it is inevitable that discourses will reach into the very hearts of individuals and come to influence and shape their sense of identity” (Connolly, 1998, p. 14). Such a Foucauldian understanding holds that discourses create certain ways of being — subject positions — that, when negotiated and taken up by individuals, have implications for their subjectivity and

experience (Hook, 2001; Willig, 2009). Through a discourse analysis of how youth write about their future, we attempted to reveal the dominant discourses that influence and shape the youths' subjectivity in each of the two societies. Moreover, this approach also provides insight into how high school students construct identity through negotiating meanings embedded in various dominant discourses they encounter in their daily lives. Discourse analysis also offers the possibility of questioning and challenging those understandings, as discourses function ideologically, presenting an oppressive version of the world that defines what is normal and what is deviant (Parker, 2005; Willig, 2009).

Willig (2009) suggests a stepwise procedure to perform a Foucauldian discourse analysis. Following Willig, the first author read all the essays thoroughly, searching for different discursive constructions (e.g., applying to education or career) and locating various discourses drawn upon by the students in each national context. Engaging with the research literature, the first, second, and fourth authors held collective discussions to relate the discourses in the students' writings to wider societal discourses. We then evaluated what our participants had to gain by constructing objects (e.g., education, career) in the particular ways that they did. In the next step of the analysis, we evaluated what subject positions were offered by these constructions and what they implied about possible actions by those who take on these subject positions. The guiding question was, "How do discursive constructions and subject positions open up or close down opportunities for action and limit what can be said and done?" Finally, we discussed how subjectivity might be influenced — what can be felt, thought, and experienced from within the subject positions identified? The analysis we present in this paper deals particularly with the central issue regarding, "What subject positions are promoted and enabled, and what subject positions are constrained or made unreasonable by the discourses students draw upon?" Answering this question allows us to explore the implications of those discourses on subjectivity of youth.

There is also a comparative element to our study as globalization is experienced differently between nation-states (Heggli et al., 2013). Hence, comparing and contrasting the two sets of data from Turkey and Norway should provide insights into the complex relationships between future orientation, subjectivity, and societal discourses. On a more general level, according to Haldar and Wærdahl (2009, p. 1142), "Having two sets of data from different contexts adds to the richness of the data by providing a contrast that is needed to illuminate the taken-for-granted" (see also Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012; Miles & Huberman, 1994).

### **Analysis**

In line with much research on future orientation (Nurmi, 1991; Seginer, 2003), we found that participants were predominantly concerned with education, career, family, and the self. Parts of this study, presented elsewhere (under review), cover a relationality framework on the tensions youth feel between, on the one hand, becoming autonomous, self-directing individuals in search of individual achievement and self-realization, and, on the other hand, joining with others in

solidarity, belonging, and citizenship. It should suffice to say here that although the same discourses appear in the writings of youth in both national contexts, individualistic neoliberal discourses seem to be more widespread among Norwegian youth than among Turkish youth who, to a larger degree, draw upon discourses that enable a collective identity and belonging. In this paper, we present data concerning what youth expressed as essential to their future well-being: (a) materialism and (b) education and career (see Table 1). We will detail and discuss how youth in Turkey and Norway constitute themselves as particular subjects in order to achieve success and increase their own well-being by drawing upon certain discourses related to materialism on the one hand and education and career on the other. Our analysis did not reveal any gender differences in the way students from each national context relate to materialism, education, and career. Whenever applicable, we will connect the discourses presented in this paper with the discourses related to a relationality framework, presented elsewhere (under review).

Table 1

*Most Common Themes Appearing in the Writings of Youth in the Norwegian and Turkish National Contexts, in Order of Prevalence*

Norway	%	Turkey	%
Employment	66	Employment	86
Education	62	Education	81
Materialism	38	Materialism	24

### ***Materialism***

Youth in both national contexts constructed positive goals for the future in terms of possession of money or material ownership. We thus found a discourse of materialism in the essays of a substantial number of our participants; for example, Norwegian girl 11 wrote, “To live happily without material happiness, is it real? I do not think so.”

Obtaining the means to possess material things or commodities such as “a luxury car”, “a nice house”, and “a lot of money” was essential for a prosperous future. Within this discourse, happiness, images of a good life, and, hence, well-being were dependent upon money:

“Money makes you happy! Money matters!” Norwegian boy 4

“I want to establish my own work ... and get very rich. To own all the things I want to have.” Turkish boy 40

“My ideal is to be rich in the future.” Turkish boy 35

Material possession was constructed as such an important goal that the possibility of living happily without it was in doubt. This discourse accordingly constitutes the individual as a subject who is not only motivated but also obliged to earn a lot of money to escape a failed, unhappy life. In other words, a positive future is dependent on making money:

“In spite of those who claim ‘money does not make you happy’, I want a job that pays a lot.” Turkish girl 36

“Well, anybody’s dream is to get rich and be happy. I am not going to hide that this is mainly my dream.” Norwegian boy 22

While Turkish girl 36 is aware of a non-materialistic discourse of happiness, she positions herself against it and is motivated to get a job that will provide her with financial resources that arguably lead to happiness and a good life. Norwegian boy 22 makes a link between getting “rich” and being “happy”. Moreover, through the expression “anybody’s dream”, he takes for granted that it is only normal for him to wish for the same.

This is not surprising given the increasing discourse on consumerism expanding throughout the world in which identity becomes more and more connected to material possessions (Dittmar, 1992). These findings also correspond with other research highlighting that materialism and the desire to consume have become key values among young people in contemporary Turkey (Lüküslü, 2009; Neyzi, 2001) and in Norway (Brusdal & Lavik, 2008; Hoffman et al., 2010).

Our analysis shows materialistic values in the essays of 38% of the Norwegian and 24% of the Turkish sample indicating that a discourse of materialism is clearly present in the writings of youth in both societies. However, a majority of participants were more concerned with other themes and did not explicitly write about materialism. Yet, a dominant discourse does not necessarily need to be made explicit all the time or require unanimity. For those who explicitly drew upon a materialist discourse, their future well-being seemed to be conditioned by the need to not only obtain money for security and survival, but to be rich and gain the material possessions required to become happy. Moreover, there were only a few essays that challenged materialism. For example, Norwegian boy 38 stated, “I have no expectations of becoming rich, money is false happiness.”

The few findings in this vein mirror Heggli et al.’s (2013) study of 14- to 15-year-old Norwegians, who in the context of making career choices talked about money only in terms of sufficiency, wanting simply to “have enough”. Regarding the Norwegian context, the discrepancy between our findings and Heggli et al.’s findings might be explained in terms of age. Our participants were older and about to make important choices to become independent (most Norwegians move out of their family’s house when they turn 18), which might have made them more preoccupied with economic independence and money. However, there was little to indicate

the dominance of an “anti-materialistic” discourse that offered alternative subject positions (i.e., that it was a normal position to not want or need money or material possessions). Hence, the materialism discourse seems to be a dominant discourse in both Norway and Turkey as it is largely successful in limiting critical voices.

Most youth who draw upon a materialism discourse in both contexts construct a link between material possessions and well-being. However, many scholars have warned against a preoccupation with material possessions, claiming that the pursuit of happiness through possessions is bound to result in dissatisfaction (e.g., Fromm, 1978). For instance, Kasser and Ryan (1993) show that valuing materiality and aspiring to financial success among adolescents is associated with more depressive symptoms and overall lower well-being. Materialism, correlated with higher egocentric behaviour and less sharing of money or other possessions with both significant (family and friends) and non-significant (strangers and society in general) others, is found to be correlated negatively with self-esteem and with overall satisfaction with life: materialists are less satisfied with the amount of fun they have, with family life, with relationships to friends, and with their income or standard of living (Richins & Dawson, 1992). While money may matter to increase the well-being of the very poor, it seems to be weakly correlated with happiness (Dittmar et al., 2014; Selim, 2008). Indeed, a recent meta-analysis shows a negative correlation between well-being and pursuit of material possessions (Dittmar et al., 2014).

### ***Education and Career***

Two other elements that the youth constructed as essential in their future orientation were education and career. University education in particular was seen as important to a successful future for participants in both national contexts. Yet, subjectivity cannot develop independently of culture and the structure of society. A main finding was that there were very different ways of constructing and relating to education and career in the two national contexts.

#### ***Turkey: Concerns with Education and Career — A Worried Self***

One element that was both central to future orientation but also a great source of worry for the Turkish youth was access to university education as a path to better career prospects. Higher education was widely constructed by our Turkish participants as a key to a good future, and posited as providing youth with possibilities:

“My biggest ideal is to get an education at a very good university and have a life of high standards.” Turkish girl 26

“My only hope and dream for the future is attending university, having an occupation that I can master, with good job opportunities...” Turkish girl 78

University education was thus constructed as a first step toward a good life. As Turkish girl 78 continues, “I do not have any other dream beyond attending a university. To be honest, I have not thought about that at all. Maybe, to have other dreams, I need to realize this dream first.”

Hence, without achieving this goal, other dreams cannot be realized. Leading a good life seemed almost impossible without an education:

“To live a better life later on I will work hard to get into the university.” Turkish boy 78

“I know from my life at the present how it is with unemployment.... My father did not get an education and I will learn from that and build a better life for myself.” Turkish boy 99

Here, education is seen as the difference between poverty and a better future. For youth such as Turkish boy 99, learning from his parents’ “mistakes” suggests a rational, responsible subject. He also explains his father’s lack of higher education as a matter of personal choice and also understands himself as the sole responsible agent for a better future. This construction implies “work on the self”, reflecting a discourse of individualism strengthened by the current powerful influence of neoliberalism (Walkerline, 2003). According to that view, youth have to take individual responsibility to succeed in life; the structural constraints of society are ignored.

Indeed, higher education was construed as such an important event that not having access to it was associated with a multitude of fears for the youth. Turkish girl 78 elaborates further on her dream of education, writing that, “My only fear is to let down my family and teachers who expect [a lot of me].” Turkish boy 66 also writes about feeling uneasy about whether he will get into a good university:

“I am afraid to fail the university exam. I fear that if I fail the exam, I will stay unemployed. I fear that I will not be able to take care of my family.... My biggest wish right now is to attend a good university and thus guarantee my future. A good university means a good job, a good job means a good life. I of course want to lead a good life.... My greatest worry is not being able to realize this dream.” Turkish boy 66

These youth feel the burden of possible failure as it would also mean not living up to the expectations of their family members and significant others. Furthermore, many participants worried specifically about the university entrance exam as the key to shaping their future:

“My hope for the future is to get higher education and start work life later on. My fear is failing the university exam.... If I do well at the exam and get into the university, I believe everything will in itself get better.” Turkish boy 134

“The most important reason for why I have to pass the [university entrance] exam is that how my life is going to take form from now on is dependent on this exam.” Turkish boy 135

However, there were critical voices to be found among the Turkish participants. Although the idea that “a good university, a good education means a good life” (Turkish boy 26) represented a predominant understanding among Turkish youth, many graduates in reality will face unemployment (Celik, 2008). Some of the youth in our study were thus keenly aware and critical of the existing system, and in particular the role of the entrance exam, which promotes university education as a solution to unemployment:

“Our life is decided by a couple of exams we take. At this age, we are turned into race horses. In fact, they do not want a thinking, questioning youth. They only look at what answer you give to a multiple choice question. You necessarily have to fit into the system.” Turkish girl 37

“My only hope is the exam. Everything is bound to that. It is such a pity that a human life is so much decided by a single exam but UNFORTUNATELY it is the way it is, I hate life. I don’t even want to live such a life.” Turkish girl 64

We can see that the anxiety felt by youth regarding the university exam is so strong that Turkish girl 64 uses such a term as “hate” and even considers life as not worth living. This is an illustration of the connection between social structure and subjectivity. The current educational system in Turkey creates subjects whose present and future well-being is extensively dependent upon events such as the entrance exams:

“The exam totally occupies me and turns all my thoughts upside down. I do not want to do anything. I am depressed knowing that my friends are doing well at [preparatory] exams and me not so good.... Therefore, I am cautious about having dreams. If I worked harder, it could go OK but it did not go well on that day [preparatory exam]. Everyone says ‘It is going to be all right’ but I don’t believe in this sentence at all because when the results get back, it is not going to be all right.” Turkish boy 55

This quotation illustrates how the structure of Turkish society in combination with a discourse of “hard work” associated with neoliberalism, creates a worried subjecthood. Placing responsibility for success or failure on the university entrance exam alone is such a burden that Turkish boy 55 feels depressed and helpless, and wants to withdraw from social activity. When university education is constructed as the fundamental difference between failure and success in life, a strong sense of anxiety is almost inevitable when access is under threat. As well, the inefficient social security system in Turkey puts the burden of managing life on the shoulders of the individual.

Our data also resonate with other studies linking university entrance exams with anxiety among high school students in Turkey (e.g., Kockar & Gencöz, 2004). Turkey has in fact the lowest youth education attainment rate (as measured by completion of an upper secondary education) in Europe at 51.1%, compared to the average 79% for European countries and 71.1%

for Norway (Eurostat, 2012). This means that a larger number of Turkish youth are structurally hindered from getting the higher education that is posited as a key for future well-being and success. Indeed, out of 2,126,670 youth taking the university entrance exam in 2015, less than half (983,090) were granted enrolment (Ölçme, Seçme ve Yerleştirme Merkezi [Measuring, Selection and Placement Centre], 2015). Furthermore, contrary to a common-sense understanding of education leading to a better life as demonstrated by our participants, Selim (2008) reports that higher education has no significant effect on well-being and happiness in Turkey. In such societies, neoliberalization may lead to failed subjectivities, especially for youth who increasingly understand themselves as self-made individuals with the sole responsibility for their own successes and well-being (Walkerline, 2003, 2006), as exemplified by the struggle to get access to university education.

A worried subjecthood among our Turkish youth was not only linked to obtaining university education, but also extended even further into the future, especially with regard to working life. For example:

“My biggest fear is unemployment.... My expectation for the future is first of all getting an education and then having an occupation. Yet in our country, university graduates do not easily find work. A lot of people are unemployed. My biggest fear is remaining unemployed after university.” Turkish girl 42

Some participants even questioned the role of the state:

“One of my fears is to finish university education yet remain unemployed. Because there are thousands of young people like that. Although the state has a duty to provide jobs to those who are educated, this duty is overlooked, I think.... Maybe the system is failing ... if people, after 16 years of education, are ‘pavement engineers’ [a common phrase used to refer to the educated yet unemployed segment of the population] ... I do not want to be that pessimistic but these are my observations.” Turkish boy 26

According to Turkish boy 26, the Turkish state fails to provide fundamental services connected to employment for its citizens. Such a critique is possible within a welfare state discourse; the development of a welfare state discourse in the aftermath of the establishment of the republic in 1923 made it the state’s task to provide social security services. Modern Turkey was founded on the principle of statism as an extension of the people’s will (Spencer, 1958), in which issues such as unemployment are not viewed as just a personal matter, but rather as a societal or state responsibility. However, current neoliberal development in Turkey has reduced the state’s tasks and duties. Hence one will find greater pressure on each citizen to be responsible for passing entrance exams, completing an education, finding a job, and remaining employed. As Turkish boy 26 elaborates further, “I guess, having a university education is not the only necessity for a positive future, one needs to *hold on* to a job later and *remain employed*.” (emphasis added).

Wyn and Dwyer (2002) contend that, in many societies, large-scale economic changes that began in the 1980s have led to youth today experiencing unemployment and short-term jobs. “What young people are experiencing today ... reveals a mismatch between human capital ‘instrumental education’ approach, which informs policy on education in the 1990s, and the reality of deregulated, flexible, and ‘unpredictable’ market forces” (Wyn & Dwyer, 2002, p. 148). Yücesan-Özdemir (2012) also discusses how neoliberalism has led to higher rates of unemployment and precarious working conditions in Turkey. Cosar and Yegenoglu (2009) similarly argue that neoliberalization in Turkey has resulted in the state assuming less and less responsibility for the well-being of its citizens. Subjectivity of youth is influenced negatively by these structural changes, leading to worry, as we found among our participants.

Taken together, we can see the contours of neoliberal subjectivity among Turkish youth. The predominant neoliberal discourse that puts the responsibility for getting into university, finding a job, and remaining employed on the shoulders of the individual (Kelan, 2008), is expressed in the fears recounted by many of our Turkish youth participants. Indeed, the Turkish Statistical Institute (TSI; 2013) reports that 48.4% of participants in formal and non-formal education and training designed to improve career prospects were higher education graduates. Thus, employment becomes a lasting concern for many individuals, even those who already possess a higher education, as they need to seek further educational credentials to guarantee employment (Celik, 2008). Not surprisingly, unemployment is negatively correlated with well-being in Turkey (Selim, 2008). Therefore, in strongly individualized societies it can be argued that youth, drawing upon neoliberal discourses, often internalize systemic failure and see it as the fault of their own shortcomings (Dean, 2010; Rose, 1999; see also Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1992), a perception that negatively affects their well-being.

### ***Norway: Desire for Enjoyable Education and Minimal Concern for Unemployment — The Self-realizing Subject***

While university education also emerged as an important issue for our Norwegian participants, the way in which they related to it differed considerably from their Turkish counterparts. Obtaining a university education was, in contrast, a non-issue, and the link between a university degree and success via employment was not as strong:

“At the university, I want to study something that really intrigues me, no matter what job I have later on. It is not a good job which is the goal. The goal is to get into the discipline I wish at the university, what comes afterwards is not important.” Norwegian girl 1

Norwegian participants’ future orientations were thus more concerned with what they personally find “intriguing”, “meaningful”, “fun”, or “enjoyable”, as exemplified by Norwegian boy 30, who stated, “I want to study something I enjoy.”

These participants’ essays focusing on university education were also written in a much more relaxed style. One explanation for this is that there is not an entrance exam in Norway.

Students are instead free to apply to a number of programs and are accepted based on their own interests and grades from high school. While Turkish participants revealed negativity and anxiety about their ability to get into university and hold a job, Norwegian participants' worries related instead to being satisfied with their choices and the consequences these may have in the future:

“I do not know what I want. Many questions in my head ... What to study? What if I don't choose the right one? What if I do not enjoy myself?” Norwegian girl 48

“My biggest worry is that I do not find something exciting to study and I do not find a job I enjoy. That I will have a boring (A4) life. That I will have the feeling that I should have done more or made different choices along the way. I am horrified to end up with resentment and wrong choices.” Norwegian girl 64

Quotations such as these illustrate that a majority of Norwegian youth did not show much regard for the idea of education as a necessity, in the way their Turkish counterparts did. Rather, attending university or college was something they wanted to enjoy. We found that this goal of enjoyment also applied to working life, and was related to more abstract statements about self-realization and self-development:

“... not forget to live, take care of myself. My dream is to work with something meaningful, something that will allow me to develop myself continually.” Norwegian girl 4

“My hope for the future is to do what I feel like doing.” Norwegian boy 35

This connection between future orientation and education, working life, and self-realization can arguably be explained in terms of Norwegian participants living in a well-functioning welfare society in which certain provisions from the state enable a different subjectivity. This resonates with Heggli et al. (2013) who state that the combination of a welfare state with more neoliberalist values promote a self-realizing subject, as illustrated by Norwegian girl 4 who wants to “accomplish my full potential”.

Presumably feeling rather secure about the future, Norwegian youth were also able to draw upon discourses of sensation-seeking and self-realization. Many seemed to take the socio-structural mechanisms of the welfare state for granted and expressed worries mostly about their own inner life and well-being. Moreover, their writings about their futures reflected that they considered themselves more as isolated agents of self-interest:

“Get a life in which every day is about stuff I want to do and not things I have to do. Do not give up on own interest.” Norwegian girl 12

“As a 17-year-old now looking at the future, I can only see one thing: opportunities. I have the possibility to do what I want, become just what I want, and use my life to do

whatever I want. Everything is up to me, everything is dependent on my own choices.”  
Norwegian girl 42 (emphasis in original)

Youth in Norway seem to be much more concerned with autonomy, inner life, and self-interest than Turkish youth, although there some wrote about being connected to family and showing solidarity with humanity. This widespread understanding among Norwegian youth resonates with Rose’s (1999) contentions regarding how neoliberalism shapes subjectivities. The self-realizing subject of neoliberalism is a person who is self-centered, who understands herself or himself as autonomous, and who must continually seek personal development to feel satisfied with life. Thus, subjective well-being is to a large degree linked to self-satisfaction. Such a discourse may lead youth subjects to feel less satisfied when fulfilling their duties as citizens and more concerned with their own individual rights as a way to achieve their full potential and own self-realization. Indeed, Gullestad (1996) reports changes in the upbringing of children in Norwegian society: throughout the 1980s, youth became more concerned with “finding and being oneself”, with little sense of group solidarity. Similarly, Nafstad et al. (2007) argue that the neoliberal turn in Norway has led to more emphasis on rights individuals have rather than duties they are to perform as citizens, indicative of a shift from collective to more individualistic values.

Combined with self-realization, and in contrast with the Turkish youth, concern for unemployment was minimal amongst our Norwegian participants as none of the participants explicitly mentioned unemployment as a worry. While some participants were preoccupied with earning enough, for instance “to be able to travel” and “to experience new stuff”, their main worry concerning working life was whether or not they would end up enjoying their job, as exemplified by Norwegian girl 58, who stated, “I am afraid that I won’t succeed career-wise, because it is important to have a good income to manage oneself, especially in Norway. I am worried I will end up with a job I do not enjoy.”

Most of our Norwegian participants in fact did not express much concern for the unknown future. Rather, given the stable living conditions, they wrote with a sense of security. However, this was felt to such a degree that it was posited by some as an issue of dissatisfaction, arguably lessening their well-being. Norwegian boy 14 writes:

“I sometimes think life is boring since I know all that is going to happen. I know I will get an education, establish a family, live, work, have kids and eventually die! I do not want to think like that and choose therefore to tell myself that I need to live as much in the moment as possible.”

Norwegian youth seem to take the functioning of the welfare state for granted, as exemplified by the above quote. Similar to our findings, the younger (14–15 years) Norwegian participants in the study by Heggli et al. (2013) also felt less uncertainty and showed a more relaxed attitude regarding unemployment compared to their peers from the Czech Republic and Tunisia.

The difference in future orientation between Norwegian and Turkish youth illustrates how subjectivity is conditioned by the structural mechanisms and conditions of society (Foucault, 1978–1979/2008). Although uncertainty is a common consequence of globalization for youth (Arnett, 2002; Hermans & Dimaggio, 2007), national conditions influence the ways and the extent to which it is experienced (Heggli et al., 2013). The dominant underlying concern for Turkish youth who seek university education as a way to a successful life seems to be unemployment. This finding corresponds with key statistics illustrating that unemployment is indeed a huge societal problem in Turkey. According to TSI (2015), the unemployment rate in Turkey was 10.1% (youth unemployment 18.3 %) in August 2015, staying steadily around 10% since 2002<sup>1</sup>. While youth unemployment is 18.3 %, Celik (2008) reported that 39% of college graduates were unemployed, and argued that unemployment breeds unemployment in Turkish society, reproducing social inequality. Meanwhile the Norwegian unemployment rate in the third quarter of 2015 was 4.6% (youth unemployment 7.8 %; Statistics Norway, 2015); the rate has not exceeded 5% in the last 20 years. Hammer (2006) reports that although short-term unemployment after graduation is not unusual, Norwegian youth do not suffer from long-term unemployment. Such structural differences may indeed influence youth differently in the two nations. For instance, Heggli et al. (2013), reporting that many Norwegian youth are indecisive about their future, argue that such indecisiveness is a reflection of an abundance of opportunities. The “open and positively charged attitude [of Norwegian youth] is, therefore, framed by a high level of structural security that makes it possible to cultivate uncertainty as a positive aspect of life, as potential and a possibility” (Heggli et al., 2013, p. 928), which differentiates Norwegian youth from their Turkish counterparts.

### **Concluding Remarks**

Our analysis reveals both similarities and differences concerning discourses that youth in Norway and Turkey draw upon in their future orientations. We found noteworthy similarities in how ideological and socio-economic changes related to neoliberalism in both societies influence youth subjectivities. Drawing upon an increasingly widespread discourse of materialism, youth in both societies sought well-being in material possessions. A dominant discourse can be recognized by the degree to which it limits critical voices. In our study, there were only a handful of youth who wrote in an anti-materialistic manner, while a substantial number in both national contexts emphasized how material possessions were important for their well-being. The materialism

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<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that the official unemployment rate in Turkey is contested. For instance, according to the Confederation of Progressive Trade Unions of Turkey Research Institute (DISK-AR; 2015), the official numbers are too low because the labour force participation rate is kept artificially low (51.1 % compared to Norway’s 71.6 %), excluding millions of unemployed people from the calculations. DISK-AR suggests that the unemployment rate would otherwise be 19.9 % for 2015, the actual number of unemployed being 6,496,000. Indeed, the rate of long-term unemployment has been between 20% and 30% for the last decade (OECD, 2015).

discourse found in both contexts corresponds with trends in other societies. For instance, Myers (2000) found that the number of American college students reporting that being well-off was essential for their well-being rose from 50% in 1971 to 75% in 1998 (Myers, 2000). However, Dittmar et al.'s (2014) recent meta-analysis of the research on materialism and psychological well-being demonstrates “a clear, consistent negative association between a broad array of types of personal well-being and people’s belief in and prioritization of materialistic pursuits in life” (p. 915). The more youth strive for extrinsic goals such as money, the more problems they may face and the less robust their well-being becomes (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). It is thus important that researchers, educators, and youth workers be aware of how globally dominant discourses such as the materialist discourse found in our study might influence youth subjectivities, so they can help youth reflect upon how those discourses affect their well-being.

Our findings also demonstrate the complex ways in which subjectivity develops, as socio-structural differences between Norway and Turkey seem to lead to key differences involving constructions of subjectivities across similar themes. Our analyses indicate that social change toward increasing neoliberal influence in each society, and thus increasing individualism, impacts youth differently in each context. A majority of youth from both national contexts wrote about the same issues, namely university education and employment. However, we found a predominantly self-realizing, sensation-seeking subject among the Norwegian youth, who were more preoccupied with growth of their inner lives than were their Turkish counterparts. For the Norwegian youth, who could rely on the welfare state to provide job-related security, concerns for education and employment seemed to focus more on self-fulfilment and enjoyment. In contrast, we found predominantly a worried subject among Turkish youth. One explanation for this difference involves the presence of the university exam in Turkey, which was a source of concern for Turkish youth. The widespread discourse depicting university education as the key to employment and future well-being seemed to magnify the importance of the university exam and hence increase the strain on the Turkish youth in our study. Adding to that worry is the much higher and stable rate of unemployment in Turkish society.

Analysis of the essays thus revealed differences in how youth from the two societies relate to insecurity about their personal futures. An uncertain future with a limited potential of stable employment leads to a worried self in Turkey, greatly affecting the well-being of the Turkish youth in our study. Meanwhile Norwegian youth seem to be at ease regarding their hopes and expectations of the future, presumably because of the security that the welfare state provides for its citizens. Despite increasing neoliberalization, Norway is still one of the strongest welfare states in the world, with universalistic policies and economic prosperity. The fact that unemployment is not a major issue in Norwegian society today, combined with the knowledge of social security policies (i.e., that one will be taken care of by the welfare state if in need), presumably lead youth to worry less about their future in terms of material safety. However, the security provided by the welfare state seemed to be taken for granted among our Norwegian participants, most of whom in their writing did not relate to the society or the collective that

enables their way of life. This taken-for-grantedness even leads some to find security “boring”. Arguably, dissatisfaction with a secure future can be felt if the youth draw upon neoliberal discourses and constitute themselves as neoliberal subjects, preoccupied more with self-realization, sensation-seeking, and their inner lives (Rose, 1999). There might however be disadvantaged groups in Norway who show similar concerns to our Turkish participants. For instance, Sletten (2011) reports a higher prevalence of pessimism amongst adolescents in poor families as they are more concerned about future unemployment and well-being. As our data show, youth who draw upon neoliberal discourses constitute themselves as isolated subjects governed primarily by self-interest. According to these subjects, who seem to take social security for granted, the present and the future, and education and jobs, ought to be about things one enjoys. Indeed, only a handful of Norwegians showed concern for the well-being of society and wrote that they would like to contribute to society, in contrast to a certain number of their Turkish peers. This finding lends support to Nafstad et al. (2007) who, in studying changes toward neoliberalism in media discourse, argued that individuals under neoliberal influence were more preoccupied with their “rights” and showed less concern for their “duties” as citizens in Norway.

Norwegian youth can be understood as representatives of post-modernity, having self-realization as a major goal with work and leisure fused together, isolated to a larger degree from collective ties. In contrast, youth in Turkey show a high level of uncertainty and concern regarding their future, as they expect to encounter socio-structural hindrances to obtaining a higher education and finding stable employment, both of which they see as central to a better life; all this leads to a worried self. Although discourses that pertain to collectivity are more widespread among Turkish than Norwegian youth, most Turkish youth also draw upon neoliberal discourses and see themselves as autonomous individuals capable of deciding their own fate, and thereby released from structural constraints. Yet no matter how hard they work and prepare, most Turkish youth will not succeed in the obligatory university entrance exam, given the high failure rate. They are thus, to a larger degree than their Norwegian peers, left to fail because of processes beyond their control. Neoliberal discourses that youth draw upon promote the concept of responsible and autonomous subjects who manage their lives on their own through self-improvement and self-discipline, either to attain self-realization or to secure their future and achieve well-being. As far as youth draw upon neoliberal discourses to make sense of their surroundings and constitute themselves as subjects, they will be inclined to seek individual solutions to systemic problems, and this may limit their ability to think critically about the system as a whole. As researchers, it is our duty to investigate the ways in which youth are influenced by systemic changes, and to contribute to increasing consciousness about how their well-being may be preserved. Scholars of neoliberalism are particularly preoccupied with investigating how far the vision of neoliberal subject-making is recognized and disseminated in society as well as exploring levels of resistance (e.g., Parker, 1999; Rose, 1999). In this study, we have attempted to show how widespread such subjectivity is among Norwegian and Turkish youth. We encourage scholars to investigate further the various contexts in which neoliberal discourses become salient

and influence subjectivities. Such knowledge is imperative to raise consciousness, especially among youth in contemporary societies, about the effects of neoliberalism.

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