Salutogenesis and the Sense of Coherence in Young Adults Not in Education, Employment, or Training (NEET)

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Introduction

Young adults not in education, employment, or training (NEETs) emerged as an interest of public debate in the 1990s (Husmanns et al., 1990). The debate was taken up by the fields of health promotion and public health in the mid-2000s. NEETs, also referred to as “disconnected youth”, have since been a priority topic in policymaking (Levitan, 2005) and research (Patel et al., 2007).

In the years following the banking crisis of 2008, unemployment levels rose, and youth unemployment rates were substantially higher than those for adults (Robertson, 2018). The numbers of young people not in education, employment, or training remained stable even in those countries where employment rates increased remarkably (Carcillo et al., 2015; Wilson & Bivand, 2014). However, a decline in the numbers of NEETs due to economic improvement had been expected in the following years (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009). Additionally, the share of well-educated youth among NEETs was rising (Carcillo et al., 2015) as well as the proportion of rural NEETs among young adults (Simões, 2018). In accordance, data from Eurostat (2020) reveal disparities within countries and show higher rates of NEETs in rural than in urban contexts, especially in southern and eastern European countries (Eurostat, 2020). These developments indicate that disconnectedness in young adults is not exclusively due to an economic crisis in general.

The global estimates of numbers of NEETs vary widely since indicators of NEET and age groups included in the group

of “young adults” differ markedly among available studies and between disciplines (Fernandes & Gabe, 2009) and countries (Elder, 2015). For example, NEET young adults have been defined, ranging from 15 to 30 years of age. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines two groups of young NEETs, one from 15 to 19 and a second from 20 to 24 years. Referring to the second age group of young adults ages 20 to 24 years, estimates for NEETs in different countries vary for men from 5.1% (Czech Republic) to 28.6% (Italy) and women from 4.4% (Switzerland) to 44.4% (Turkey) of the total number of young people in the corresponding age group (OECD, 2021). The US Social Science Research Council (Measure of America) estimated NEETs’ rates as 12% of the general population in the same age group (OECD, 2018; Burd-Sharp & Lewis, 2017). The European Commission counts 4.6 million young people in NEET situations all over Europe, yet again considering a different range of ages (15–24 years). Using this calculation, 20.4% of the young people ages 14–25 years throughout Europe are unemployed, not in education and not in training (European Commission, 2016). However, the prevalence differs substantially among European regions. Rates of NEET status in 20- to 24-year-olds are much lower (approximately 8.5–11%) in central and northern European countries compared to southern European countries with rates of 23% (examples of Spain and Greece, OECD, 2021). The pattern in all regions shows that women are more affected than men worldwide—even in regions with low numbers of young adults in a NEET situation (Fig. 17.1).

The problem of young people not in education, employment, or training represents a global concern (McGorry, 2019). Studies, reports, and position papers cover a wide range of countries with various economic backgrounds all over the world. They reach from Scandinavia (Bania et al., 2019; Stea et al., 2019) to Mexico (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2018) and Australia (Rodwell et al., 2018), from Japan (Genda, 2007) to Europe (European Commission, 2016) and South Africa (Hallstein Holte et al., 2018). They cover the United Kingdom (Goldman-Mellor et al., 2016), Senegal (Cabral, 2018), and the United States (Carcillo et al., 2015), as well as South Korea (Noh & Lee, 2017) Austria (Tamesberger &

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Youth not in employment, education or training (NNET) 15-19 year-old men / 15-19 year-old women, % in same age group, 2019

Fig. 17.1 Youth not in education, employment, or training (NNET) (indicator), 20-24-year-olds / 20-24-year-old men / 20-24-year-old women, % in same age group. (Reprinted with permission from OECD (2021))

Johann Bacher, 2014), and Switzerland (Baggio et al., 2015), among other countries. Even though studies show substantial differences in the definition of NEETs and despite differences in the economic situations and welfare structures of the various countries, all authors conclude that there are no valuable and functioning solutions to the problems related to NEET (Bania et al., 2019). The persistence of this problem has led the International Labour Organisation to talk in terms of “a generation at risk” (ILO, 2013).

The urgency of the problem is emphasised by the UN 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Goal No 8 aims to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all”. Within this goal, two proposed targets identify youth: (i) by 2030, achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men, *including for young people* and persons with disabilities, and equal pay for work of equal value (United Nations, 2016), and (ii) by 2020, substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in education, employment, or training (NEET) (United Nations, 2020).

Despite being deprived of employment, NEETs value work as much as other youths, and they are as likely as non-NEETs to think that work would be important in their life. Therefore, the lack of a job has an impact on life satisfaction. NEETs report higher levels of dissatisfaction with their lives compared to non-NEETs. This suggests that, for a majority of youth, unemployment or inactivity is not a choice and that they would be willing to integrate into the labour market if they could (OECD, 2016).

On an individual level, NEET situations are perceived as a burden and a source of suffering from lack of participation and life perspective: Most of the young people in a NEET situation did not become NEETs by choice (Chen, 2011). In a Japanese qualitative study, a young NEET woman framed this in clear words: “*If you’re not working and not in school or training, it will be boring, and it is no fun at all*” (Chen, 2011, p. 36). NEET situations negatively affect young adults’ self-esteem and self-confidence. Some of them stated that it was difficult to defend themselves from being exploited. They felt they had to be grateful for having a job at all, and therefore they had to be ready to accept any working conditions. As Chen (2011) concludes, “*Their previous work experiences led them to believe that they were not worth much and that their choices for succeeding in the workforce were limited*” (Chen, 2011, p.41).

Risk Factors and Risk Situations

Since the banking crisis, policymakers, and researchers have increasingly focused on the analyses of factors influencing NEET. Studies have concentrated mainly on individual characteristics such as gender and migration background on the one hand and macro-level social factors such as economic growth

and minimum-wage regulations on the other hand. In general, studies focusing on risk factors in NEET situations and the deficits of young people negatively affected are predominant.

NEET situations are more common in lower socioeconomic groups, resulting from poor participation in formal education (Thompson, 2011; Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). Other authors maintain that lower educational and professional skills are the main underpinning factors of a NEET situation, especially in rural areas (Simões, 2018). Care leavers are particularly at risk in the transition to adult independence (Akister et al., 2010).

Being a Woman—Being at Risk for NEET

Women are generally much more likely to be in a NEET situation than men. Caring roles as young mothers or in other care roles do not explain the gender difference, and the reason why women are overrepresented in the group of disconnected young adults remains unexplained. A recent study revealed that NEET women suffered poorer physical and mental health compared to both NEET men and same-age women in employment or education (Stea et al., 2019). The authors reported NEET women more often endure physical pain and report a higher number of adverse experiences as well as have fewer resources. It might be worth considering that women become involved in NEET situations because of poorer mental health, more psychosomatic disorders, and traumatic experiences.

In Sweden, Bania et al. (2019) found that NEET status in young adulthood was significantly higher among females than among males and ethnic minorities compared to the general population, with minority women bearing the highest risk of NEET status. They further specify that among females, adolescent peer problems and hyperactivity problems were associated with later NEET status. In contrast, in male adolescents, this status was associated with problems related to poor peer relations, conduct, and physical health (mainly musculoskeletal problems).

Poor Health as Cause and Effect of NEET Situations

Mental and physical health problems play a crucial role as antecedents and as consequences of NEET conditions. Across various countries, mental and physical health problems (e.g., Bania et al., 2019) are significantly more prevalent in the pre-history of NEETs in comparison with their non-NEET peers. In contrast, cannabis and other drug use do not seem to be strong predictors (Zuccotti & O’Reilly 2019; Cabral, 2018). In particular, the early onset of childhood mental and behavioural problems enhances the risk of a NEET status (Rodwell et al., 2018). A Canadian research group showed

that NEET status was thrice as prevalent in young adults with psychotic developments as in the peer population (Iyer et al., 2018). In line with this finding, O'Dea et al. (2014) found a high proportion of NEETs among mental help-seekers. Compared to their peers in education, training, or work, they were more likely to be male and to have a history of criminal charges and/or economic hardship. They also showed a more advanced stage of mental illness with symptoms of poor mental health (risky cannabis use, higher levels of depression, poorer social functioning and greater disability). Even minor mental problems may increase the risk of NEET status. A study based on census data in the US describes three main groups of NEETs: young mothers and young carers, young adults with disabilities or health problems, and young people (mainly young men) who do not have any overt disadvantage, but who cannot find a way to enter the labour market (Fernandes and Gabe, 2009). A randomised study in Greece showed increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression in young people between 15 and 24 years of age the longer the duration of NEET situations (more than one year) and the older the young person (Basta Maria Basta et al., 2019). Other authors emphasise the heterogeneity of the NEETs as well as their multiple and various burdens of poverty, mental illness, social deprivation, low education, and low self-esteem that are a reinforcing determinant of a NEET situation (Stea et al., 2019; Carcillo et al., 2015). Baggio et al. (2015) therefore conclude from their study on causal paths analysis that NEET status is a consequence of mental health and thereby induced substance use is a way of self-medication rather than a cause. According to Basta Maria Basta et al. (2019), studies from countries with significantly different economic and cultural backgrounds, such as Australia, the United Kingdom, Mexico, Japan, Sweden, and Switzerland, that explored associations between NEET status, mental health, and substance use confirm these associations between NEET status, mood disorders, suicidal behaviours, depressive symptoms, and substance use.

Other authors question the prominent role of mental health problems in the genesis of NEET situations: Gutiérrez-García et al. (2018) conducted a representative, prospective, longitudinal 8-year cohort study in Mexico City with 1000 adolescents aged 12–17 years in wave 1 and 19–26 years at the second point of measurement. They found no marked differences between young people in NEET situations and their working or studying peers of the same age group. The authors conclude: *“NEET youth were not that different from their peers...The greatest differences between NEET youth and all their peer groups were their increased risks of incident suicidal behaviour”* (Gutiérrez-García et al., 2017).

A third perspective relates to NEET situations due to mental problems in young adults to general societal developments. Robertson (2018) assumes that underlying societal circumstances may further hamper the transition to adult-

hood. He states that the pathways from adolescence to adulthood are prolonged, more complicated, and more individual in general: Those who manage well find a broader range of opportunities and those who do not face NEET situations very often have health problems. Robertson (2019) states that health-risk factors facing young people increase due to the trend towards a prolonged and complicated period of transition from youth to independent adulthood. During this transition period, unemployment is likely and has the potential to increase stress, mental health issues, use of drugs, promiscuity, eating disorders, and self-harm. Stewards and colleagues confirmed this observation in a British study, where NEETs were significantly more likely than non-NEETs to be smokers, not to participate in sport, and have an unhealthy BMI (Stewart et al., 2017).

NEET status itself causes health-damaging effects. A meta-synthesis shows evidence that young people are especially vulnerable to health problems when unemployed or working in precarious conditions (Vancea & Utzet, 2016). Bruckner et al. (2010) confirm that levels of demand for youth mental health services are related to levels of unemployment. Japanese researchers show that young people whose expected returns from working are low tend to refrain from working and seeking jobs (Genda, 2007). This is particularly true for young women, the less educated, and the long-term jobless. Young people seem to resign at an early age with unforeseeable and presumed catastrophic long-term consequences for their lives, their health, and their changes to participate in society.

Programs and Projects to Resolve an Unresolved Global Problem

In parallel to the growing scientific interest, an equally growing number of policies, projects, and initiatives have evolved that aim at integrating and educating the young NEET adults by supported education, supported employment, supported housing, and other means of social welfare. The results of these efforts are discouraging (Strandh et al., 2015). Even though a small number of studies show that individual job placement is useful in helping young adults to attain employment (Bond et al., 2016), two persisting problems remain unresolved. First, most young adults who are not in employment stay out of the reach of these measures or they fail to complete programs within the predefined (and economically guaranteed) time. Secondly, most of the labour policy programs are tailored for and successful with men, but not (equally) effective for women (Bacher et al., 2017).

Very few scientific evaluations of the various existing programs are available. The retrievable evaluations consist of short-term evaluations of effectiveness or customer satisfaction. No studies on long-term effects of supported education

or supported employment on the specific group of young adults in NEET situations could be located. These findings correspond to statements by several authors (e.g., Robertson, 2018) describing a lack of strong evidence for the effectiveness of back-to-work programs. Accordingly, in a previous literature review, Lakey et al. (2001) revealed a near absence of evidence for the health effects of labour market programs for NEET young people.

In Taiwan, a 4- to 10-month program named “Flying young” was offered nationwide to young people in a NEET situation (Chen, 2011). Although the program was targeted at this group, was tailored to this group locally, and participants were offered monetary compensation that allowed them to make a living, the retention rate was low. Of the participants, 59% did not complete the program. Those who finished had little to say about the job skills they had learned in the program. They considered the program to be of low practical help to participants. It did not increase their chances of employment, but it provided social and emotional support and helped them feel better about themselves (Chen, 2011). These findings are in line with the results of Swiss authors who conclude that the broad and heterogeneous projects in the field of supported education and supported employment for young adults widely lack evidence of effectiveness (Sabatella & Wyl, 2017). A large variety of offers and programs of assessed quality and adequate length (24-month duration on average) did result in a meagre success rate. For example, 8% of participants completed an apprenticeship (Sabatella & Wyl, 2017). Moreover, the contribution of the programs to the success is much lower than the two main determinants for successful integration: neither was related to professional support but rather to an individual’s motivation and their parents’ or their informal network and relationships to employers (Sabatella & Wyl, 2017).

From a policy point of view, Bacher et al. (2017) conclude that there is no “one-size-fits-all” solution for reducing the number of young people in NEET situations. Group-specific aspects related to age, migration, and gender should be considered in order not to leave behind young women and migrants. The most promising structural intervention, according to the authors, consists of an active labour market policy (Bacher et al., 2017).

Young people with psychological problems have even lower chances of finding access to the labour market due to stigmatisation and self-stigmatisation of psychological and psychiatric problems (O’Dea et al., 2016). However, there is no association between a change in depression and a change in NEET status in the same study on young adults with depression. The authors conclude that psychiatric and other services need to address functional outcomes and re-engagement with education and employment in addition to symptom reduction. Re-employment improves the health of formerly unemployed adults in general (Rueda et al., 2012)

(Bjarnason & Sigurdardottir, 2003): The best health outcomes result when full-time employment and role satisfaction are achieved.

The social risks influencing the likelihood of NEET status are multi-dimensional, so interventions that focus on one risk factor are likely to be inadequate (Duckworth & Schoon, 2012). Overall, the conclusion might be Shore and Tosun’s (2017): “One of the main reasons for this failure is that the proposed activities do not match NEETs’ needs”.

A Salutogenic Perspective on NEET Situations

Given the failure of support initiatives for young adults in NEET conditions, this field needs new and different approaches as well as new questions. It is crucial to understand who these young people in NEET situations are, what they need, and how they could receive appropriate support in improving their quality of life and their life perspectives, with or without becoming educated, employed, and trained. To date, such a comprehensive approach to the NEET situation is lacking; it is necessary to develop an approach that incorporates the experiences and visions of these youth, their relations with formal and informal systems, as well as their cultural and economic condition (Simões & Drumonde, 2016). Salutogenesis may offer a framework towards a new understanding, a comprehensive approach, and a different way of handling the problem. It focuses on resources and capabilities instead of risks, deficits, and predefined “normality”. We, therefore, attempt to illuminate the situation of NEETs from the perspective of salutogenic theory and research by advancing a new approach to learning and research with NEETs and with their non-NEET peers. In this section, we present some first results of a current research program and conclude with future policies and practices.

We conducted literature research on the Web of Science to retrieve publications that link the topic of NEETs to salutogenesis. We limited the publications years to 2006 to 2019 and used the keywords salutogenesis, sense of coherence, SOC combined with NEET, disconnected youth, and other terms. We could not find any study that did explicitly link salutogenesis or SOC to NEET situations or disconnected young adults. Therefore, we resorted to publications that throw light on related topics, such as research on SOC and unemployment in general.

We know from studies conducted with unemployed populations that Sense of Coherence (SOC) is a strong predictor for positive outcomes in terms of re-employment: SOC is an important personal resource that enhances the chances of re-entering the labour market after unemployment (Vastamäki et al., 2011), independent of educational level, age, gender, and duration of unemployment. The SOC of adolescents

may affect their stress and coping in much the same way as is seen in adults (Eriksson & Lindström, 2005), young people are especially vulnerable to health problems when unemployed or working under precarious conditions. This is mainly true for their higher risk of mental health disorders, health-risk behaviour, poor quality of life, and occupational injuries (Vancea & Utzet, 2017). Again, SOC is a crucial buffer when coping with unemployment and marginalisation in the early years of adult life. Starrin et al. (2001) found that in unemployed young adults who were exposed to a greater degree of financial hardship as well as to more shaming experiences, the mean SOC score was much lower compared to young unemployed men and women who were not victims of financial deprivation and shaming experiences.

Consequently, we assume that strengthening SOC in NEET situations is a feasible approach to support young adults. Dealing openly with experiences of shame, providing minimal basic incomes and housing may be the first important psychological and material resistance resources in this process. Additionally, a salutogenic approach may be more attractive and motivating for affected youth than the current paradigms that ask them to fit into defined programs and life plans defined by educators, experts, and rehabilitation systems.

A 3-Year Peer-to-Peer Study to Understand Young Adults in NEET Situations

We assume that a salutogenic perspective on young people in NEET situations will reveal new approaches to urgently needed solutions. According to Antonovsky and following his example, we must ask new questions. These questions should shift from the deficit-oriented approach in the literature and include the central concepts of the theory of salutogenesis. What are the resources of these young adults? How do they build their SOC? How do their resources, coping, and coherence fit with the support systems they find in their societies? These questions were addressed in a 3-year study of 76 NEETs in the German-speaking part of Switzerland. The study was based on three assumptions:

- We need to ask new questions.
- We need to use new research methods.
- We need to work with researchers in the same age group as the NEETs.

It is difficult and costly to reach NEETs (Stea et al., 2019), and it is difficult to gain the confidence of these young adults who have mostly had various adverse experiences with the social-care system (Genda, 2007). We, therefore, worked with students of the social work department at a Swiss university, assuming that each of them would know a friend, col-

league, or relative in a NEET condition. To allow the young researchers to ask new questions, we excluded questions regarding the causes and history of the NEET situation, and we chose a process-oriented design, following the method of rhizomatic learning and research by Deleuze and Guattari (1988). Rhizomatic research attempts to overcome hierarchical and binary thinking that traditionally leads to a top-down process in scientific approaches that generate hypotheses, methods, and results. In contrast, a rhizome, according to Deleuze and Guattari (1988), is an “image of thought”, analogous to the botanical rhizome, which is a stem of plants that sends out roots and shoots from its nodes. In other words, the ontological thinking by Deleuze and Guattari (1988) can be understood by analogy with these rhizomes in nature. The underpinning concept of rhizome ontology is that material and semiotic entities have the same ontological status, that is, both material entities and discursive statements are “real” in an identical way. Deleuze and Guattari (1988) do talk about assemblages of entities as active, creative affected and affecting processes that define and limit themselves and each other, as rhizomes of plants do in nature. Deleuzian ontology (and in consequence rhizome research) is based on the assumption that reality is made up of discursive statements and material entities, both of which are active, mutually affecting, and affecting the world. Therefore, this research methodology and design shifts from a deductive and hierarchical conceptualisation towards a process of interacting with the question of interest. In this process, the research question, the researchers, and reality affect influence and change each other mutually. This ontology has a broad impact on research and learning, as some of the fundamental principles of rhizome research demonstrate (Clarke & Parsons, 2013). Box 17.1 describes the basic principles.

Box 17.1 Principles and Methods of Rhizomatic Research

Nomadism: Rhizome researchers are «nomadic» in the sense that they transcend the current state of knowledge and allow them themselves to be led by the research question and the research process. They might change along the process of moving from place to place, idea to idea, and concept to concept. Nomadism demands an openness to interrelationships even if these interrelationships present places and concepts that are not traditionally linked.

Assemblages: An assemblage consists of heterogeneous components and forces that form a unity by working together as a whole to produce or create a temporary entity. The components of an assemblage have traditionally been considered separate. Rhizome

research deliberately sees things, processes, and people as equally important elements co-creating assemblages. Therefore, researchers link seemingly unconnected aspects (for example, architectural, technological, emotional, and discursive aspects)—into assemblages and they consider elements that seem less likely to provide research insights rather than dismissing them as being irrelevant.

Deterritorialisation: Rhizome researchers develop sensitivities to elements/people that are not part of the status quo.

Affect: In rhizome research, emotions (affects) are not considered to be confounders that have to be controlled or at least reflected. Emotions like interest, fear, compassion, etc. are means of gaining knowledge and insight. They co-create and co-direct the research process that ideally will allow the research project to control itself.

The students learned these principles at the beginning of the course in a challenging process. They found themselves in a very open situation and soon recognised the parallels to the situation of their peers in NEET conditions. They had to find their way into a completely new and uncertain process, make efforts without ensured success, and did not know whom and how to ask for help. These students left the “secure ground” of professionals “knowing” solutions for problems, and they accessed the topic of NEETs with a humbler and more open attitude of learning.

The overarching aim of the study was to understand the inner and outer world of young adults in NEET situations. Within this frame, students were free to choose their specific research questions, which they then studied together in two phases of fieldwork, each 2 weeks long. In between the fieldwork periods, they gathered all together in a 1-day marketplace workshop, where each group’s study was discussed with other students, tutors, teachers, and an artist. The marketplace served as a reflection on the ongoing research process and as a support to further orient and specify the research questions for the second period of fieldwork.

Research questions varied broadly: How do NEETs with a psychiatric diagnosis and those without view their lives? How much or how little do NEETs accept their reality of living and themselves? Where do young adults in NEET situations find resources for their everyday struggle? Why are they in a NEET situation? What are their dreams and their visions of life? (cf. Box 17.2). The results are presented in the following section.

Box 17.2 Research Questions and Methodology

The research methods used by students were predominantly qualitative approaches focusing on interviews of different types. Guideline-based, narrative, and biographical interviews were conducted. In some cases, the storytelling method or (photograph) diaries were also used, since some of the young adults in NEET situations were often able to express themselves better with this method. Some of the student’s groups choose to explore and contrast two perspectives: the one of the young adults in NEET-situations and the ones of the results professionals of their help systems. They conducted a first field work with young adults, discussed the results and generated questions for the second phase of field work, where they interviewed social workers, psychiatrists, youth workers, working educators, family nurses, and other professionals. The latter presented the experiences of young adults in comparison with an expert view and gathered information on the type of cooperation between professionals. The 22 groups dealt with a wide variety of questions, which allows the results presented to be used to form different categories and summarise complexes of questions:

The study groups that explored the experiences of young adults pursued the following questions:

- *How do those affected experience working with help systems?*
- *What kinds of plans and visions do those affected have?*
- *What is important in the area of housing?*
- *What was supportive in the socialisation process?*
- *What do those affected do in their free time?*
- *How do those affected experience their everyday life?*
- *What kind of support do affected people want?*

Study groups dealing with institutional support systems attempted to answer the following summarising sets of questions:

- *What form can inter-institutional cooperation between the support systems take?*
- *Which accesses to support systems are open to affected persons?*
- *What options are available to those not recognised as disabled by the social security system?*

Study groups that focused on the closest personal environment dealt with the following questions:

- *How do relatives experience their everyday life with those affected?*
- *What support do relatives want?*

A total of 116 interviews were conducted, of which 76 were with affected persons, 7 with relatives, 25 with professionals, and 6 with young adults who formerly were in NEET situations that they ended by successfully integrating into work or education.

Tutors accompanied the students during two research phases of 2 days each, and they received support in the evaluation of their results by targeted feedback. It quickly became apparent that a significant challenge was to establish contact with young adults in NEET conditions. The second field phase built on the evaluation of the first phase. Often this led to a revised question and also to more precise interest in knowledge. The implementation of the principles and methods of rhizomatic research was a continuous learning process requiring reflection by all participants. Altogether 80 students participated in the course over the three terms of investigation that extended over 3 years.

Generalised and Specific Resistance Resources of Young Adults in NEET Situations

The prerequisites for the sense of coherence (SOC) are general resistance resources (GRRs), conceptualised as any physical, material, cognitive, emotional, attitudinal, interpersonal, social, or macro-sociocultural characteristics of an individual to cope with a wide variety of stressors (Lindström & Eriksson, 2010). Specific resistance resources (SRRs) are individualised, dependent on the person's particular context, and used during certain circumstances (Antonovsky, 1987; Mittelmark et al., 2017). In terms of young adults in NEET situations, GRRs are resources that generally allow access to societal roles and participation, for example, education, social belonging, and societal and political participation. SRRs are those specifically needed to overcome the hardship of NEET situations and their negative consequences on health, for example, integration programs, social assistance, and psychiatric or psychotherapeutic treatment. The results are presented alongside the generalised and specific resistance resources.

In the 3 years of rhizomatic research, both young adults and the professionals who supported them were interviewed. The patterns of their narratives show remarkable differences,

Table 17.1 Contrasting the perceptions of young adults and professionals

General Resistance Resources (GRR)	Young adults' perception of GRR	Professionals' perception of GRR
Employment	Very important	Important
Time	Very important	Important
Stigma	Important	Important+
Housing	Very important	Somehow important
Personal development and identity	Very important	Somehow important
Coping skills	Very important	Somehow important
Visions and perspectives	Important	Not relevant
Leisure	Important	Not relevant
Peers and friends	Important	Not relevant

which might explain why the variety of assistance available does not reach the young adults in the NEET situation. There seems to be a misfit of concepts, attitudes, and expectations between the two systems of help-seekers and professionals. Of the nine key resources of well-being that young adults emphasise, only three were fully shared by the representatives of the helper system, three were mentioned but defined differently, and three of the young adult's key issues were perceived as irrelevant (Table 17.1).

Both young adults in NEET situations and social workers in the helper system consider work and employment as a key issue and central goal. Young adults' difficulties in finding employment on the first job market were confirmed by social workers who stated that there were too few employers ready to hire young adults with psychological and/or social difficulties or handicaps. Employers often perceived the available programs of supported training, supported education, or supported employment as too bureaucratic and too complicated. At the same time, the young adults found them as too demanding, difficult, and stressful. In Switzerland, programs for youth in NEET situations that focus on education, training, and employment are either funded by municipalities or by national insurance systems. Both demand defined steps of success within fixed time limits, which means that if predefined objectives are not achieved within the required time, support is discontinued and young adults find themselves back in the NEET situation. Support systems are fragmented, and in the majority of cases, continuity between different support systems is not provided. In consequence, the young adults themselves should seek and find consecutive programs. This proves to be an excessive demand for many since they struggle with feelings of shame and low self-esteem. A common consequence is a nomadic journey of attempts, failures, disruptions, and new attempts that may last 5, 8, or more years (Mögling et al., 2015).

Accordingly, time was mentioned as an important issue by both young adults and social workers. They talked about the time young people lose finding relevant information

about support systems, the time they lose trying to overcome failures, and the time they wait for replies or authorisations from the helper system, communities, or health insurance. Once they are in a support system, young adults feel themselves being under constant time pressure to shape their personal and psychological development in a way to follow the demands and time limits of educational and welfare systems.

The young NEET adults' perception of illness, diagnosis, and stigma corresponded with the view of professionals in the support systems, which reveals the important impact and correlation of psychiatric diagnosis, mental problems, and stigmatisation. As the young adults stated in the interviews, a psychiatric diagnosis can be both a support and a burden for them. Some find it helpful to have an explanation for their suffering; others reinforce their already existing self-deprecation. The researchers observed that diagnoses received before adolescence shape individuals' self much more strongly than diagnoses made in early adulthood. In surprising contrast, a psychiatric illness, by itself, was viewed positively. The young adults in our study emphasised that mental health problems can be a reason to engage in a process of critical self-analysis and a starting point for personal growth: "People without mental health problems can easily go through life without reflecting on who they are". For a process of personal reflection and growth, young adults in this study consider it important to have access to a value-free, non-judgmental environment, be this nature, animals, sports, music, a theatre group, or something else. Only when they start to compare themselves with others (or with people on social media), do they start to doubt their lives and themselves. There, a vicious circle may start where low self-esteem and self-stigmatisation weaken the process of becoming healthy as well as achieving social and professional participation.

Communicating the diagnosis remains difficult due to employers' contradictory attitudes: They want to be informed of a job applicant's psychiatric problems, but employers also think they would not employ the applicant if they knew of a psychiatric diagnosis (Baer et al., 2017). The young adult's experiences described in the interviews mirror this contradiction. To receive support, they must communicate the psychiatric diagnosis, but consequently, they experience, "employers don't feel confident about your abilities, and you feel like a burden to them. And you're perceived as your diagnosis only; you're not perceived as a person. This makes you feel unhelpful".

A second group of resources concerns housing as well as psychological and coping resources. Housing, "to have a place of your own where you feel secure and are free to live your life", as one of the young adults framed it, is considered important by professionals and young adults alike. Views diverge, however, about the way housing should be provided. Young adults consider housing as a basic resource. "Housing means intimacy. My home gives me security and is a place in which I can determine what happens". From there, they can

start to find training, participate in professional education, and find employment. They are also convinced that having their place to live in would help them to become more independent and gain self-esteem: "*If I feel at ease at home and can live the way I want, I'm fine and I can use my energy for the next task*".

The support system instead follows an opposing logic: As long as young adults do not earn their living, as long as they have not completed their professional education, and as long as they have not learned to manage a household, they are better in sheltered housing, where social workers and social pedagogues take care of them. Consequently, situations perceived as humiliating by young adults in NEET situations persist: "*My apartment is one the region pays for. It bothers me when the social worker comes into the house unannounced and does what he wants, whether I am at home or not. I have no privacy for myself and my family in this apartment – he even looks in the fridge*".

The support system offers sheltered or accompanied housing in institutions that generally are not conceptualised for young adults in NEET situations. As a result, they found themselves in institutions for people with handicaps or patients with severe psychiatric disorders—a situation they found depressing.

For professionals, one's place to live is a reward, but for these young adults, it is a prerequisite to building up an independent life. "Housing First" projects in the US, Canada, and recently Europe, especially Finland, may well prove the young adults right. In most existing welfare models, individuals should graduate through a social rehabilitation process to earn their housing. The housing first principle suggests a paradigm shift. Instead of an ultimate goal, housing is considered a first step, a basis, and a precondition to start and succeed in the social recovery process. Results of recent randomised controlled trials (RCTs) show better outcomes in housing first programs than in the traditional educational models for quality of life, mental health, social inclusion, and other parameters (Aubry et al., 2019). Some social workers in our study did not acknowledge the young adult's wish for independent housing. One stated: "*They need to consume, to have everything, iPhone, computer; brand-name clothing is huge today. I think those are more important for the young than having an apartment of their own*".

Attitudes towards psychological and coping resources also differ between young adults and social workers. Individual biographies of young adults in NEET situations show an almost unbreakable will to succeed, to achieve, and to survive. Five to ten attempts at integration, education, or training were frequent among the young adults in the interviews. "*You need persistence and a strong will to survive*", one of them stated. This contrasts with the beliefs of professionals. They don't emphasize persistence but the capability to sacrifice, to adapt to given circumstances.

Similarly, the concept of identity is perceived differently by professionals and young adults. The young adults interviewed said that all they asked and wished for was to be accepted and appreciated the way they are. It was the strong conviction of all interviewees that they are—presumably special—but full human beings, with identities of their own. In contrast, the professionals demonstrated the conviction that these young adults would stay in a state of “not yet”, still searching for themselves and still in the process to become and to build up a personal identity. These contrasting perceptions are not explicitly exchanged or expressed in routine interactions between the partners involved. Nevertheless, such a stark contrast can hinder a genuine and functional working alliance.

The third group of general resistance resources was composed of those aspects of life quality that were not perceived and were therefore not addressed by supporting systems and professionals. However, they were of crucial importance to young adults in NEET situations. One of the most prominent findings was that young adults were surprised to be asked about their aims and visions in life. They said that their visions had never been a topic of interest for professionals of the helping systems. In line with these NEET adults' statements, some representatives of the support system affirmed they never ask about visions, since the young adults might be overstrained by this question (because they are not able to reflect on and express themselves). The visions of their future the young adults described were modest but still far away from their current living situations. They dreamed of having a place to work, becoming an appreciated member of the community/society, doing something meaningful, and having a family—if possible outside the city and in the countryside. Stable relationships were a constant wish since most of the young adults interviewed looked back on a life full of interrupted relationships within the family, but also with peers and the various professionals of support systems they had known, worked with, and then lost. Money was not the main issue: They wanted to be economically self-supporting, and they aimed at living a simple life in which they had enough money not to suffer from a deficiency.

Support systems for young adults in NEET situations are mainly directed at education, employment, and training that are usually rather difficult to achieve. In our interviews, young adults emphasised the important role of leisure activities. They are considered to be an opportunity for positive experiences, a source of self-esteem, and a relatively easily accessible resource since professional background or education usually are not requested to take part in sports or groups of creative, social, or other leisure activities. In leisure groups, social background or position are less important than shared interests and activities. Some leisure groups are aware of this and actively involve people in difficult living situations. Social workers stated that leisure time is not impor-

tant. In their views, hobby and leisure activities are a later priority of learning—a successful integration into working life comes first. Social welfare professionals could but rarely do support leisure initiatives of young adults in NEET conditions, predominantly for economic reasons. These opinions contrast with the view of the young adults who feel that it is easier for them to find access to leisure groups than to professional or educational systems. The importance young people in NEET situations attribute to leisure activities in this peer-to-peer study contrast with research (OECD, 2016) that found NEETs are less likely than non-NEET youth to think that leisure time is very important for their life. The different findings may be due to differing research questions and methods as well as to the fact that most participants in our sample suffered from slight or moderate mental problems. For them, leisure groups were a gate for social contact and participation, since stigmatisation is less prominent, access is easier, especially when peers accompany young NEETs.

Peers compose the third GRR in the group of NEETs' resources neglected by professionals but considered important by the young adults in our interviews. Some of them have lost former friends due to mental problems, the NEET status, and the stigmatisation of both. They were living a rather lonely life but claimed to have “many friends”, who on closer inspection turned out to be friends on Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter with whom they have no personal contact in real life. Still, young adults consider these friends very important and spend a significant amount of time with them on social media. Others could keep friendships with former friends who are not in a NEET situation and reported they receive support from them, but also “a situation of equality and belonging without any power gap”. Ideally, friends support or can cope with the specific vulnerability the young NEET adults show, as one NEET adult describes his peer group: *“Everyone knows about my illness and my problems. I don't have to pretend, and I can be sad and calm. Even when I feel very bad, I can always be there and do not have to be involved. But I can take part in fun evenings without having to do anything or to pretend. This helps me a lot. We care for each other. We have agreed on a sign language: When I raise my hand, they all know that I don't want to talk now”*.

A third group of the young adults in our sample found new friends during previous treatments in psychiatric hospitals or detoxification clinics with whom they kept contact after the treatments. These friends were considered emotional resources and people to talk with about problems, but since most of them are in NEET situations as well, they were not of practical support. In contrast, social workers and other professionals either ignore peers, regard them as a private matter, or have a more negative perspective of NEETs' peers, fearing their harmful influence. In any case, friends and peers were not involved in integrative, therapeutic, or supportive

treatment nor did professionals in this sample provide support in developing a private social network.

To conclude, young adults in NEET situations and the professionals who support them share a common view, but with differing understandings, of the GRRs regarding work, education, housing, psychological and coping capabilities, and the insight that de-stigmatisation of NEET situations are needed. Professionals ignore or are unaware of the resources that might be crucial to strengthen the SOC of young adults. Closing this gap in the perception of support systems may help to empower young adults to more easily access and use both GRRs and SRRs.

Specific Resistance Resources (SRRs) and the Support System

The support system can be viewed as the organ to facilitate the access to or to provide specific resistance resources that are needed in NEET situations to access the GRRs described above. An inconsistency between the high number of available supporting programs and the persistent stability of the number of young adults in NEET situations calls for an explanation. To discover the reasons for this inconsistency, a group of questions in our study addressed the young adults' perception of the helper system.

In Switzerland, young adults in NEET situations who have access to the support system are usually accompanied by an average of five different institutions (Baer et al., 2015). Institutions and their representatives lack time and resources, so they rarely coordinate with each other or actively involve their clients. This results in a lack of cooperation among professionals and requires young adults to spend a substantial amount of time and energy keeping appointments, which gives them the impression they are being "administered". They described their situation by asking a question: "Are we all puppets?" This lack of coordination often results in young adults being buffeted about on their journey among the different support systems because of bureaucratic and legal requirements. Since the institutions, not the young adult, lead the process, dealing with access to protected personal data needs time.

Moreover, every institution sticks to its profile, and tasks and transitions between support systems are often not provided. Sometimes, specific support is even lacking: One participant stated: *"I'm too sick for the primary labour market, but I am too strong for the second – what shall I do?"* Others stated that they think that each program might be useful and valuable, but that all lack flexibility and their criteria for admission, progress, and success are unduly restrictive.

In sum, the misfit between institutional support and individual needs may be due to a support system that functions within a financial, organisational logic that cannot respond

to individual life circumstances and development processes. As our research shows, support by non-profit organizations was a crucial factor for NEETs who were able to overcome their situation. Private services could provide the support and time the young adults needed because of flexible economic standards. In contrast, most of the public support programs demand specific progress within a predefined time.

Inter-institutional coordination, in particular, appears to be poorly developed. For example, young adults in NEET situations perceive that there is too little communication among the experts involved; they also experience the individual processes offered by institutional helpers as closed systems. Moreover, when different institutions are connected, the number of professionals with whom a young adult speaks considerably increases. Finally, the highly specialised support systems make things even more difficult: Individual aspects of problems only are tackled, but the situation of the individual as a whole is not seen.

Discussion

Among the most striking results were those that expressed the individual needs, dreams, wishes, and future perspectives of the young adults in NEET situations. It was impressive to learn that what they wanted was normality. They defined this based on their needs (see also Table 17.1). In contrast, institutional support systems take a different approach. Their focus is on integration through work, and their priority is for NEETs to earn a living. The promotion of earning capacity is seen as the key. Support systems seem to not take into account the normal range of up to 6 years in differences in psychological and social development among children and adolescents. In line with other authors (Maguire, 2015), we consequently can assume that the problem of NEET situations in early adulthood is at least partly due to the misfit of offered support by organisations and the individual needs of development. Here, we will claim that the system could work much more effectively if the support system were able to understand the young adults and their situation in terms of the SOC and the GRRs.

The normative structure of support offers hinders young NEETs from accessing GRRs. The final question by the student interviewers addresses this: "Why are there no niche offers in the first labour market for NEETs?" A possible solution to this lack and dilemma may be to create new and adequate GRRs in a "third" labour market overlapping and bridging the first and the second ones. Recent initiatives in Portugal provide promising examples. In *Highlights of an untold story*, Simões (2018) described an initiative for rural NEETs. Cooperation among youth and social workers, farmers, and ecologists led to the development of a training and entrepreneur's program. It broke the former rule for NEETs

to fit into pre-designed projects. It allowed them to work, be trained, and build up their business project within a flexible system of transition to the labour market in an eco-agriculture cooperative. The project, called *Terra nostra*, was based on an equality approach to talks, learning, and evolving. It thereby addressed important dimensions of the SOC: *comprehensibility* was tackled by learning and gradually understanding, *manageability* by developing a business with an income, and *meaningfulness* by planning a personal future. *Terra nostra* consisted of several offers for young adults in NEET situations that were multi-level, open, easily accessible, and flexible. The main elements of the program were as follows: Integration of young adults in NEET situations into an eco-agriculture social business.

- The launch of one's own small business, with the support of project partners.
- Linkage to local food production businesses where apprenticeships took place while the apprentices were mentored by *Terra nostra*.

Terra nostra take into account that many young adults in NEET situations look back on a history of educational failure or underachievement. It is based on individualised informal learning in contrast to the formal educational system that overemphasises labour market demands. This approach refuses traditional teacher-centred methodologies and rigid curricula and instead fosters informal learning techniques, allowing individuals to take the time they need to evolve. Learning sessions occur mostly in the field rather than in a traditional classroom environment. Direct observation, demonstration, peer mentoring, small-group problem-solving, and learning diaries are the primary teaching methods used in this bottom-up learning and teaching process, during which the youths' questions and contributions are the starting point for exploring training topics.

Terra nostra and the young adults together developed a system of after-learning transition to the labour market offering three pathways: the creation of an eco-agriculture social business, which could integrate some of the youths; entrepreneurship, for example, participants could create their own small business with the support of the project's partners; and integration into food production businesses where apprenticeships took place. This is also in contrast to traditional services that do not consider the young adults' expectations and predominantly offer counselling and training in narrowly defined work alternatives to low-skilled intensive labour (Carcillo et al., 2015; Tosun, 2017). The system offered flexibility in that youths could combine various solutions according to their personal needs (Simões, 2018).

The authors conclude that at all stages, projects should be organised as laboratories in which youth can understand, by themselves, the demands, the achievements, and the barriers

to activities, with minimal (but significant) input from professionals. Together, self-determination and free experimentation are elements of an activation formula that becomes a sense of empowerment otherwise seldom experienced by NEETs (Simões & Drumonde, 2016).

From a salutogenic viewpoint, projects like *Terra nostra* reconstruct the distinction between SRR and GRR in the sense that they combine them in a new way. When we regard such projects in relation to our results from NEET and professional interviews, we observe that *Terra nostra* covers all but one GRR dimension (see Table 17.1). We propose three main qualities for suitable and effective Specific Resistance Ressources (SRRs). First, successful support should provide a particular experience of coherence for the NEETs. The experience of resources, not their availability, is crucial for strengthening SOC (Maass et al., 2017). Young adults who have the opportunity to learn according to their capabilities and within an encouraging and open process are much more likely to live positive experiences of resources than those who feel overwhelmed by long curricula of aims, objectives, and abilities they have to achieve within a predefined limit of time.

Second, professionals' attitudes towards young adults should be shaped by respect, equity, and trust in processes of growth, rather than based on systems of control and mistrust.

And third, young adults need challenging and demanding, but yet flexible and individualised pathways to achieve the societal autonomy they wish for. These pathways need supported transitions in between different support systems as well as the willingness of professionals to cooperate and invest in transprofessional and interdisciplinary networks.

In sum, support systems and young adults have so far agreed on the GRRs to be achieved, but support systems have not yet been able to design adequate, accessible, and attractive SRRs for young adults. *Terra nostra* is one example of how to create them. Others are strongly needed, not only for the benefit of young adults: "Greater cooperation between youths, social agents, and producers (not to mention political decision-makers) would result in a win-win situation: not only would youths and social organisations find alternatives for youth employment based on local opportunities, but producers could also use an additional channel to tackle the increasing labour force shortage" (Simões, 2018). Thereby, the NEET situation could become a collective challenge and would no longer be defined as an individual failure. Moreover, the thousands and thousands of young people in NEET situations around the globe would no longer be an overload for fragmented services but rather a valuable resource for society.

Support systems are thus challenged to understand the young adults in order to strengthen their SOC. This means understanding the inner reality of these young adults rather than attempting to fit them into economy-driven, rigid programs (Lindström & Eriksson, 2010; Meier Magistretti et al.,

2016, 2019). One of the key capacities in professionals that our study revealed to be positively associated with NEETs' successful transitions was to bear NEETs' insecurity and their periods of no apparent progress. We thus suggest that the professionals should commit themselves to acquire a more profound understanding instead of providing fast, pre-defined solutions. Another factor that strengthens SOC is the professionals' agility and flexibility in following their clients and challenging them with adequate and attractive tasks (Antonovsky, 1987).

Future Questions and Developments

Young adults in NEET conditions tend to preserve coherence and SOC by narrowing their radius of action. Alcohol and drug consumption, excessive online gaming, and other behaviours (that may even grow to become lifestyles) serve as a means to maintain or create a world that is understandable, manageable, and meaningful. In online games, for example, they understand their tasks, they can manage them, and the achievement of different levels provides motivation and a sense of meaningfulness. Focusing on gaming, the young adults can successfully fade out other sectors of life, for example, work and employment, that potentially weaken their SOC. Antonovsky (1987) stated that the boundaries people set about which parts of the world and life we consider of importance affect the SOC. He further assumed that the boundaries cannot be illimitably restricted but must include the person's inner feelings, the closest interpersonal relations, the main occupation, and the main existential themes. Hochwälder (2019), referring to Antonovsky, proposes a "measure of the boundaries, or in other words, a measure of which sectors of the world and life the person takes into consideration when assessing his or her SOC" (Hochwälder, 2019, S.4). Even though this measure is still lacking, the concept of boundaries is a useful heuristic for practical work with young adults in NEET situations. Assuming that current behaviours of these young people serve to maintain the four basic functions of SOC by narrowing their world, setting boundaries to sectors of life they do not threaten their experience of coherence. The task of professionals then might be to support young adults to widen their boundaries slowly. The example of terra nova shows this is possible. Other, more various and new initiatives are to be developed to create perspectives and sustainable quality of life for young adults in NEET situations.

Finally, new questions risen by students in the rhizomatic research program mentioned above should receive more attention, and difficulties now perceived as individual problems could be recognised as (also) societal ones. Basic questions of what is and who defines quality of life will arise.

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