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# Imagining Gendered Adulthood

## Anxiety, Ambivalence, Avoidance and Anticipation

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**ABSTRACT** In this article, the authors draw on two qualitative, longitudinal studies of young people's transitions to adulthood and how they construct these transitions over time in social, cultural and material terms. The authors focus on the hopes, anxieties and imagined futures of young women. They discuss the individualization thesis, and the contradiction for female individualization between expectations of equality and the reality of inequality between the genders. The debate is moved beyond 'pitiful girls' and 'can-do girls' by exploring how young women in the UK and Finland anticipate and try to avoid being locked into the lives of adult women.

**KEY WORDS** comparative studies ♦ gender ♦ longitudinal, qualitative studies ♦ transitions ♦ young women

## INTRODUCTION

In this article we draw on two qualitative, longitudinal studies of young people's transitions to adulthood and how they construct these transitions over time in social, cultural and material terms. In these studies we explore how young people in the UK and Finland imagine their adult futures, but here in this article we focus on the expectations described by young women, including the balance they seek between love, friendship, family, education, work and fun. We are interested in both the constraints and possibilities in young women's lives, and the difficulties they might have in thinking about alternative futures. Searching for a balance in their lives and imagined futures generates contradictions to which young women respond in a variety of ways, which can be characterized as anxiety, ambivalence, avoidance and anticipation. We explore the possibility that adulthood and therefore the idea of transitions itself may be predicated on gender.

Ambivalence characterizes the ways young women construct their transitions to adulthood, and imagine their futures as women. Many want to accelerate their shifts towards independent adult status, but some attempt to postpone the point of being locked into the lives of adult women. They anticipate acquiring the legal status of an adult citizen and moving into homes of their own. But they want to stay young, which means time for relationships, studying, work and travel. They definitely avoid the idea of children at an early age. Being an adult woman does not seem to be a very tempting position for some young women, given the potential future responsibilities it implies. For them anticipation may involve anxiety.

Finland and the UK are both within the European Union, and have shared characteristics as European nation-states. However, there are also differences. The UK is a liberal democracy with relatively strong neoconservative and neoliberal politics. Finland is a Nordic welfare state, with an emphasis on equality of citizens. New Right politics have had an impact on Nordic countries also, but in a more circumspect way than in the UK. Finland is a more homogeneous and social democratic society than the UK, and consensus is an important cultural value, whereas the UK is characterized as a 'melting-pot', with more diversity.

In terms of youth transitions, Finland is typical of the Nordic countries, with most young people leaving home at a relatively young age, supported by both parents and the state (Lahelma and Gordon, 2003). The UK is a more divided and fluid society, where young people's transitions to adulthood are differentiated and class related, with the transitions of many working-class young people being more 'accelerated' than their middle-class peers and in comparison with other European states (Bynner, 2001). Understandings of adulthood and independence are in a

state of flux within the UK, with state support rapidly receding and parental obligations characterized by considerable confusion (Holdsworth, forthcoming; Jones and O'Sullivan, 2004). Discussing trends in these two countries is of interest because of both the similarities and the differences between them. Our approach is best characterized as cross-cultural rather than comparative. Our respective research projects employ qualitative methods, and each has a slightly different history, realization and aims. A long history of cooperation facilitates the kind of joint investigation we engage in here, and our aim is to present shared analysis based on interlocking stories about young women's transitions, characterized as they are in different ways in both countries by anxiety, ambivalence, avoidance and anticipation of imagined futures.

## FEMALE INDIVIDUALIZATION

The changing situation of women in western, industrialized nations has been central to much theorizing based on concepts of detraditionalization and individualization (Beck, 1992; Nielsen and Rudberg, 1994; du Bois-Reymond, 1998). Heelas et al. (1996) use it as shorthand for an indication of the scale of current social change. But a contradiction lies at the heart of female individualization. While there is an 'equalization of prerequisites' in education and law, and women have raised expectations, the contradiction between these expectations of equality and the reality of inequality between men and women means for Beck, for example, that 'the positions of men and women become more unequal, more conscious and less legitimated' (Beck, 1992: 104). The analysts referred to here have argued that traditional gendered identities and life courses have not disappeared, and that biographical paths are gendered (Thomson and Holland, 2001). Du Bois-Reymond comments on the "'doubleness" of the female biography which even in its modern shape carries with it the burden of traditional female destination and definition' (du Bois-Reymond, 1998: 75). In this context, the decision as to whether and/or when to become a mother becomes an arena of heightened anxiety for women (Segal, 1999).

Many of those who study young people argue that there has been an extension of transitions to adulthood in western industrialized societies (Furlong and Cartmel, 1997), but these extended transitions relate to independence, dependence and interdependence in complex and multilayered ways. The relationship is shaped by many factors including welfare provision, education systems, labour market opportunities, family resources and cultural expectations (Holdsworth, forthcoming). In this context the meanings of adulthood may also be changing; they are also likely to be culturally specific and permeated by formations of gender,

heterosexuality, ethnicity and social class. These socially located meanings in turn stand in tension with individualized notions of citizenship (Gordon and Lahelma, 2002). While citizenship is based on the idea of abstract individuals extricated from their social relations and material locations, many feminist researchers have suggested that this abstract individuality is most accessible to white middle-class adult men (see Jones, 1990; Pateman, 1988; Yuval-Davis, 1997). We have argued that girls and young women have a complicated relationship to the ideal of individuality: they both criticize it and embrace it in situations when 'gender' seems to be too restrictive in the ways it defines their imagined futures (Gordon et al., 2000).

Young people have also been seen as an illustrative case of individualization (Chisholm et al., 1990; Wilkinson and Mulgan, 1995). Individualization is increasingly emphasized in neoliberal marketization politics and in cultural conceptions of fragmentation of identities and changing patterns of consumption. The celebration of 'choice' within the ideology of marketization transforms the growing possibilities of making choices into a coercion to make individual decisions at an early age and to take personal responsibility for those decisions. Choices may appear to be free, but are framed and curtailed by structural and cultural boundaries including social class, gender, ethnicity, embodiment and sexuality (see, for example, Ball et al., 2000; Gordon and Lahelma, 2002).

McRobbie (2001) argues that young women can be seen as the spearhead of a new meritocracy. The young female worker, who is flexible, focused on success, self-sustaining and self-disciplined with a 'can-do' approach, has become a key subject for the New Labour project in the UK. She contrasts the subject position of the 'good girl' with the representations of the 'bad girl' who is increasingly at the centre stage of social policy – the teenage mother. The subject position of the 'good girl' not only excludes the experiences of many young women who fail to live up to its exacting standards, but it also excludes an awareness of and responsibility for the costs of such success within a highly individualized discourse of self-improvement and social mobility. In Finland, Oinas (1998) describes how middle-class young women distinguished between 'career women' and working-class 'sexy women', distancing themselves from the latter.

The extent to which such changes can be seen as a form of 'progress' as well as questions about the role played by feminism in the development of a neoliberal economy and a deregulated labour market are increasingly at the centre of feminist discussions in the UK (Brown, 1995; McRobbie, 2001; Walkerdine et al., 2001). The diagnosis of progress vs decline is contested within feminism itself as well as being a feature of the wider culture. The apparent rejection of a feminist project by a generation of younger women, and the embracing of forms of femininity resisted and

critiqued by earlier feminists has been a source of some confusion and debate (Frith, 2001). In the words of Walkerdine and colleagues

... discourses of 'girl power', which stress the possibility of having and being what you want, provide an ideal that is almost impossible to live up to, and through which young women read their own failure as personal pathology. (Walkerdine et al., 2001: 178)

In this article we move the debate beyond powerful 'can-do girls' and more pitiful 'bad girls'. We explore what is happening in the lives of young women in the UK and Finland by exploring how they both anticipate as well as try to avoid being locked into lives of adult women.

## CROSS-CULTURAL ANALYSIS: FINLAND AND THE UK

There are both similarities and differences between Finland and the UK; here we address issues that are relevant when analysing the position of young women in these countries. We also introduce our respective studies. We continue by discussing ways in which young women imagine their adulthoods in general and motherhood in particular. We discuss ways in which they both avoid and anticipate those imagined futures as adult women.

In recent decades there have been considerable changes in the lives of women living in the UK and in Finland, in relation to family life, education and work. In both countries, the age of first marriage and at birth of first child has risen. In Finland, women have outnumbered men in upper secondary school since the 1950s, and in higher education since the 1980s. There has been concern for male underachievement since the 1980s. The situation is now similar in the UK, although with a later start.

Labour market participation reflects the general changes for women. In the UK the employment rates for women have risen to 68 percent (53 percent full-time, 39 percent part-time). It is still the case that there is gender segregation in the labour market and that women receive lower pay than men in both countries. In Finland, 49 percent of the labour force is female and Finland differs from the UK and even from the other Nordic countries in that 83 percent of employed women work full-time. The context of the Finnish welfare state is relevant here. Anneli Anttonen (2001) suggests that the 'female working citizen' is a major female figure in Finland. Public childcare is readily available, and local authorities must provide daycare for children under the age of three, or pay an allowance to a parent whose child does not use this facility (most of these parents are women). The welfare state, at least in principle, treats people as

individuals, and gender differentiation is not built into the legislation. According to comparative statistics on equality, Finnish women fare well.

The UK study, 'Inventing Adulthood: Young People's Strategies for Transition',<sup>1</sup> builds on an earlier study of youth values.<sup>2</sup> The objective of the earlier study was to map the moral landscape of young people aged 11–16 drawn from five contrasting locations in England and Northern Ireland (referred to subsequently as the UK), including urban, rural, relatively affluent middle-class areas and relatively deprived working-class areas. The current study follows 107 young people from the same sites, many of whom took part in a questionnaire survey, interviews and/or focus group discussions in the first study. There are 46 young men and 61 young women in the sample, and this article focuses on the young women. The young women were 43 percent broadly located in the middle class and 57 percent in the working class ( $N = 26:35$ ) (indeed, reflecting the sample as a whole).<sup>3</sup>

The study is qualitative and longitudinal in design, with researchers undertaking a biographical interview with each young person at intervals of approximately nine months. Other methods used include emergent focus groups (in which individuals are brought together across sites to discuss issues emerging as of importance from the study), questionnaires (on values and social attitudes, derived from the earlier study) and 'memory books' – a form of open diary in which young people record activities and feelings, and preserve memorabilia to use as a basis for the second interview (Thomson and Holland, forthcoming, 2005). Lifelines are used in the first and third interviews (see later). Interviews and focus groups are recorded, transcribed and coded on NUD\*IST for cross-cut analyses. We also use narrative analysis and a case study approach to capture process in this longitudinal study (Thomson and Holland, 2003).

In the Finnish study, 'Tracing Transitions – Follow-Up Study of Post-16 Students', we started in the context of a comparative, cross-cultural, contextualized and collective ethnographic study, 'Citizenship, Difference and Marginality in Schools: with Special Reference to Gender'.<sup>4</sup> We conducted research in two secondary schools in Helsinki with a team of four other researchers.<sup>5</sup> One of our research schools was more working class, one more middle class, but we chose schools where there was not too great a contrast. There were more girls in the more middle-class school, and our sample reflects this. However, class divisions are not as strong in Finland as in the UK, so it is more problematic to cite clear-cut figures.

Tuula Gordon and Elina Lahelma conducted the first transition interviews in Finland with 40 young women and 23 young men (aged 17–18) predominantly in small groups and pairs, in 1999/2000.<sup>6</sup> We collected data on their remembered past, current situation, imagined future and plans to pursue those futures. Questionnaires and word associations were



also used. We explored young people's transitional paths, as well as their experiences and the meanings they attach to these processes. We aim to develop a complex understanding of the significance of age, gender, social class, ethnicity, embodiment and sexuality in young people's life histories, and a multilayered analysis of how these are played out in their transitions. We combine a life-history approach with the tracing process (Gordon and Lahelma, 2003). The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded thematically and analytically on ATLAS.

Each of the studies is longitudinal, and has a considerable history and background for the individuals taking part from earlier studies from which the samples were chosen. Each uses group interviews, although the UK study is based on individual, biographical interviews, and the Finnish study largely on small group or paired interviews. The UK study includes some slightly younger people (age range 15–20), but there is considerable overlap in age. Both studies have tried to develop ways of accessing issues that are not easy to deal with, and have attempted to approach them in multilayered ways that allow for the complexity of the processes involved.

## IMAGINED ADULTHOODS

In each of the studies we asked the young people to project themselves into an imagined future, and in this section we discuss the contours of that future which emerged in the data in the two studies. In the UK study, we used a lifeline. In the first interview, we asked the young people to imagine their lives in three years' time, at age 25 and at age 35, and to think particularly about their potential situation in housing, education, work, relationships and values or priorities in their lives at these three moments.

We examined the data for patterns, particularly in relation to age, gender and social class, and patterns did emerge (see Thomson and Holland, 2003, for a discussion of the method). For example, the young people expressed expectations that indicated increasing independence in relation to housing tenure, relationships and work between their current age and 25. All but two expected to have left home by age 25, but there were variations within this related to social class and location. There was a higher expectation of independence in terms of housing for the middle-class compared with the working-class young people.

Educational aspirations were relatively high in general, but with differences related to social class, gender and location. More young women than men (44 percent vs 35 percent;  $N = 27/61:16/46$ ) expected to go to university, as did more middle-class than working-class young people. These levels of aspiration continued into work, again with higher aspirations for the middle class, reflecting their educational expectations.



In Finland, the methods were somewhat different.<sup>7</sup> Before starting the interviews, the young people were asked to fill in a short questionnaire that included an open question 'How do you see your future at the age of 25?' We also asked them to present their immediate associations for 10 prompt words, some of which were 'child', 'young', 'adult', 'girl' and 'woman' and 'future'.

In the Finnish study, almost half of the young women expected to be married, engaged or cohabiting at age 25. Many of them, however, mentioned the kind of situation that they did *not* want to be in at that age – that is a mother of young children. But the themes mentioned in the order of frequency were: work, study, relationships, lifestyle and living circumstances. The idea of a future as an independent working female citizen is envisaged by Krista, when she explains what worries her about the future:

*Krista:* Well of course if you don't get to study what you want. And that you have money and can look after financial matters, everything costs money, like rent and all that. Work, work, getting work.

The lifelines in the UK study asked the young women to imagine the type of relationship they might have at age 25, and similarly 48 percent ( $N = 29/61$ ) of them mentioned marriage, engagement or cohabitation, but there was a distinct class difference. Less than one-third of the middle-class compared with more than a half of the working-class young women mentioned marriage, engagement or cohabitation. At the other end of the scale, a number of the young women were definitely not envisaging marriage at 25, with a variety of responses including no relationship, they wanted to be single, have fun, or had no idea what type of relationship to expect.

But for the young people in the UK, the most striking pattern to emerge in the lifelines was at the age of 35 where the variations described at age 25 seemed to have largely vanished and the vast majority of the young people, almost 100 percent, expected to be married or in a steady live-in relationship and with children, with most of them expecting marriage. This seems to be the lynch pin of imagined futures, whatever the trajectory that leads to it, and these varied considerably. For most of the young women, both working and middle class, with high career aspirations, commensurate with their educational and other aspirations, marriage and children, while specified as imagined objectives, raise issues that they will need to resolve. It is these issues, and the tensions they entail, that give rise to anxiety, ambivalence and avoidance in the young women's responses in both studies.

These more complicated feelings only became evident in the rest of the interview. Doubts about marriage were expressed, and for this group of

young women, marriage did not seem to be as important as it was for the young men in the sample. A third of them felt that they did not need to get married, and even those who liked the idea of marriage had requirements that they needed to satisfy before that could take place, to finish or secure their education, to have a good job, somewhere to live. There were, however, young women who had 'normal' expectations:

*Interviewer:* And erm, what about when you're 35?

*Vicky:* Erm probably in a house, with a husband or something, two kids. I don't know. Just a normal sort of what everyone else wants to be like, in a way.

In general, we have a mixed picture. The lifeline exercise prompted the expression of a common destination that may be expected to be reached by a variety of routes. Yet it becomes apparent in the interviews that the ideal is under pressure and in particular is being questioned and reworked by young women.

In Finland, in relation to these issues, the young women's discussion about their futures in the interviews suggested that nearly half of them definitely expected to have a partner and children in the future, about a third felt ambivalent about having children, a few talked about children conditionally ('if I have children'), and a few stated that they did not plan to have or were inclined not to have. Motherhood is an institution (Rich, 1977) which touches the lives of most women whether they have children or not, because all women are considered potential mothers, even if they do not want to, or cannot have children.

*Elin:* Well it's funny, because now I think that I wouldn't want to have children, I don't particularly like children or anything. But then when I think about being about 30 or something, I can't imagine that I really wouldn't have children. So it's a contradiction.

Ambivalence about motherhood was more common among those middle-class young women who strongly embraced an ideology of individuality. They did not express the same shared vision of 'settling down' as captured by the UK lifeline exercise. Elin's comments illustrate that a majority of them were aware of it, and found it difficult to envisage escaping that pattern. While young women talk a great deal about having fun as young adults, they tend to assume that work becomes increasingly significant. Upper middle-class women, with wealthy, educated families of origin, in particular emphasized their careers, but concerns about work were shared by almost all of the interviewees. In Finland, the proportion of single women and of single mothers is relatively high; moreover, there has never been a strong 'male breadwinner' ideology. As well as working to support themselves, women work to ensure sufficient financial

resources in two-parent families. For young women the lure of individuality and the ideology and rhetoric of equality coexist in a relationship of tension.

At the core of the tensions we have identified here in each of the countries is the issue of motherhood. From the lifeline exercise in the UK, we can see a possibly romantic notion of settling down with home and children, and for the young women, being a mother. The duality of the female biography is submerged in this common destination. The rest of the interview indicates some recognition of the problems entailed before this dream can be realized – education, accommodation, work will need to intervene. And women will need to work, few will achieve the luxury of being a kept mother, the notion that underlies this dream. In the Finnish situation the duality is much more starkly apparent. Almost all women *do* work full-time, the young women expect to have to work and be a mother, and they see the burdens that this imposes on the women around them. In the following section the young women talk about these issues.

#### MOTHERHOOD: ANXIETY, AMBIVALENCE, AVOIDANCE, ANTICIPATION

Many of the young women in the Finnish study believe in gender equality, but if they imagine having children, as the majority of them do, gendered patterns become more complex, their individuality fragments and gender becomes more visible. Young women's expectations of having children are full of ambivalence. Milla worries about finding a man who is good enough to be the father of her children. Riikka is afraid that she cannot have children, because her parents have had fertility problems. Heta, struggling with personal problems, wonders whether she'll ever be a 'decent enough person' to have children. Eini does not want to have children, but can't imagine not having children at 30. Motherhood is an expectation; for some it feels like an obligation, for others something positive to look forward to in the future.

Although most of the young women want or expect to have children, motherhood is often seen in negative terms, as a burden and a restriction. Aura might not want to have children at all – 'they are a terrible nuisance' – except if she finds a 'perfect man'. In her discussion with her friend Arja, many worries were expressed:

*Arja:* ... I don't know how to be with children at all, and I'm not terribly enthusiastic now, if for example in the tram you see some mothers whose children whine there and the mother snaps at them, you know, you really wouldn't want to be in that position.

*Aura:* ... for that reason I might not want to have children, because

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somehow it seems that everybody's life has that sort of pattern, first you are at school, then you study, then you marry, then you have children, and then you die.

Some of the young women have taken care of younger siblings or done baby-sitting, and their expectations of motherhood tend to be less complicated. Ella, with several small siblings, says that she is confident about having children, similarly to the young women in the UK study who experience a sense of adulthood in the domestic sphere. She explains this is an area where she is likely to be 'kind of good' and that 'it will be a piece of cake' – although her future plans also include university.

Reasons for postponing motherhood are varied, including education, work, getting a flat, having fun and travelling. But the independent female working citizen also wants to be certain that she is able to provide for her children materially. For example, when Ida suggests that before having children she has to have 'a permanent job', 'a flat', and her life needs to be 'in order', she envisages an independent future where men or fathers are not relied upon (Gordon and Lahelma, 2004). Young women talked about when they might have children, and most do not want children earlier than at the age of 28–30.

Motherhood itself is considered a potential joy and at the very least a special experience, and thinking about being old without children is not tempting.

*Pinja:* Once I've travelled round the world and have started some brilliant career and have seen lots and experienced lots, then I would be interested. When you're old, or older, it would be nice really to have a family and to know what it's like. What it feels like to be a mother, I reckon it's a really strong feeling you know. And you know really something you can't imagine if you're not a mother. It would be nice to live that through too.

Several themes characterized the young women's responses in relation to the idea of having children in the UK study. Like the Finnish young women, they were concerned about age, they did not want to have children too young, but also did not want to be too old. They saw it as important to be responsible about having children, and had material concerns. They suggested that you needed an education, a career with a reasonable salary and somewhere to live, before taking on the responsibility of children. Having a child was seen as a marker of adulthood, and for a number of the young women, they were determined to have fun, a good time, before settling down and having children.

*Corinne:* But I suppose like they depend on you too, you know what I mean? The child does. I think that's when I'll become an adult because I'll know it's me.

A couple of young women had decided that they did not want children, they were not particularly maternal, or had 'never been too fussy on wee ones' (Cynthia). Louise was doubtful about having children because of 'going through the pain', but was willing to consider adoption. A pregnancy scare had convinced Lorna:

*Lorna:* Oh I wouldn't have had it at all, I would have had an abortion 'cause I wanna do too many things as you can tell, I just don't, phew no, children, I don't really like children that much anyway to be quite honest with you, they're quite horrible little things.

Like many of the young Finnish women, Karen wanted to push the possibility as far away in time as possible, age 35 might be appropriate, when she would be prepared to give up living it up to spend all her time caring for her children. Again, the spectre of the lives of women around them, particularly their mothers, gives them pause. Karen feels sorry for her mother who sacrificed herself for her children, with no help from her father. Similarly, Lena thinks her mother got married too young at 19, and had five children before her thirties 'you know, I just think she was mad'. Others are concerned about being too old, dying when the children are still young, not being around for them when they need you. Amanda considers all the problems associated with having children, and concludes that 'it's a juggling act between what you want and what's fair on the rest of the world and stuff'.

There are many similarities in the responses of the young women in each of these two studies. Most of them want and expect motherhood, but are ambivalent about it. They want to have fun, and to build up a satisfactory base in terms of education, career and material situation – a home – before embarking on this ultimate trip into adulthood and responsibility. They are anxious about having children both too young, and too old. They do not necessarily like what they see in the lives of the adult women around them, although the young Finnish women are more convinced that they can avoid this fate. Young women in the UK often expect to embrace motherhood more full-time, at least for a period. This difference is both cultural and material, relating to differences in dominant cultural understandings of motherhood, and the level of public provision for childcare available in Finland.

#### AMBIVALENT ADULTHOOD: A GIRL, A WOMAN OR AN ADULT?

The young people we interviewed in Finland had just reached, or were about to reach, formal adulthood at the age of 18. We focused on their

age-related transitions, including a discussion of rights and duties they thought important, changes in their lives since secondary school, and meanings they attached to age. Considering what is understood as the favourable position of women in Finland, it is interesting to note that in both interviews and associations several young women did not think of themselves as women, and did not want to become women (Gordon and Lahelma, 2002). Milla, for example, suggests that 'girls can be silly', but it is not considered appropriate for 'women' to be silly. As 'girls' can also have more masculine characteristics, for Milla being a girl is nicer. Several other girls shared Milla's ambivalence. Sinikka cannot use terms like 'adult' or 'woman', because she does not 'feel like that yet'. She is not convinced that she would ever want to claim these positions.

Ella introduces another strand into the discussion:

*Ella:* If you're a girl, you can be a bit sort of, you can be like a child. But if you're a young woman, it sort of always means that if somebody calls you a young woman, it either means that an awful lot is expected of you. Or like – that you're a young woman, you should already know how to do this thing. Or another alternative that is that somebody wants to sort of respect you.

The figure of a 'female working citizen' has been constructed in order to enable women to be more autonomous with independent economic resources. 'State feminists' have been active in struggles to ensure women's access to the labour market. Young women in our study, however, questioned the advantages of this model.

Asta and Salli talk about their observations of the lives of adult women. While they have started to think about themselves as young women rather than girls, they nevertheless dissociate themselves from adult women they see round them.

*Salli:* Women try too much. Or I don't know . . .

*Asta:* They try too much, that's why they are exhausted and all a bit mixed up, because, because women sort of have to make a career and work and look after the family. It's all, sort of up to them.

In the context of a discussion on gender equality and feminism these young women do not consider the lives of adult women particularly tempting. Middle-class young women such as Asta and Salli alternate between ideologies of individuality and gender constraints (see Allatt, 1993). The limitations can be observed as gendered in other women's lives, but when they talk about themselves, the possibilities of individual agency are emphasized.

Pinja both embraces gender and shuns adulthood; she distances herself from the category 'woman', but not from the category 'girl': 'I don't know,

it's just such a big concept . . . We always laugh at some – some women's things.' The strong ambivalence expressed by these young women is not shared by everyone we interviewed, but it is interesting to explore how those young women who want to be silly, have fun and enjoy life without great restrictions, disassociate themselves from femininity. It is also interesting to pursue their transitions and to explore ways in which they solve the tensions imposed on them through increasing expectations bestowed on grown up people, adult citizens and women. For the majority of women it is difficult to sidestep issues dealing with partnership, family, children and work.

Representations of adult women veer between 'dependence' and 'independence'. Dependence on others, including boyfriends and husbands, is culturally not appealing to Finnish young women and not consistent with the 'working female citizen'. Yet they observe that women's independence is framed with limitations – often they only need to look at their own mothers to reach such a conclusion. Young women are more interested in 'interdependence': interlocking lives are acknowledged and cherished, but in the context of equality. While such equal interdependence is strived for, certainty about its feasibility wavers (Gordon, 1994).

For the young Finnish women, 'girl' is associated with youth, being or doing silly things, having fun. 'Young woman' is moving towards taking some responsibility, being more mature. In their accounts, the young women can see themselves moving to and fro between these two positions at different times. The adult woman seems to suggest more of a problem: the 'double burden' position of being an 'individual' and 'a woman'. This is what they imagine might lie in their future, and most of them are trying to stave that off for as long as possible.

In the UK study, we asked the young people in interviews what being adult meant to them. The notion of a process of maturation, moving towards adulthood, but with variations in status at different times or in different spheres of life also appears in the UK data. Interaction with significant adults, parents, older siblings, teachers, co-workers or older friends featured as important in the process, and aiding the progression to adulthood. Being treated as an adult facilitated the subjective feeling of being adult. Lena describes the subjective experience of feeling adult in some contexts, and a child in others:

*Lena:* Well . . . sometimes . . . you know when you're in different . . . you know when you're with friends, you feel like an adult . . . and then like with other people, you feel so stupid and innocent . . . you know that kinda thing

*Interviewer:* So in what areas of your life do you feel like an adult?

*Lena:* You know . . . knowing people and baby-sitting as well. You know watching the children and 'Go to your bed' and you know, getting tarted up and just being out . . . you know at night and all, and then my boyfriend . . .



things like that. And then you know . . . visiting your relatives and your aunts are all there and they're all chatting and you're like . . . feel kinda . . . you know.

There is a gendered discourse of development in which young women are seen as emotionally mature and young men as emotionally immature, but both young women and their parents are concerned about their developing too fast, particularly in relation to the dangers of sexual activity. Estelle talks about her mother's fears:

*Estelle:* She always worries about me because I'm the eldest and I'm a girl so she always says you've got to look after yourself, you can't let all the boys take advantage of you or anything – I said, mum, don't worry, I'll be fine. I think my mum's really worried because I'm growing up too fast for her.

Independence and autonomy were major themes in the process of growing into adulthood and maturity, and key moments which marked progress in this area were multiple: leaving school, getting a job and earning money, learning to drive, leaving home and some forms of relationships, particularly those involving heartache.

Belinda highlights some of the pleasures and pains of autonomy and independence:

*Belinda:* What, is there a moment when I feel I've sort of grown up? . . . I think it all rolls in together – when I left school – erm, that's made me feel a lot more grown up. Being treated different – like an adult. That makes you feel grown up. Erm, being able to like earn your own money, if you work – rather than asking your parents for money. That makes you feel different – independent – grown up. It all just rolls in, sort of they all add together . . . there's times when I've felt, oh I'm all on my own now but I've got no one to help me. And that's quite scary, – sometimes it's happened to me and I want to ask my mum and dad for help, but my pride er, I won't – I won't ask them. And then I have to do it on my own. And then there's other times when you think yeah, I can do it. I don't need no one else.

While Belinda asserts her independence and autonomy – and these were important issues for the young women in the study – the family and the domestic arena could also be a sphere in which adulthood was experienced. A number of young women felt confident and capable in the domestic sphere, having cared for younger siblings, others valued moving into a different relationship with their parents, less dependent and more equal (see also Gillies et al., 2001). Family interactions, like those relationships that contributed to increasing independence and autonomy on route to adulthood suggested earlier, represent the relational aspect of these transitions to adulthood.

Two overall themes emerging in the data then could be characterized as individualized and socialized/relational versions of adulthood.<sup>8</sup> In the

individualized version internal dimensions of adulthood are stressed – feeling mature, going through the process of becoming more independent and autonomous, making your own decisions and choices. The relational version included relationships of all types, and was associated with no longer being selfish, stupid, young, but taking responsibility for others. As we saw earlier, the clearest signal of this kind of maturity and adulthood was seen as associated with having a child.

In the discussions with the young women in both Finland and the UK we have seen ambivalence about adulthood in general and female adulthood in particular. They see themselves as moving between childhood and adulthood, wanting to have fun and to be free to be young, silly and irresponsible, but moving towards autonomy and independence in a process of maturation. They recognize the responsibilities to come, particularly in relation to having children and taking up the adult woman's position. The young Finnish women seemed to feel that they wanted to be able to hold it all together, although they did mention partners and expectations of sharing. As they wanted time to be silly, to build their careers and to have fun with their friends and partners, they wanted to delay childbearing, implicitly seen as a marker of adulthood for women, as it was explicitly in the UK. Material factors including social class location played a part. This was explicit in the young Finnish women's recognition of their privileged position and implicit in the higher expectations of education and career for young women in the middle class compared with the working class, in the UK. In Finland, a good mother is also a good provider.

## CONCLUSIONS

Debates within feminism in the US and Australia have centred on questions of generation, but in the UK attention is increasingly drawn to the impact of social class in polarizing the lives of women. When compounded with effects of generation (Walby, 1997), this gives rise to very different female biographies and an uneven access to opportunities brought about by feminism. Diversity exists in women's lives both within and between cultures. In a recent comparative study of young people's lives and expectations of the future contrasting European and Scandinavian countries, Brannen et al. explore the range of ways in which young people experience disjunctions between gendered realities and the discourses of individual choice (Brannen et al., 2002: 89). They observe that discourses of equality operate differently in different countries, relating to national welfare regimes and policy languages. In Scandinavian countries, they observe a 'silent' discourse of equality, premised on a normalization of expectations that nevertheless makes the contradictions

between normative expectations and actual practices difficult to name. Finland shares many similarities with the other Nordic countries, but a larger proportion of women have been full-time working mothers. In the UK, Brannen et al. (2002: 106) suggest that equality is translated into the language of individual choice, and contradictions between expectations and realities are attributed to individual tastes.

The power of individualism is suggested by the many similarities between the UK and Finnish young women, although there are differences between the societies. In this context it is notable that in Finland more public responsibility for children is assumed, and social policies have supported the possibilities for women to combine work and motherhood. Yet these questions are not simply political, but social, cultural and material. Patterns of gender relations may vary from society to society, but gendered inequality prevails. If we are all expected to think about ourselves as individuals, while gender is predominantly understood as a natural, biological category, it is not surprising that young women's imagined futures often contain anxiety, ambivalence and avoidance, as well as anticipation. Our data suggest that young Finnish women are more likely to engage in avoidance, but anxiety and ambivalence are shared. It is also not surprising that young women both in Finland and in the UK are often keen to postpone thinking about being a 'woman'. The more women postpone marriage or cohabitation and childbearing, the more likely they are to be single and childless. Imagining such a future is still exceptional, although a few examples can be found in our data.

'Independence' and 'dependence' are culturally loaded words. Independence is a fractured possibility at the best of times, but this fracturing is more obvious for women. In their transitions young women are engaged in balancing acts between the detraditionalization of gender and the remaking of gendered inequalities within changed conditions and a new language of choice (Adkins, 2002). While it is possible to imagine 'having it all', in practice it is more difficult. Those young women who want to have fun today and plan for the future in terms of education and work, and those who are ready to embrace femininity are most able to avoid contradictions. These contradictions, however, can be acutely experienced by the young women who assume they might want children but cannot think when and how, and those who try to imagine their futures without motherhood.

Our findings lead us to want to interrogate notions of 'detraditionalization' and of 'having it all'. We have sought to develop a more complex understanding of transitions of young women through engaging in cross-cultural interlocking analysis. Our approach enables us to search for analytical understanding beyond stating that young women imagine their futures in a contradictory way. Tensions between being an 'individual' and a 'woman' are evident both in the UK and in Finland, but assume

different inflexions. There are 'can-do girls' found in both countries, but among those who anticipate having children there is some divergence. The young Finnish women want to ensure that they are, as female working citizens, able to fend for their children with or without a partner. Young women in the UK have been more likely to embrace full-time motherhood, at least for a period. How they engage with anticipation and avoidance is more prominently linked to social differentiation, although constricting welfare state provision will increase such differentiation in Finland too. These contradictions are linked in complex ways to the frames within which they are evoked, as well as to the social, material and cultural context within which each young woman imagines her future as an 'individual'/'woman'. Representations of a 'can-do girl' and that of a 'pitiful girl' are both simplified and cannot capture the ways in which young women create a balance between anxiety, ambivalence, avoidance and anticipation when imagining their futures.

## NOTES

1. 'Inventing Adulthoods: Young People's Strategies for Transition' was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council (Ref: L134251008) as part of the Youth, Citizenship and Social Change Programme. Further information can be found at: [www.lsbu.ac.uk/ahs/ff/](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/ahs/ff/)
2. 'Youth Values: Identity, Diversity and Social Change' was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council as part of the Children: 5–16 Programme. Further information on the study can be found at: [www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications.shtml](http://www.lsbu.ac.uk/families/publications.shtml)
3. Social class position was assessed from a number of factors: mother's and father's work, type of housing, school attended, newspapers taken.
4. Our work in both studies has been funded by the Academy of Finland and the University of Helsinki.
5. We spent one school year (with intermittent follow-up) with 13/14-year-old students using ethnographic methods consisting of classroom observation, participant observation, student and teacher interviews, questionnaires, word associations, metaphors, etc. Janet Holland conducted a similar study in London (see Gordon et al., 2000).
6. The second transition interviews were conducted when the young people were 20/21, and the third set will take place two years later.
7. Exact comparisons between the data cannot be made; the figures here merely point to some directions in similarities and differences.
8. Jones and O'Sullivan (2004) make a parallel distinction between subjective and objective criteria of adulthood.

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