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Career and cultural context: collective individualism, egalitarianism and work-centrality in the career thinking of Norwegian teenagers

Ingrid Bårdsdatter Bakke

Department of Social Work and Guidance, the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, Lillehammer, Norway

ABSTRACT

Career guidance in Norway has seen major developments over the past two decades. Secondary schools have integrated career education and guidance into an education system which socialises young people to develop citizenship and take part in society. In this article, I explore how Norwegian teenagers' career thinking is influenced by Norwegian cultural values which are strongly associated with the Nordic model of welfare: collective individualism, egalitarianism, and work-centrality. Teenagers' and counsellors' thoughts about career are explored through qualitative interviews and analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis shows that in conversations about career choices, teenagers and counsellors refer to these concepts, but in ways varying most notably along the urban-rural, academic-VET, and adult-teenager dimensions. Implications for career guidance are discussed.

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Norway; cultural context; career guidance; urban-rural

Introduction

Do you think you'll have a career?
Everybody has a career. (…) It's about doing things. (…) It's not necessarily about success and stuff.
What's a good life to you?
A good life for me? Well, it's having a job, house and a car, kids and a woman and all that. Then it's ok.
Just normal?
Mm. Yes. Guess you don't need anything else! (Bendik, 15 y)

Career choices are complex. They entail considering future identities, how education might fit with these identities and weighing up how future selves might value what is a good life. In this article, I will discuss how Norwegian 10th graders, aged 15 or 16, reflect on career choices in the light of key Norwegian cultural values, which I characterise as collective individualism, egalitarianism and work-centrality. The research question in this article is: *In which ways are Norwegian cultural values important for vocational and educational (career) choices, both for teenagers and counsellors providing career guidance and education*?

Career guidance as a field of practice, research and policymaking in Norway has undergone major developments over the last two decades, inspired by international developments in the career field. Career guidance has been debated as a way to support career actors in a time of an increasingly precarious employment structure, and has been connected to a policy view that it would benefit both individuals and at the same time contribute to public goals such as social justice, prosperity and sustainable employment (Bergmo-Prvulovic, 2018). The development of career learning and education

CONTACT Ingrid Bårdsdatter Bakke Ingrid.bardsdatter.bakke@inn.no

perspectives have been seen as particularly important, as the rationale is that career actors benefit from developing career management competence in a lifelong learning perspective (Sultana, 2012), and career learning can be argued to be a cornerstone in the developing career guidance field in Norway (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2002; 2014; *Norges Offentlige Utredninger* [NOU] 2016: 7; Haug et al., 2019).

But international theoretical discussion of concepts may differ from how theories and concepts work in context and in practice (Bakke & Hooley, 2020). Work in the career field to transfer and adapt theoretical frameworks or process-tools across contexts has shown that contexts frame peoples' lives differently, and that people think differently about life, learning and work. For example, the transfer of the Blueprint framework to Lithuania proved to be difficult, as basic assumptions about society and the individual's place in it, affected career considerations in surprising ways (Hooley et al., 2013). Hence, career theory needs to be context sensitive and attending to issues of culture may aid theorists, policymakers and practitioners in their work.

Definitions of culture are debated, as both inter- and intradisciplinary agreement about which elements form the basis of it is hard to reach, whether it is to be found in the social, the individual or both (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018). Common elements are often that the behaviours, ideals and values that define a culture are learned over time as members inculcate and perform them until they are integrated, automated and drop out of awareness (Hall, 1976; Sultana, 2017). More specifically, culture can be defined as "a multidimensional phenomenon that encompasses processes, products and results of human activity, material and spiritual, transmitted from generation to generation in a non-biological way" (Mironenko & Sorokin, 2018, p. 338). An important assumption about culture is that while some culturally specific behaviours will be salient and readily observable and thus will be possible to verbalise and discuss in public discourse, some cultural assumptions will also be tacit, implicit, and un-verbalised.

Culture describe shared ideas about how the world is and how it functions, in addition to how it *ideally* should function. These ideas and values affect the content of career considerations, and as such cultural context and identity shape career decisions (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997; Law, 1981; Leong et al., 2010). Law (1981) argued that individuals live their lives and make their career decisions at a meso-level, between the individual and the societal, and the "notoriously difficult rag-bag-concept" of community (p. 145) affect people's career decisions. Others have attempted to pin down the characteristics of culture to understand how they affect and predict behaviour (e.g. Hofstede, 2001), offering a tool to understand career choices and behaviour. Leong et al. (2010) hold that even though culture is a complex phenomenon where clear demarcations do not exist, the individualism-collectivism dimension is particularly interesting, as choices reflect whether the individual or the group is the "smallest unit of survival" (p.466), and ultimately whether choices first and foremost benefit the individual or the group the individual belongs to. Swanson and Fouad (2015) have stated that culturally responsive guidance is good for all clients, meaning that guidance needs to be sensitive about which cultural factors are most salient and important to the client.

Educating citizens and supporting career decisions

It is often argued that as a Nordic welfare state, Norway is characterised by equality and egalitarianism – the belief that by who, where or when one is born should not affect life chances (Alestalo et al., 2009; Kvist et al., 2012). Coupled with a universal welfare system, this shapes policy in employment, education and welfare. While legislation ensures democracy and equal rights for all citizens, education and active labour market policies are designated to provide equal opportunities for all citizens to function and participate in society. This often means that different needs are supported differently and that higher needs elicit more support, but the underlying rationale is that there ultimately should not be differences between people and that no one is more valued.

Egalitarianism is coupled with shared responsibility for maintaining the system that ensures individual opportunities for all. As such, the notion of *inter*dependence, and of being a part of a social contract, is equally important. The social contract assumes that the state has a responsibility to provide (and regulate) a safety net for all citizens, but also that citizens are active, engaged and participating in society (Sultana, 2011). Hernes and Hippe (2007) have coined the term collective individualism to explain the transactional relationship that exists between the individual and the state in the Norwegian political economy. So while research on culture states that Norwegians are individualists, the political settlement enshrined in the welfare state suggests a collective orientation (Bakke, 2020).

Another central value in Norwegian culture is work-centrality (Bakke, 2020), echoing the central role of the work in Norwegian social democratic policies (Øverbye & Stjernø, 2012). Work is central as it allows people to fulfil their needs for income and meaningful activity, and offers them an arena for developing and realising their potential. Being able to work, also means being able to participate in society and make a valued contribution. Work is heavily incentivised and expected, and is what the individual brings to the table in the social contract (Watts, 2016). The principles of egalitarianism and equity, mean that no form of work should be regarded as better or offer more privilege.

The cultural values of collective individualism, egalitarianism and work-centrality shape and condition how Norwegians think about their careers. If career is to be understood as a journey through life, learning and work (Law, 2009), collective individualism is the understanding that throughout their journey people are in a continuous transactional relationship with a higher-order system providing a package of possibilities and security for the individual in exchange for some limitations and obligations, equal to all. Work-centrality is a shared belief regarding the degree of importance that work plays in people's lives, that it is good in and of itself both for the individual and society. The egalitarian aspects of Norwegian culture mitigate against the idea of measuring individuals against each other, and the welfare state and relative income equality mean that the personal benefit, in terms of both financial reward and social status, from career success is less marked than in other countries. Together, these values give content to a career concept where working is foregrounded, not as the individualistic pursuit of success, but rather as a contribution to the collective and fulfilment of the responsibilities of the social contract. While these are values and ideas that inform career at a conceptual level it is of interest to see if and how these concepts appear in discussions about career choices of young people in a relatively wealthy country less dependent on the turmoils of global economy than many other European countries.

The Norwegian education system

Education, including career guidance and education in schools, is underpinned by the Norwegian concept of *danning* (Asplin & Lingås, 2016) which can be imperfectly translated as "personal formation and development" or "bildung". The Norwegian word *utdanning* can be translated as "education" but the concept of danning holds that education means more than acquiring scholarly competence. Danning is a personal development parallel to education, a process of formation where scholarly education is important, but encompassed within the broader development of an individual into a full member of society. Acquiring competence is about the development of individual skills and knowledge, but it is also about using them responsibly and being able to manage the tensions between individual possibilities and social responsibilities (Education Act, 2007).

In the Nordic countries, Antikainen (2006) argues that there is a specifically Nordic model of education, founded on specific local values and practices found in the Nordic, social democratic welfare model. The Nordic education model is designed to educate and shape the future citizens of the Nordic states. According to Antikainen (2006), the shaping of future citizens implies conveying through educational content and methods the ideological heritage that will be important for future citizens to adhere to and believe in to sustain the societal model. Key to socialisation is, therefore, inculcating views on equality in terms of social relationships, individualism/self-dependence in the light of social responsibilities, and the importance of work as an arena for acting as a citizen.

The Norwegian education system offers a pathway into employment consisting of several turning points for the students. The first turning point prompting students to make a career choice is the transition between lower and upper secondary school, after 10 years of compulsory school, when they are 15 or 16 years old. Upper secondary is optional. At this point, they need to choose whether to pursue academic education or a vocational education and training (VET) track that will finish at 18 or 19. Teachers with additional roles as guidance counsellors are tasked with supporting the students' transition by providing career guidance and career learning. These teacher will often, though not always, have additional competence in career guidance. Upper and specialised secondary education is often centralised due to variation in population density (Mathiesen et al., 2014).

While the academic track offers conventional theory based education, the VET track is an apprentice-based system combining training in school and with employers. The majority of Norwegian teenagers, 98%, transtition to upper secondary, where they are equally distributed between academic and VET, but where dropout from VET programmes are significantly higher at approximately 40% than from academic programmes at approximately 15% (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2020). The different trajectories of academic study and VET are the focus of debate in Norway with particular reference to the requirements of the labour market where there is a shortage of those qualified in the practical vocations associated with VET (Kunnskapsdepartementet, 2017). The policy focus on the need for VET has resulted in a range of different measures to adjust this balance, for example, campaigns launched to promote VET, where also career guidance has a role (NOU, 2016: 7).

School counsellors are increasingly focusing on supporting career learning. School counsellors are becoming more professionalised, increasing their competence to address careers issues and using career management skills as a framework for their practice (Haug, 2018). Norwegian research on teenagers' career choices have emphasised structural issues, for example, the role of the practitioner or the guidance system (Mathiesen et al., 2014), or sociological issues as socioeconomic or geographic factors affecting career choice (Holen & Hovdenak, 2014). Also, the content of career guidance and how it relates to danning needs more investigation (Lødding et al., 2008; Asplin & Lingås, 2016), in addition to research including the voice of users – counsellors and teenagers alike – in career guidance (Plant & Haug, 2018).

Norwegian geography and career decision-making

Another factor in young Norwegians career and educational decision making is geography. Norway is a country with a large territory and relatively small population. Its population density varies from 4.3 inhabitants/ km^2 in the North to 22.8 inhabitants/ km^2 in the South (Kartverket, 2019; SSB, 2019). This makes geography and infrastructure a concern for many families, as it is necessary for many students from rural and scarcely populated areas to commute or move out of their homes to attend upper secondary. The opportunity structures, both in terms of education and employment, are very different for rural and urban Norwegians (Lysgård, 2013). This means that the consideration of whether to pursue a future within or outside your home community is a key part of educational choice (Bakke, 2018). However, the differences in the choices made by urban or rural youth have not been well discussed in research on educational and vocational choices either internationally (Alexander & Hooley, 2018) or in Norway (Holen & Hovdenak, 2014). Research on the urban-rural dimension in Norwegian society often focuses on migration patterns and the conditions causing people to either move or to stay in rural areas (Eikeland & Lie, 1999; Løken et al., 2013; Villa, 2000). A similar mechanism, as discussed by Corbett (2007), is that choosing education means following given trajectories out of the community, where further education and specialisation creates more distance between the career actors and their home community where practical skills traditionally have been valued.

The career choices of young people matter, as they link participation in education to their eventual role as workers and citizens who can take part in the social contract. Thus, guiding and supporting young people to build a career is essentially a part of socialising them into being full Norwegian citizens. In this article I ask *in which ways are Norwegian cultural values important for vocational and educational (career) choices, both for teenagers and counsellors providing career guidance and* *education*? From the metatheoretical perspective of phenomenology (Giorgi, 2009; Melançon, 2014), the question was formulated to capture how making career choices are lived and perceived by young people. The focus was on teenagers as the transition into upper secondary presents the first career choice in their educational trajectories, eliciting ideas about career as a concept and how it relates to life, learning and work.

Methods

To capture geographic and demographic variety, I recruited a purposive convenience sample (Johnson & Christensen, 2014) along the urban-rural dimension and interviewed a total of 43 teenagers in 10th grade of compulsory school. See overview of the sample in Table 1, which I planned in the design phase, except for the counsellor interviews. The locations varied from approximately 1000 inhabitants (small) to approximately 200,000 inhabitants (large), including both inland and coastal communities as the inland/coastal divide is another important division in Norwegian society. I was interested in rich descriptions of experience rather than generalisable results (Creswell, 2013). After having started data collection, I realised that the "bird's eye-view" offered by school counsellors would provide interesting information, and also interviewed the six counsellors in the schools visited in the sample. They all had teacher and counsellor roles in combination, however their formal competencies in career guidance are not known. The total sample has a distribution of female and male of 22 and 21 respectively for the teenagers, and 5 and 1 for the counsellors.

I completed group interviews at five of these six schools, with a minimum of seven and a maximum of nine students in the groups, sometimes mixed between classes and sometimes the group was with the entire 10th grade at the school. I visited the schools both during autumn and spring term, both before and after the deadline for applying to upper secondary. I subsequently did individual interviews with two students from the groups and then the counsellors after that. I did individual interviews only at one school because my contact at the school had only prepared two students for interview, and I conducted two of the counsellor interviews by phone after having visited the schools. All interviews had a duration of 45–90 min.

The study was approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (NSD), the chosen partner of the Norwegian Data Inspectorate to implement the statutory data privacy requirements in the research community. I contacted schools' management directly by email, presenting the study and asking for permission to visit and do interviews. I was welcomed at all schools and visited 6 of 7 schools initially contacted, the last school not being able to let me visit as we had planned. As I was not collecting sensitive data, like biodata or information on race/ethnicity, health issues, sexual orientation, political or religious views, NSD regulations state that interviewees at the age of 15 can give independent consent. All participants were over the age of 15. However, to make sure that my visit was known and the purpose understood by both teenagers and parents, consent forms were collected from parents in advance, administered by school staff. As consent forms were for primarily informational purposes, and consent was discussed initially in the interviews, they were later destroyed for anonymity purposes. In addition, identifying information was removed and substituted with pseudonyms in the transcription process, completely anonymising the dataset. In this article, all names are pseudonyms and potentially identifying elements like names of individuals, organisations and places etc. are removed.

In the interviews, the aim was to cover a wide range of issues concerning career choices and to concentrate on the issues that elicited discussion in the groups. I took an organic approach to the subject of career choices. I would bring up the same topics in the individual interviews to further explore issues considered important at these locations. While this article covers only a portion of the topics discussed in the interviews, more data is discussed in Bakke (2018; Bakke & Hooley, 2020). Transcripts were analysed in NVivo using the Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) approach (Braun et al., 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2006). RTA was particularly suitable for this study because it is an open, flexible approach that suggests synthesising and extracting themes from the material in

Table 1. Overview of the sample.

	Criteria for inclusion									
Location	No US	US	US + HE	Variation of industries, varied employment possibilities	Little variation of industries, less varied employment possibilities	Urban	Rural	Group interview (No. of students in group)	Individual interviews (No. of individuals interviewed)	Counsellor interview
Medium, Fjord		x		x			x	x (8)	x (2)	x
Large, Fjord, 2			x	x		x		x (8)	x (2)	x
Large, Fjord, 1			x	x		x			x (2)	x
Small, North-Norway, Inland	x				x		x	x (7)	x (2)	x
Small, Mid-Norway, Coast	x			x			x	x (9)	x (3)	x
Medium, East-Norway Inland,		x			x		x	x (8)	x (2)	x

Note. US: Upper secondary, HE: Higher education.

six steps: familiarising yourself with the material, generating codes, constructing themes, revising groups/themes, defining themes, and producing the report. As the RTA framework emphasises the importance of the researcher as decision-maker and interpreter in the process (Braun et al., 2018), after familiarising (Stage 1) I decided to code the material by creating shorter statements akin to meaning units (Giorgi, 2009) (Stage 2), thus making interpretations of my subjects' accounts to make the meaning clear.

Results

For the analysis in this article, I created nodes for *collective individualism*, *egalitarianism* and *work-centrality*. Approaching the material deductively, I reviewed the meaning units looking for those that from my interpretation addressed these three concepts both explicitly and implicitly, and coded them on to these three central nodes (Stage 3). From this process I had produced three groups of meaning units and going back to the raw data (transcripts) I reviewed and synthesised the separate groups (Stages 4, 5), presented in the interpretation as follows (Stage 6).

In the review and synthesis stage, the content of the nodes *collective individualism*, *egalitarianism* and *work-centrality* showed different patterns of meaning. The subthemes *urban/rural dimension*, *teenager/counsellor dimension*, *social significance of VET*, *social pressure*, *gender* and *status differences* appeared, as shown in Table 2. The subthemes are described as they appear in sections *Collective individualism*, *Egalitarianism* and *Work-centrality*.

Individualism and collectivism

The **teenagers** see themselves as being in the middle of a process of growing up where their career education and learning in lower secondary has centred around realising, finding, understanding and sorting personal interests and features into a set of alternatives for choosing upper secondary education. The idea that choices should be based on individuality, personal interests and abilities resonates with all groups: *"the choice is about me and my future"* (Åshild). Some of the teenagers describe their interests as something that grows and develops over time with reflection and experience, and describe the process as private and not involving counsel or advice. Though the most important determinants of career choices are individual and they believe that the choice is their own, they realise that there are external influences on their choices: *"It's up to you in the end, but there are many expectations"* (Solveig). There is something external exerting influence on their choices.

For the **rural** teenagers in the sample, the external influence is tangible and clearly understood: *"But I've understood that returning to this community is really really really important, (laugh) or else this place will become overgrown"* (Sindre). For the teenagers from rural areas where upper secondary provision is non-existent and they have to move out of the community to attend school, an important component in their process is the question of returning to the community when their education is finished. The need for young people to return to their community is a question openly discussed in the community and in career education: *"we had a career day where people working in the municipality presented their vocation, and they all finished by saying: come home, we need you"* (Veronika). In

Table 2. The appearance of subthemes in the nodes for collective individualism, egalitarianism and work-centrality.

Subthemes	Collective individualism	Egalitarianism	Work centrality
Urban/rural	X	X	X
Teenager/counsellor	X	X	X
Social significance of VET	X	X	X
Social pressure	X	X	
Gender		X	
Status differences		X	

other words, they experience that their home communities are collectively attempting to influence their mobility decisions. For the rural **counsellors**, they feel a social responsibility for making sure that the teenagers know that they are needed back in the community. By rallying local stakeholders in business and the municipality to reinforce this message, the school counsellors want to make sure that the teenagers conceive of their home communities as *"quite happy with them"* and that they are *"good places to be in for them"* (Counsellor L). In other words, they actively evoke and transmit collective values, and see themselves as agents for a community culture of caring, where *"we are a kind of silently agreeing about doing this"* (Counsellor N).

While Veronika further states that what people say *"concerns me, but doesn't influence me"* the geography and opportunity structure exert an influence on the career thinking of the students who have an interest in returning. While Bendik wants to return home to work in the local aquaculture and fishfarming industry because he has been interested in it for as long as he can remember, Ingeborg wants to return home to take over the family farm because it is up to her keep it in the family as her *"big brother, he's not considering running any farm, so I guess we'll have to sell, and I don't want that"*. Combining it with being a teacher gives the opportunity to stay attached to something she cares deeply about, while at the same time developing her academic interests. She knows that there will be a job for her there in the future, as teachers are needed in primary and lower secondary education in the community. Ingeborg and Bendik want to return to their home communities because that is where they see opportunities and possibilities. Being able to contribute to the future of the community is a positive side-effect, as settling in the community is to *"contribute to growth and stuff"* (Bendik).

The **urban** teenagers also value individualism and self-dependence and express respect and admiration for those making career choices that truly reflect their interests and abilities, because these people *"know what they want and are really dedicated in a way"* (Solveig). Teenagers choosing **VET** because they are following their interests and abilities rather than following the mainstream are highly regarded. However, choosing VET as an easy way out is not. *"Some choose VET because they're not bothered or are bad at school"* because *"you should try your best, take it seriously and try to make a difference, […] if it's just that you're not bothered, it doesn't help, it is just lame"* (Per). The idea that choosing VET is against the mainstream is related to **social pressure**, where the teenagers perceive other people to think that vocational education is an unattractive alternative. Parents and peers might "*try to talk you out of [choosing VET] because you don't … get that far or … that you have a lot more potential in a way, even if the education is really good"* (Hege and Mirja). For Hege and Mirja, parents' feedback is important because *"you look up to your parents in a way, you want to do the things they do"* and to *"make them proud"*. Going for academic education is "mainstream". A high proportion of the teenagers go for academic education, and they are concerned about getting into the right schools, that suits them or allow them to keep in contact with friends transitioned to the same school: *"yes, it matters where they are going, you feel safer"* (Solveig).

In sum, while both urban and rural teenagers and counsellors value individualism, the teenagers in the rural sample are "true" individualists that choose independently and seek out opportunity, while the urban teens are more "other" oriented, seeking out confirmation from valued others. Rural counsellors are advocates for the community; urban counsellors are advocates for the teenagers.

Egalitarianism

The **teenagers** in the sample recognise that there are differences between the alternatives they are offered and that these reflect a difference between people. For all groups, an important and salient factor is **gender**. This is thoroughly discussed in career learning sessions and education in general, and the students all state that gender is not something they consider important in their career choice. Rather, the focus on gender seems arbitrary, because *"everybody thinks that people think* *about it, so they think everyone thinks about it"*, while *"nobody here has thought of this, but it's just that boys like electro and mechanics and stuff, while girls like, well health, design, that kind of thing"* (Tora and Marianne). So, they see that people make gender-stereotyped choices, but they perceive these as natural rather than as a deviation from the value of egalitarianism: *"boys like physical work better than these tiny girls, girls like using their hands"* (Mirja).

The teenagers with **rural** backgrounds are often raised in more traditional environments where tasks have been divided in gender-typical ways, where sons raised on farms learn to build and repair equipment and *"don't do any women stuff"* (Sindre) while girls learn traditional crafts from their mothers and grandmothers, *"there are like no sons involved"* (Veronika). So while the teenagers sum up that in these communities it is *"probably so that people get the jobs that are expected of their gender"* (Ingeborg), this does not in the teenagers' opinion necessarily mean that there are **status** differences between them. But wanting something else than what is offered locally, like achieving academically or excelling in a trade, means moving out of the communities, as it is in the employment market outside in the bigger places, that things happen and possibilities and opportunities to achieve something and stand out are to be found. Moving out and up, whether in education or work, implies freedom and conceptually connects to individualism, because *"if I do well, I am free, and can choose what I want"* (Synne). But they need more alternatives to choose from, like the opportunity to *"try to get into an expensive salon to get further up"* and experience a diversity rather than feeling bored and *"work alone every day, then you'll get lonely and that might affect your health"* (Louise). In other words, for these girls, geographical mobility also means social mobility and more individual freedom. Arguably, this suggests that even though they do not perceive themselves as oppressed, there is something restricting them.

The **urban** teenagers also see gender differences and discuss gender stereotypes, and relate them to choosing upper secondary, like for instance Endre stating that there are *"more men going for VET than women"*. In their discussion of upper secondary choices, they are also concerned about the differing **social status** of the different alternatives. Choosing academic studies gives them the opportunity to *"go to university, [so] that I can like build me up and become better"* (Åshild). **VET** represents a less attractive alternative based on *"rumours about VET being for those that are not that smart, that academic studies are for the smart and intelligent ones and VET is for those with low grades"* (Endre). In other words, choosing academic or vocational education differentiates the teenagers socially, and it is important to be in the right group: *"[VET] studies are for those who don't have the same grades as me"* (Mirja). In addition to what may be "objective" measures of giving higher or lower status, like different requirements to get into programmes, different voices in their surroundings exert **social pressure** and give further input as to what are the better choices. For example, making recommendations with the teenagers' best interest at heart gives clear directions about what *not* to choose as *"I am constantly told that I have the capacity to do academic studies, but I don't know"* (Siri). These messages come from parents concerned with making sure that their children have the best possibilities for the future, and for the teenagers, this often translates into that it *"is really about making money, the point is doing good and making money"* (Endre).

For **counsellors**, making sure that teenagers make truly authentic choices are important, and that often means being a counterforce to contextual influence, especially when it is prejudice about the status of VET and gender stereotypes. Sometimes they target the power mechanisms in peer groups, where *"queens are on the fence and [say] like no I don't know what to choose and then nobody knows what to choose"* (Counsellor T). Other times it means siding with teenagers in negotiations about career choices with parents who have *"put their foot down"* (Counsellor R). Especially for **urban** counsellors it often means advocating for vocational education as the counsellors observe that for many students vocational education can be more motivating and stimulating than academic education.

In sum, both urban and rural teenagers see that there are differences between people. Gender and social status are important denominators in their social landscapes. Counsellors target stereotypes and advocate egalitarian values.

Work-centrality

The urban **counsellors**, understand "*social responsibility*" as being about the need to educate their students about the general need for workers in society, especially emphasising the need for more students to do VET. These messages must be given delicately*:*

> *My daughter, the eighth-grader came home from school one day, exacerbated. We had a visit from that counsellor again, saying that we cannot become what we want in life! What?! We must become something that is good for Norway, something Norway needs! I could maybe say something like that myself (laugh).* (Counsellor B).

For the **teenagers**, the future as worker is important and positive: *"So I'm thinking a lot about work, yes, and how it's going to be in the future"* (Synne), and *"[thinking of] work you are happy with, that you know you'll enjoy"* (Åshild). Considering future possibilities for work and employment is an important component of career choice processes. Finding a way into work they will enjoy is often of a higher priority than securing the highest possible income, although income represents opportunity and security. If prioritising high earnings compromise well-being, it is clear that *"you should not spend your life doing [that job]"* as *"dreading going to work every day for the rest of your life"* is a depressing prospect. They recognise that as future parents they will influence how their children perceive work and allowing such situations to depress them make them negative role models. They would not want future generations to learn that *"you don't have to like your job as long as you make good money"*, *"like just go ahead and do academic study and get rich"*, because *"those are not the right values"* (Mirja, Solveig and Hege).

The **urban-rural** distinction in the sample defines a part of the pattern of the differences between the teenagers' conceptions of work. In addition, their different aspirations regarding **VET** or academic education define another. However, patterns are connected because the rural teenagers have more experience with practical work. For these teenagers, the notion of work is connected to the jobs that they see the adults do in agriculture, aquaculture, crafts and local industries and the part-time jobs they have themselves. *"Office jobs"* and *"office people"* are mysterious concepts, as what the job actually entails and the outcomes they produce are hard to spot, they just seem boring and uninteresting to a 10th grader. As Synne says, reflecting on her job training at a local firm, *"if I do academic study I can become what I want, but over there it would be mostly an office job"*. They often see in their context that it is the practical jobs requiring skills and practical knowledge that are needed. Professional jobs requiring education are less common, the employment market being one where practical skills are wanted and opportunities are to be found for those not wanting to continue education. Not having diverse skills is more of a risk factor: *"I actually think it is easier to survive with diverse skills here, if you come back with only one education and you can't do anything else, I think you've got an insecure job"* (Sindre). Those wanting education are less likely to find opportunities for work in the community, and as specialisation through education is seen as a *"city phenomenon"* (Sindre), career choices are again linked to geographical mobility. However, perhaps paradoxically the rural teenagers stress the need for education, as *"everybody says that it's important"* (Sindre), as a ticket to permanent employment. The **rural counsellors** see that in their communities, teenagers can find jobs and have careers in un-skilled work, but they emphasise the need for education still: *"[to be a farmer] you need to know a little bit about everything, and not least economy. I've told them, those who succeed in agriculture today, it's the ones that know about economics"* (Counsellor N).

Some teenagers going for **VET,** whether urban or rural, have had an interest for the vocation for a long time, sometimes since childhood. Sometimes career education has provided experiences strengthening these interests, for example, after having *"wanted to [become a chef since childhood] but not believing I would do it"* (Torild), or like Bendik, saying that *"I've always enjoyed exploring the seashore"* and having a grandfather telling stories about the sea, his choice of a vocational programme to work in aquaculture is firm. Their concept of work is therefore more closely connected to practice, future plans are connected to something concrete and tangible. The urban teenagers going for academic education have more ideas about what academic jobs are, as they "*live with their [parents'] lifestyle, [and see] if they work a lot, on the computer, if they talk about their job*" (Per), concluding that if you hear about "*academic stuff all the time*" it is more familiar and easier to choose. However, he also observes that sometimes his peers choosing VET seem more relaxed, *"it's cool with those choosing VET and don't care that much, they just start early and know that this is what they'll do"* (Per), whereas he himself still has many choices to make in the education system before he can start working professionally.

In sum, for the teenagers, their future as workers is important. Their view of a future as worker is positive, and they expect it to be personally rewarding. Key to getting a job is education. Mediating these messages is a social responsibility for the counsellors.

Discussion

In this article, it is assumed that Norwegian culture has a certain set of characteristics related to the country's political economy, and that this and the urban-rural dimension is important in shaping how people live their lives and make career choices and that this has a particular significance for guidance.

The cultural notion of work-centrality is found in the teenagers' reflections about career choices when they are talking about their future as workers. They want to make good choices to position themselves in the employment market to be able to find security there as well as work they will enjoy, as Åshild states. The idea of work being enjoyable is a basis for an adult life where personal development and work are linked (Bakke, 2020). For some, work seems closer and for others it is more distant, and arguably this is related to the different levels of clarity that the young people have about where their career choices will take them, or at least understandings of what the different possibilities entail. Having parents working in academic/professional jobs and being used to see them work on a computer and hear their discussions over the dinner table, gives another understanding of what this implies than the mysterious concept of *"office job"*. This makes visible the socialisation processes of growing up (Hall, 1976), where familiarity with either practical or academic work direct into a vocation or further along an educational trajectory. Nevertheless, all the teenages assumed they would become someone who works. It is not explained or discussed, it is a given. Kvist et al. (2012) hold that Nordic populations are passionate about work, and for the teenagers the prospect of work is motivating, echoing a cultural emphasis on work as key to participation in society (Øverbye & Stjernø, 2012).

From an egalitarian perspective, the young people report that no vocation or educational trajectory is inherently better, and they believe that all individuals should be able to realise their potential in the way they choose. As such, this relates to the grand narrative about the egalitarianism of Norwegian society (Hansen et al., 2014). It is a priority for the teenagers to choose the best options for the future, opportunities that are available for all. However, these individual decisions are informed, particularly in rural communities, by the existence of traditional social structures where occupational gender segregation seems natural. While Norway as a society is high on gender egalitarianism (Kitterød & Halrynjo, 2019), issues on gender segregation are highly relevant for career guidance in schools because teenagers' disinterest in gender issues is a lasting problem (Buland et al., 2011). However, while gender surfaced in interviews with the urban teenagers as well, it is also connected to navigating a landscape where choices affect their social standing, where making certain career choices risk their social status, contrary to cultural beliefs about all being equal. Boys, VET and underachievement are connected, and they are aware of how their choice of education positions them differently in the social context, echoing sociological research which shows that the bourdieusian structures of capital and power stratify and divide Norwegian society as well (Hansen et al., 2014). While the teenagers are educated about egalitarianism and understand the value of it, for example, stating that gender differences are not problematic, they see that the world is not really made up that way. Some personal and contextual features are connected to differences between people and the chances they are given (Hjellbrekke & Korsnes, 2014), and a worrying aspect is the link to ability as VET is connected to lower academic ability as seen in lower grades. Endre states that rumour says that *"academic studies are for the smart and intelligent ones"*. Career choices are made in light of beliefs about society and observations as to how it actually functions, between explicit cultural values, and assumed and tacit knowledge. Seeing this as natural and unproblematic resolves the resulting (perhaps) cognitive dissonance.

Throughout the sample, the teenagers agree that individualism, independence and self-determination are values that work as a compass for career choices. In this respect, they respond to cultural values about autonomy and individuality, and echo Norwegian writers on career choice representing individualism and self-dependence (Birkemo, 2007; Holen & Hovdenak, 2014). The rural teenagers can define individuality against outspoken coaxing towards collective values. In this context the contrast is clear between pursuing your own career and responding to the needs of the community, as Corbett (2007) also has argued. However, the demands from the context they live in give different opportunities for enacting it, showing the complex interplay between the forces of cultural values interacting in different ways, creating different fields of possibilities and horizons for action (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997). For example, Sindre states that the connection between education and job security is different in his home community from that in the city, where focusing on education for employability is a *"city phenomenon"*.

For the urban teenagers, defining individuality involves negotiating personal interests and abilities privately valued, and abilities and aspirations publicly discussed. Ideas about certain competencies and abilities being connected to certain choices, advantage and social status, makes it safer to define individuality in line with valued others. Personal ties to community affect career choices (Law, 1981), and research on social reproduction in Norway confirms that peers and family are important to individuals' choices (Hansen et al., 2014). Perhaps one effect of social pressure is that the urban teenagers in this sample more easily adopt the opinions of the people they value and are drawn towards the community of others, arguably making their career decisions look more collective than individualist. This is an interesting paradox, as urbanity is often associated with individualist mindsets and actions, and rurality is often associated with collective thinking (Farstad, 2016). In other words, the relationship between individual aspirations and contextual factors such as rurality is complex, and touches on more issues than opportunity structures as in local or nearby opportunities for education and work. Such complexity is recognisable in contexts profoundly different from that of Norway, for example in India, where issues of rurality, socioeconomic factors, gender and migration intersects in young peoples' career choices and warrants more nuanced career guidance and counselling that recognise the uniqueness of the context it operates in (Joshi & Bakshi, 2019).

Relating to the concept of collective individualism (Hernes & Hippe, 2007), the teenagers in this study do not explicitly understand themselves to be in a transactional relationship with the collective or part of a social contract. The idea of individuals and community being connected is rather an adult understanding of the world which the counsellors advance as something that they should take into account. This is strongly related to the idea of danning (Asplin & Lingås, 2016) which fosters the idea that individuals should develop within the context of society and their responsibility to it.

Limitations and methodological considerations

There are a number of limitations and methodological considerations affecting the findings of this study in various ways. Purposive sampling is a form of nonprobability sampling, and is associated with qualitative research as it is often employed to enhance understandings of selected groups through cases rich in information (Devers & Frankel, 2000), and the inclusion of the counsellors was done to enhance the richness of the data. However, this was not planned for and it is a limitation in as much as planned interviews with counsellors at the outset would have made it possible to take better advantage of their perspective in data collection.

Purposive sampling is also known as judgmental, selective and subjective sampling. As such it is prone to bias from the researcher, and generalisation is also limited to the sample (Sharma, 2017). In addition, the deductive approach to the analysis made it possible to focus the investigation as the material is rich, but this approach also limits the scope and may leave out interesting aspects and findings. However, the data have been explored using an inductive approach in other works (Bakke, 2018; Bakke & Hooley, 2020) and as such in this article I describe aspects of a larger picture. Finally, the data was processed by one single researcher, and the opportunity to validate the results via inter-rater reliability was missed (Johnson & Christensen, 2014). In other words, these results need to be read with caution as they represent one researcher's understanding.

Conclusion

One important point to be made is that there is a difference between the lived experience of young people and the ideology of cultural values, especially in terms of egalitarianism. While the political economy and social institutions such as the education system are set up to minimise the effect of socioeconomic difference on the chances in life, the teenagers' reflections about career show that they are in fact navigating such differences. Education in general, and career guidance and education in particular, could benefit from considering how practice reinforces certain ideologies like egalitarianism and whether this is a legitimate aspect of career learning. How career guidance and learning can approach this issue, needs to be a continued focus for research.

A central finding in this study is that there are systematic variations in career choices related to different urban and rural contexts. Particularly, career choices intersect with gender issues, class issues and consideration of VET, all of which are considered especially important in career learning. For both urban and rural youth, VET and gender are related, but for the rural teenagers in the sample, initiatives to promote VET seem less relevant, as practical vocations and skills are already highly valued in rural contexts and for them, the question is rather *where* they can use their skills. An emphasis on practical skills and gender segregation limits the space of opportunity for young people, and for rural counsellors, it is important to continue to emphasise the need for competence in rural areas and as such create a social space with room for more variety. For urban youth, issues about VET intersect with social status illustrating that to promote VET, counsellors must target context and prejudice more explicitly and raise awareness and endorsement of VET. More research focusing on the tacit assumptions about the lower status of VET among parents and peers and how this affect teenagers' career choices is needed, as counsellors need tools and new perspectives to address these challenges.

Ultimately, these teenagers have integrated the notion that work is a positive future project where experiencing personal growth and development is key. Progression is not linked to excellence, but to realising individual potential, as in settling into a future where being allowed to pursue interests and feeling secure are important. As such, they exemplify the process of danning and show that this can be a positive connection for career guidance and learning. Seeing work as something genuinely positive in life irrespective of success and achievement but instrumental in putting them in a position to do the things they like, is a positive outlook on their future, and gives an idea of what work-life balance can look like.

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Notes on contributor

Ingrid Bårdsdatter Bakke, MSc in Psychology, is a PhD-fellow and Assistant Professor working at the Inland Norway University of Applied Sciences, in Lillehammer, Norway. Her research focuses on Norwegian and Nordic work culture and career guidance. As Assistant Professor, she lectures and supervises students on the MSc in Career Guidance, and Further Education Counsellor Students on career theory, career guidance, national culture and organisational theory.

ORCID

Ingrid Bårdsdatter Bakke http://orcid.org/0000-0001-5823-2160

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