



Artwork by Teresa Juhl/@tattooskurken *

“I SURE HOPE THEY SEE ME FOR ME AND
NOT THE LITTLE THINGS ABOUT ME”

Young Adulthood, Unemployment and Mental Health

MASTER'S THESIS

Culture, Communication & Globalization
Fourth Semester, AAU

Anna-Lo Krogh

Supervisor: Trine Lund Thomsen

Keystrokes: 191,578

Study number: 20212146

Acknowledgements

The focus on mental health, young adulthood, and exclusion from education and the labor market has taken shape over several years — not only through academic inquiry, but through personal questioning of ideas of normalcy, health, and productivity. To live and navigate the world as a neurodivergent person carries both major challenges and wonderful insight. This has given rise to thoughts of how others manage similar positions. However, the final piece would have never come together without invaluable help and inspiration. I owe deep thanks to the neurodivergent community for limitless, caring support. Teresa, thank you for the artwork — your creativity added something I couldn't have. Rose, thank you for listening, practicing a rare kind of love, and representing such a joyful, honest and humorous neurodivergent path.

I am endlessly grateful to the informants who shared their stories, to the local Jobcenter for supporting my work and granting access to a vulnerable workplace, and to my contact at the Research Department of Social Medicine for believing in a total stranger. To my supervisor: Thank you for sticking with me through illness and heartbreak, and for pushing my academic thinking. To my SPS-counsellor, thank you for being a greater support and cheerleader than I ever expected.

Thanks to Mette, Amalie, Camilla, and my sister Marie Louise for important proofreading, feedback and knowledgeable brains for me to pick. You inspire me — in this project and beyond. And to my extraordinary mother: Thank you for always having my back.

Finally, Bjørn —roommate and champion — thank you for making me laugh even at the worst of times, and for showing that struggle and joy can coexist. To you and the rest of my pack of beautiful friends I am eternally grateful, you guys carry me when walking is too hard to do.

* Frontpage artwork inspired by the seventeenth-century engraving *The Stone of Folly* by Teniers, as depicted in Porter (2002).

Abstract

In a Danish context, public debates about the rising number of young adults, without attachment to the labor market or educational institutions, are booming. Especially, with regards to what can be termed the most ‘vulnerable’ group consisting, amongst others, of youths with mental health challenges. Different suggestions have been made to why this particular group might struggle and how these struggles might be overcome. This thesis aims to engage in conversation with this group to explore how young adults, with no attachment to the labor market or educational systems due to mental health issues, experience their everyday lives and practices outside of these systems. Furthermore, to explore how the group reflects on phenomena such as mental health, the good life and work.

In order to answer these research questions an approach, sensitive to working with specific social communities that might be subjected to marginalization, which pays extensive attention to accountable, transparent research, is necessary, in order to responsibly explore individual narratives and broader discursive trends concurrently. By engaging with a feminist, postmodern epistemological foundation, as a basis for performing short-term ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, an analysis of local understandings, practices and narratives is made possible. This is applied in a municipal setting, a social initiative targeted at youths in the local area.

The empirical data is analyzed by engaging with perspectives allowing both a discursive, phenomenological and affect-oriented focus, ensuring attentiveness to both language and bodies’ movements and orientations. The analysis demonstrates several points of ambivalence, as the youths navigate cultural and individual understandings of concepts such as meaning, accomplishment and belonging. Furthermore, the analysis identifies struggles with balancing discursive trends associating youth with extroversion and partying, as the participants favor social situations with fewer people, less noise or a different focus altogether. Additionally, it is found that location and temporality play a role in experiences of loneliness, exclusion and difference, as the participants point out another element associated with being young – to be out and about in the world, for example at school or with friends – whereas both interviewees believe they spend more time at home than their peers. These findings are connected to that of ‘common’ life trajectories, emphasizing certain steps that one should follow at certain times of the life span. Finally, the thesis identifies a significant power-relation between the facilitators at the initiative studied and the attendants there. These facilitators take part

in constructing everyday understandings of normalcy, activity and progress, which might interact with youths' processes of identity formation and self-awareness.

The thesis concludes that critical, queer and feminist approaches to research and analysis, bring forth alternative understandings of the field that, as opposed to barrier-focused research, opens up for more community- and society-oriented understandings of experiences of exclusion, deviance and stagnation. The thesis provides possible recommendations for researchers, politicians and municipal employees to take into consideration to counter some of the cultural trends which seem to interact with individual wellbeing in problematic ways. These recommendations center around reflections on political discourse affecting how value and meaning is comprehended in society, and ways to counter harmful effects by centering alternative understandings of for example meaningful activity and positive identities. The idea, of emphasizing youths' voices of mental health challenges in new ways, is unfolded as an active way to engage with social change. This is supported by recommendations for further research to explore issues of exclusion from queer perspectives on temporality and space, in order to counter dominant ideas of life-trajectories and move away from individual-focused approaches to struggling.

Indholdsfortegnelse

Introduction	0
<i>'The Good Life': Mental Health, Labor Market Participation and Community</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>Research Question</i>	<i>3</i>
Chapter 1: Methodology	5
<i>Situated Knowledges: Doing Epistemology in a Feminist Tradition.....</i>	<i>5</i>
<i>Research Design and Methods</i>	<i>6</i>
Ethnographic Fieldwork: Combining Observation and Interview	7
<i>Analytical Approach: Reflexive Thematic Analysis.....</i>	<i>15</i>
<i>Ethical Reflections and Researcher Positioning: A View from a Body.....</i>	<i>16</i>
Disclosure as Method and Solidarity.....	16
Writing and Representation: Language as Practice	17
Disclosing in the Field: Ethics of (Potential) Shared Vulnerability.....	17
<i>Limitations</i>	<i>19</i>
Chapter 2: Literature Review	20
<i>Part 1. Young Adults with Mental Health Challenges Who Are Not Able to Work or Study.....</i>	<i>21</i>
To Be NEET or Not?	21
Barriers on the Path to Labor Market Integration.....	22
Supporting Elements on the Path to Labor Market Integration	25
A Brief Look into Employment Law and Policy	26
<i>Part 2. Discursive Contexts.....</i>	<i>28</i>
Labor Market Integration, Imagined Community and Individuality	28
Alternative Openings.....	30
Chapter 3. Theoretical framework	31
<i>Introduction to Foucault</i>	<i>33</i>
Power in Foucauldian Terms	33
<i>Introduction to Ahmed.....</i>	<i>34</i>
Affect and Cultural Narratives	35
Happiness and Objects	36
Orientation and Lines	37
Chapter 4. Analysis.....	40
1. <i>Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity.....</i>	<i>40</i>
2. <i>Social Life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams.....</i>	<i>46</i>
Subtheme: Dreams of Future Social Life and Impact.....	48
3. <i>To Be Different or to Be Made Out to Be Different?</i>	<i>50</i>
4. <i>Standing Still or Moving Forward: On Home, Movement, and Belonging</i>	<i>53</i>
Subtheme: When Help Becomes Directive	59
Conclusive remarks	61
Chapter 5. Discussion.....	63
<i>Value, Independence and Meaningful Activity</i>	<i>63</i>

<i>Happiness and the Good Life Revisited</i>	<i>67</i>
Happiness as Performance or Analytical Bias to Search for Despair?	68
<i>Paranoid or Reparative Readings?</i>	<i>70</i>
Spatial and Temporal Possibilities.....	72
<i>Discussion of Methods, Theory and Limitations</i>	<i>75</i>
Conclusion	77
Works cited	80
Appendix	93

Introduction

They think everyone is trying to get out of work to lay at home and be lazy and, but really no one wants that, everyone wants to contribute, I just CAN'T because I'm too SICK. (Maria, 28 years old)

This was my friend's answer, when I asked about her experience with mental health challenges, not being able to work or study, and with having to frequent "Jobcenter" ("they" in this instance refers to Jobcenter and the people she met there).¹ The response was similar to that of others I have encountered. I wonder if it captures an important aspect of how many young adults, who are not currently able to work or study due to mental health challenges, describe their lives and experiences: With a sense of being met with distrust and a lack of recognition?

At a moment where there is both major media, political, and societal interest in the mental wellbeing of younger generations in Denmark, this can seem paradoxical. In 2024 the Danish government formed an expert group to bring forth new suggestions for the active employment effort after it had received increasing critique of how Jobcenter-offices operate (Bolvig et al. 2024). The political interest in a particular group of unemployed citizens was further highlighted by the agreement titled 'Lifting Youths' (DA: Ungeløftet, my translation). With this agreement, the Danish government and supporting parties agreed to allocate over 1.3bn DKK to a broad societal effort to create job openings, and to support youths towards "[...] mastering their own lives and preparing them to join the labor-community"² (Regeringen, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Konservative Folkeparti & Radikale Venstre 2024: 2). In the agreement, it is stated that 43,000 young people are neither working, nor in education, and nearly half of this group have a psychiatric diagnosis.

A study directed by VIVE (the Danish Center for Social Science Research) argues that since the social benefit system was reformed in 2013, the heightened demand for work-related activity has led

¹ Term for municipal, governmental office that apply national employment policy and law to local contexts (Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering 2025). When phrased as "Jobcenter" this refers to any given Jobcenter-office and/or the national institutional framework surrounding all Jobcenter-practices. It is specified when referring to a specific Jobcenter-office.

² Following Foss (2015) on APA citation style, direct quotes shorter than 20 words will be highlighted by quotation marks but otherwise incorporated in the text. Quotes consisting of 20 words or more are highlighted by indentation.

to a bigger focus on the young citizens that Jobcenter counsels, as these might have gone “under the radar” before (Bolvig et al. 2019: 5). Furthermore, the attention towards unemployment and mental health challenges amongst youths was increased further in light of the findings of a study by the Economic Council of the Labor Movement completed on behalf of Disabled People’s Organisations Denmark. It stated that ultimo 2018 more than 46,000 young people had neither an education, nor a job (Pihl et al. 2022), and additionally, 40% of this group had one or more disabilities. It was found that the risk of being without a job or an education as a young person is in fact four times higher for people with a disability. Especially youths with psychiatric and cognitive disabilities³, such as ADHD, autism, anxiety, and clinical stress disorders, were at risk of being without job or education, as this group makes up of 38.9% of youths with a disability and no job or education (Pihl et al. 2022: 4). The same year, Statistics Denmark found that young people (16-24 years of age), who had not been active on the labor market for three or more years and had not completed any post-compulsory education (DA: ungdomsuddannelse), had a 39% rate of using prescription drugs for mental health issues, and a 26% rate of having (had) contact with the psychiatric hospital sector (Danmarks Statistik 2024). There is, in other words, no shortage of focus on the connection between mental health and unemployment and there seems to be a particularly increasing interest in understanding the young and vulnerable group (Bolvig et al. 2019).

The numbers, however, never tell the full story. What this thesis explores, is what testimonies like those of my friend can tell us about the intersection of mental health, quality of life, and the expectations that come with entering adulthood, like being able to hold a job. How do youths verbalize and make sense of being a young adult who due to mental health challenges cannot work or study? And what – if anything – does that say about Danish society more generally? The next section explores debates and perspectives on the matter, both as presented by the general public and the affected parties, as well as how these debates relate work and mental health to the idea of wellbeing.

³ Wordings from the study.

‘The Good Life’: Mental Health, Labor Market Participation and Community

Public service coverage of labor market participation among young adults often shows a somewhat sinister state of affairs, with titles such as “Catastrophe: almost every tenth young person is not in education or work” (Prakash & Hall 2024) and “Many of the 45,000 youths without jobs or education has a disability and does not get enough help” (Olesen & Edelvang-Pejrup 2021, my translations). A lot of the arguments in these texts proceed on the underlying assumption that 1) to be part of the national community is to be part of the labor market or to be moving towards work through education and 2) not doing so is bad both for the individual and society. This assumption, that being part of the labor market is linked to living a good life and feeling included, can be seen in the following quote from an article written by a group from ‘A Path for Everyone’ (DA: En Vej til Alle), who are, in their own words, a “coalition of change” working with different organizations to help young people without education and work towards these activities (En Vej til Alle n.d.)⁴:

Attaining an education and a meaningful job is in many ways a part of the good life, and we believe that as a system we should be fighting to give as many young people as possible this opportunity. It will give them a chance at attaining a positive identity, an experience of contributing and being useful, as well as it will give them a day-to-day rhythm and content to their life. (Vickery, Bukdal & Klie 2023: l. 19-23, my translation)

This statement relates work to a positive identity-formation and frames it as a contribution to society and to what it means to live a (meaning)full life. The idea of work, or work-related activities, as associated with community-feeling, a positive sense of self and a good life, appears to be viewed as especially true when it comes to mental health challenges - as opposed to physical illnesses. This is highlighted in an article in Fagbladet 3F, a trade journal published by trade union 3F, focusing on labor market conditions and challenges (Fagbladet 3F n.d.). In the article “Jobcenter makes Danes mentally ill” (my translation), Sokoler and Olesen (2017) interview Tue Flindt Müller, doctor and active participant in public debates of health politics (Lægeforeningen 2023). Müller argues, that

⁴ Examples of public, professional, and NGO organizations they work with: JustEat, Coop, Danish Industry, Children’s Rights (DA: Børns Vilkar), Danish Chamber of Commerce (DA: Dansk Erhverv), The Danish Red Cross Youth, etc. (En Vej til Alle n.d.).

when people have “an ordinary, tangible work-related injury”, the request for support usually goes through the system quite smoothly (Sokoler & Olesen 2017: 26-27, my translation). However, as he sees it, Jobcenter “[...] does not always handle mentally fragile patients well” and tend to pressure this group to a point where they become more ill (Sokoler & Olesen 2017: l. 27-28, my translation). This statement is supported by a survey performed by the National Association of Mental Health (DA: SIND) and the Danish Mental Health Fund (DA: Psykiatrifonden), completed by 1,400 people on sick leave. The results show that citizens on sick leave due to mental health diagnoses often feel harassed and strained by the system they thought were supposed to help them. Some citizens even experience a worsening of their symptoms (SIND & Psykiatrifonden 2019). More than two thirds of the participants said that frequenting Jobcenter strain their quality of life, 23% to such a degree that they have felt like life was not worth living.

The strain brought on by Jobcenter is also emphasized in a study exploring the narratives of 24 participants, who had all previously been unemployed for more than a year and at the time of the study had been back in employment for over three months (Rambøll & Væksthusets Forskningscenter 2017: 9). One of the participants said that “[...] one of the best parts about working again, is getting peace from Jobcenter” and “from the nagging sense that you are not good enough” (Rambøll & Væksthusets Forskningscenter 2017: 94, my translations). In fact, several of the participants’ stories pointed to the experience that getting a job also meant being freed of societal stigmatization, which was experienced as both stressful and depressing.

Based on these accounts, the findings of Larsen et al. from 2012 are still relevant today. They argue that in our society we view work as the main source of wellbeing, sense of identity and inclusion in society; and that therefore work is also seen as the *solution* to a plurality of social challenges (Larsen et al. 2012). As they argue that mental health challenges seem to fall into this category, this thesis seeks to explore what it might be like to be positioned as part of a social issue needing a solution.

Research Question

As a group, young adults with mental health challenges who are not working or studying, are repeatedly considered a political, academic, and social problem, which should be understood in order to solve it. It is, in other words, a group that oftentimes is talked *about*. In this thesis, I explore what

is to be gained by talking *with* them, to further analyze the group's own perspectives and understandings of the social and political tendencies and ideas presented in this introduction. That analysis is guided by the following research question:

How do young adults make sense of their everyday lives, experiences and practices as individuals with mental health challenges and no attachment to the labor market or the educational system? And how do they reflect on phenomena such as mental health, the good life, and work?

The inquiry will center around *personal accounts, practices* and *contexts* with relevance to ideas of labor, happiness, productivity and community. More specifically, through the analysis of ethnographic fieldwork, I will focus on *what it feels like* to come into adulthood when one cannot fulfill the work and career expectation that comes with it. And I will argue that there is a lot to be learned from these experiences in terms of what they reveal about the constraints and limitations of how we have constructed our notions of 'the good life'.

Chapter 1: Methodology

This chapter introduces and explains the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of the thesis. Firstly, I unpack the epistemological foundations and the rationales behind my choice of method. Hereafter, the research design and particular research methods are presented. Then the analytical approach is introduced, followed by reflections on ethics and researcher position. Finally, the study's limitations are assessed.

Situated Knowledges: Doing Epistemology in a Feminist Tradition

To consciously engage with positions of marginalization I employ a framework with a long history of researching, centering and engaging with minority voices: A feminist approach. Following Lykke's (2008) extensive work on mapping tendencies within feminist research, I do not claim that there is *one* feminist epistemology. However, as Lykke (2008) argues, there are overlapping qualities across different feminist engagements with science. One of these is the persistent effort to *situate knowledge*.

This approach owes much to Donna J. Haraway whose work on the construction of knowledge introduced an effort to situate "[...] science as a complex of worldly material and semiotic practices" (Oxford Bibliographies 2023: ll. 23–24). In the essay "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", Haraway (1991: 188) introduces 'embodied vision' as a way for feminist researchers to challenge the so-called "gaze from nowhere", which she argues haunts the dominant ideas of scientific reasoning. She names this gaze 'the god-trick': A positivist idea of detached, objective observation, where the researcher is imagined as a neutral, disembodied knower (Haraway 1991; Lykke 2008). To contest it, Haraway insists that no vision is ever passive: Whether mediated through organic eyes or technological apparatuses, seeing is always an interpretive act. She writes, "[...] there are only highly specific visual possibilities, each with a wonderfully detailed, active, partial way of organizing worlds" (1991: 190).

This is not to say that science is to abandon objectivity completely; on the contrary, Haraway (1991) argues that by acknowledging our involvement in knowledge production, we can take responsibility for how we engage with the world. Researchers cannot "look from the outside" but must position themselves as co-creators of what is analyzed (Lykke 2008: 17). This calls for writing that embraces

nuance, detail, and specificity. Thus, grounding the thesis in Haraway's (1991) concept of situated knowledges carries methodological and epistemological consequences. It means that I do not approach knowledge as something that can be accounted for independently of the perspective brought by the one who produces it. Rather, I understand knowledge as always already embedded in specific bodily, historical, and social positions – including my own. This entails a responsibility to make my standpoint visible, rather than pretending to speak *from nowhere* or *above* the phenomena I engage with. This is unfolded in the section: 'Ethical reflections and researcher positioning: A View from a Body'.

Placing Haraway within a specific branch of epistemology is not straightforward, as it is in many ways the idea that one can establish fixed criteria for objective scientific research that she critiques (Lykke 2008: 139). That said, Haraway herself acknowledges being inspired by approaches such as radical social constructionism, postmodernism, and critical discourse theory (1991: 185). According to Lykke (2008) this orientation draws on thinkers such as Foucault, Lyotard, and Haraway herself, and is rooted in a *postmodern* philosophical tradition that centers discourse and narrative within a critical, self-reflexive research practice. Postmodern philosophy considers "[...] the subject as decentered and as re/produced in and of discourses" (Lykke 2008: 141) and therefore aims to study constructions of categorized (e.g. gendered, racialized, sexualized) subjects. This entails efforts to expose and challenge understandings of experience, knowledge and identity otherwise taken for granted. Furthermore, the focus placed on situatedness, and reflexivity can be considered a step beyond postmodernism to what Lykke (2008: 146) terms 'a revised feminist standpoint epistemology'. This approach considers critical, responsible, partial perspective a way of *accountably* connecting research to "formulations of reality" (Lykke 2008: 147), and as such does not completely abandon the idea of objectivity or reality.

Research Design and Methods

As much other current ethnographic work this study adopts an *iterative-inductive* approach (O'Reilly 2012). As described by O'Reilly (2012), this means that data collection, analysis, and writing are interlinked rather than discrete stages. Consequently, ethnographic research moves "[...] forward and back at the same time" (O'Reilly 2012: 30), allowing space for flexibility, redirection, and responsiveness to the field. Such a design is particularly well suited for working with potentially

vulnerable participants, as it enables adjustment to individual needs and contexts in line with ethical recommendations from VIVE and the Danish Authority of Social Services (DA: Socialstyrelsen) (Berger et al. 2021).

In addition to the overall framework of the iterative approach, working with different stages of the project simultaneously, I apply the *abductive approach* regarding choices of theoretical perspectives (Olesen & Monrad 2018). The abductive research process begins by having an interest in, questioning, or wondering about a certain topic (e.g. what is it like to live as a young adult with mental health challenges and no affiliation with the labor market or educational system in our kind of society?). Then, one collects empirical data about the topic and afterwards aims to place the studied in a new theoretical framework to hopefully gain new perspectives and insights, and to find the most plausible explanation to one's wondering or questioning (Olesen & Monrad 2018). The approach aligns with the thesis' methodological and epistemological approach as it emphasizes *context*, rather than formulating general laws or theories of behavior, as well as it allows for a flexible research process (Akademiet for talentfulde unge n.d.).

The study is qualitative in its nature, as answering the research question requires an orientation towards depth more than breadth (Frederiksen 2020; Braun & Clarke 2022). It relies on a small sample and rich situated data to explore complex meaning-making processes. Following Braun and Clarke (2021), the research can be viewed as both descriptive and interpretive, recognizing that description itself is an act of interpretation. According to Braun and Clarke (2021b), meaning is not simply extracted from data, but constructed through the researcher's interpretive lens; a view consistent with the epistemological foundations.

In the following, I introduce ethnographic fieldwork, the research design, and specific research methods.

Ethnographic Fieldwork: Combining Observation and Interview

What all ethnographic research has in common is an emphasis on culture and its expressions. The meaning of this term can be said to be rather ambiguous, but among anthropologists 'culture' is most commonly conceptualized as: "[...] those abilities, notions and forms of behavior persons have

acquired as members of society” (Eriksen 2015: 4).⁵ The concrete ethnographic framework I present here draws on Thomas Hylland Eriksen’s work on culture and fieldwork (Eriksen 2015), Karen O’Reilly’s reflections on ethnographic and sociological studies of identity and community, home, belonging, and social exclusion (Loughborough University 2025) and Kirsten Hastrup’s Danish anthropological point of view on fieldwork (Hastrup 2020). Lastly, the reflections on ethics and positioning within a field ‘close to home’ draw on Sofia A. Villenas work within critical race studies, ethnography and qualitative methodologies (Cornell University n.d.)

Within anthropology in particular, ethnographic fieldwork is “[...] the most important source of new knowledge about society and culture” (Eriksen 2015: 32). It is defined here as “[...] a thorough close-up study of a particular social and cultural environment [...]” (Eriksen 2015: 5). Unlike experimental methods, fieldwork involves studying phenomena *in situ*, embedded in their natural social settings (Hastrup 2020). As such, it aligns with a postmodern framework valuing context and multiplicity (Szulevicz 2020).

As Frederiksen (2020) notes, fieldwork can be termed an “unclear” methodological category as it often consists of both interview-methods and more non-intrusive forms of methods like observation. Following Hastrup (2020), I view fieldwork not just as a method but as an overarching framework for navigating different forms of data and selecting “tactics in the hunt for knowledge” (p. 68, my translation). She describes the fieldwork framework as a

[...] method to gain knowledge about how taken-for-granted beliefs emerge, are maintained or changed inside the framework of specific social communities. (Hastrup 2020: 65, my translation).

The overall social group in question is further explored in the literature review, while details of the specific social site and context is included below in the sections covering the conceptualization of the field, introductions to the field-sites and reflections on the process of access.

⁵ See Eriksen (2015: 4-6) for a more extensive discussion of the term ‘culture’.

Conceptualizing the Field

Ethnographic fieldwork is traditionally tied to a bounded field-site; a particular location to be studied, considered central to the social community in question. However, this thesis draws on an understanding of ethnography as *multi-sited*, in the sense that it *follows* practices and relations across different physical and institutional contexts (Marcus 1995). Based on this reasoning, descriptions of the social world of young adults with mental health challenges, who are not under education or in employment, cannot be meaningfully based on a single site, since social and cultural understandings are constantly shifting across locations. This, however, implies the existence of a specific ‘something’ to follow.

Rather than attempting to grasp a coherent ‘whole’, I follow Candea’s (2007) suggestion to work with *arbitrary locations*, field-sites defined not by their completeness, but by their analytical usefulness. Hence, the two field-sites of the thesis are treated as such: They do not represent the entirety of the participants’ lives but serve as contingent vantage points for exploring fragments of lived realities. Bounding the field in this way is therefore not an attempt to ‘capture it all’, but a deliberate methodological act that acknowledges its own partiality, aiming to offer situated insights from within a complex and fragmented social landscape.

The Youth Department at Jobcenter and a Local Social Initiative

The access to the field-sites of this study was facilitated through the Research Department of Social medicine at Frederiksberg Hospital, which provided contact with a local Jobcenter youth department. In Denmark there are 94 Jobcenter-offices (Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering 2024), which commonly have specific sections targeted to youths. The municipality, in which this study took place, has three administrations: 1) Children, Culture and Sports, 2) Social and Health, and 3) Technology and Environment. As part of the Social and Health administration, the local Jobcenter is responsible for “activation and employment of unemployed citizens” (Anonymized municipality 2025, my translation)⁶. The youth department is a subdivision of Jobcenter focused specifically on young people who are unemployed or not currently engaged in education. Although, it falls under the broader Jobcenter umbrella, the department operates from a separate physical location; a spatial

⁶ This and other information included from the website of the municipality is not referenced directly, as the website contains the name of the municipality. Thus, the website is cited in this manner and excluded from the list of works cited. It can be obtained upon request by examiners.

distinction that may also reflect efforts to create a more youth-friendly or informal setting. The youth department offers various social initiatives targeted to different sections of the young segment, some voluntary and some obligatory.

My contact person from Frederiksberg Hospital, a PhD-researcher, accompanied me on the visit to the youth department, where we met up with a key employee at the department. She became my main contact at the research site, clearly invested in doing her best to support the youths she would come across in her position (Fieldnotes 29.10.2024). At this meeting, the researcher helped present and legitimize my project to the contact person at the youth department, explaining its relevance within broader social and health-related research. This endorsement eased my entry into the field. This visit was included in the field work, as containing valuable contextual information.

During this visit my contact person explained that the youth department serves ages 15 to 30, but for practical as well as ethical, and analytical reasons, I decided that this thesis would focus on 18–30-year-olds. Not only could they give informed consent without parental involvement, but they were also more likely to have direct experience with dilemmas related to education, employment, and systemic expectations of young adulthood. Furthermore, the initial plan was to focus on young people who have received an official mental health diagnosis. However, the contact at Jobcenter pointed out that while many of the young people she works with experience significant psychological distress, they don't necessarily have the resources to undergo the formal processes required to receive an official diagnosis (Fieldnotes 29.11.2024). This led me to broaden the sampling criteria beyond formal diagnosis and aim to partake in different initiatives for unemployed youths, not necessarily targeting mental health, to meet potential interviewees. However, as the following e-mail-communication with the youth department unfolded, it became clear that they were going through many organizational changes and were impacted by several sick leaves. Therefore, they ended up only being able to let me attend one initiative: The program titled MeetUp.⁷ MeetUp is one of the many initiatives offered by the department. It is a free and voluntary support program for young people aged 16 to 29. MeetUp provides low-threshold access to counselling, practical assistance, and weekly group activities (Anonymized municipality 2025). It was through participation in these activities that I carried out most of the fieldwork. MeetUp was initially formed to heighten mental wellbeing of youths in the local area and to lead towards job/education (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024).

⁷ Throughout the thesis I refer to the initiative as 'MeetUp', a fictional pseudonym employed to ensure anonymity.

However, as one of the facilitators told me, now the main focus is to form a social space to meet peers (Fieldnotes 06.11.2024).

Anonymization

The individual participants were ensured pseudonymization through a consent-form, and at each interview I reiterated that I would not include their names or other personal information such as addresses, names of friends and family or contact information. However, in the name of full transparency, I mentioned that they, and their close family and friends, might recognize their statements if they were to read the thesis and knew of their participation. This was done in accordance with recommendations on ethnographic sensitivity and the responsibility to ensure appropriate confidentiality in order to protect research participants (AAA n.d.).

Drawing on Larsen et al.'s (2012) aim to avoid contributing to any forms of stigmatization, the location of the specific Jobcenter, youth department and social initiative was also pseudonymized. This was done especially considering MeetUp is a unique initiative with a low number of regular attendees (Fieldnotes 28.11.2024), which would make participants' stories very vulnerable to recognition.

Research-Tools

Initially, I planned a multi-step approach: beginning with what can be termed 'preliminary fieldwork' to explore the field and develop research protocols (Caine et al. 2009). This was to be followed by biographic narrative interviews (to go into depth with the participants' life stories), and finally the ethnographic tool: The go-along method (Kusenbach 2011), enabling access to participants' everyday life beyond institutional settings. However, as field access unfolded, it became clear that this full design would not be feasible due to the organizational changes at the Jobcenter. This resulted in limited time to build the kind of 'rapport'⁸ that would be needed to arrange meetings with participants outside the institutional contexts (e.g. in their homes, on the bus, or walking to appointments). These constraints led me to rely on a short-term ethnographic design (including semi-structured interviews) outlined below.

⁸ Rapport is an essential part of ethnographic fieldwork, it refers to developing a sense of trust, between interviewer and informant, allowing for information to "flow free" (Spradley 1979: 78).

Short-term fieldwork

To some, short-term fieldwork can seem counterintuitive, as ethnographic fieldwork is often considered a very time-consuming process (Szulevicz 2020). However, with short-term fieldwork, the ethnographer

[...] constructs a field with a focus on short interactions with informants, but with a long term engagement with use of symbols, use of tools, document analysis etc. (Musaeus 2012: 155, my translation)

This point is supported by Szulevicz (2020), highlighting that short-term fieldwork requires the researcher to be very well prepared in terms of reading up on the social group, the problem area, and (theoretical) discussions hereof. This preparatory work is outlined in the literature review. Such extensive effort to engage oneself with preparatory research of the social group and relevant surrounding elements reiterates the legitimacy and validity of the short-term ethnographic method, which has become a rather common approach, especially as it allows research into areas which might have very limited access, such as a local Jobcenter department.

Another point worth mentioning with participatory methods is the degree to which the researcher participates in the social practice. Following Szulevicz (2020: 100) my participation can be conceptualized as a continuum, as I was moving between being primarily observing (i.e. listening quietly when facilitators and participants at MeetUp were discussing potential activities) and fully participating in the social practices (i.e. being assigned a task just like everyone else when making dinner at MeetUp).

The thesis' short-term fieldwork consists of three visits: One to the youth department (on October 29th, 2024), and two visits to MeetUp (on November 20th, 2024 and November 27th, 2024).

Semi-structured interviews

Initially, the plan was to approach qualitative interviewing with a biographic narrative framework to let the participants' life-stories 'take the stage' and thereby access testimonies of the field (Antoft & Thomsen 2005; Christensen & Thomsen 2016). However, after the first visits to the field, I was advised by the facilitators to pose quite specific questions when interviewing, and to not spend more

than 40-45 minutes for an interview to ensure a clear structure and consideration of the participants' resources (Fieldnotes 20.11.2014). As this did not seem compatible with the biographic narrative approach, I followed VIVE and the Danish Authority of Social Services' (DA: Socialstyrelsen) (Berger et al. 2021) recommendations to adjust the study to its particular context. Therefore, I organized my interviews as semi-structured, which, according to Tanggaard and Brinkmann (2020: 35), has been receiving growing attention regarding being understood as a *situated* practice, taking place in a specific historic and cultural context. As such it aligns with the thesis' epistemological framework, while allowing flexibility to adapt to the context and introduce more structure to the interview. The semi-structured interview allows for both natural and organic conversation, while keeping a clear direction for the conversation (Braun & Clarke 2022), which seemed to be important for the participants to feel comfortable. As such the interview-guide is characterized by an aim to balance deliberate naivety (for openness and flow) and thorough preparation and research into the problem field (to ask concrete, relevant questions) (Brinkmann and Kvale (2009).

Data and Retrieval of Literature

Sampling

Considering the process of field-access, the form of sampling used can be termed 'convenience sampling', as this, according to Braun and Clarke (2022), refers to selecting 'cases' (in this case places of fieldwork and interviewees) that are most easily accessed. In practice this means advertising one's project, and then the participant group constitutes whoever responds. As such I gained permission to advertise my project at the youth department of the Jobcenter in the form of handing out flyers, putting up posters, and sending out e-mails to the employees describing my area of interest and my aim to do both fieldwork and interviews. My contact person at the youth department also sent out e-mails to the employees endorsing the project. No one responded to the advertisement, but two people from MeetUp agreed to participate in an interview each. They were both male, 26 and 18 years of age, frequent users of MeetUp and not in any formal employment or education during the time of the research. They also both viewed themselves as having mental health challenges.

Here it is important to note that while I was only able to include two interviews in the data, the fieldnotes also contain information from dialogue with other valuable informants such as other attendees and facilitators at MeetUp, and employees at the youth department of the local Jobcenter.

As such the two interviews do not stand alone but is part of a broader dataset. The different parts of this dataset are presented below.

Fieldnotes

Following Rubow et al. (2018: 56) the fieldnotes of this thesis are not written with a strict format in mind, but as drafts and a way to “[...] preserve the focus one had during the day, a focus which is highly sharpened by knowing one has to write notes”.

I made use of different techniques for different contexts: Quick “jot-notes” (Rubow et al. 2018: 57) were written down while in the field (e.g. stepping out to the bathroom to write quick notes on my phone or in my notebook) and as recorded voice memos following a MeetUp event. These could be anything from “Remember to look up MeetUp’s Facebook-page” to “I like the decorations, very homey”. They were then used in the work with “expanded notes” (Rubow et al. 2018: 57), written after and between visits to the field, describing specific situations and methodological and analytical reflections. Finally, these were incorporated into the “field diary” (Rubow et al. 2018), which includes personal reflections and reactions, and a chronological structure of the whole fieldwork process (see appendix). The diary integrates all notes, enabling one to look for patterns in all kinds of reflections on the field site. The field diary notes are considered data and employed in the analytical work on equal terms with the interview transcriptions, cited as “Fieldnotes” followed by the date of writing.

Interview Transcriptions

As the interviews were recorded and then transcribed, the data is by definition not the direct speech, but the transcribed versions of the interviews. Following Braun and Clarke (2006: 88) transcribing is an important part of familiarizing yourself with the data, and it informs the early stages of analysis. I followed their advice to aim for “[...] a ‘verbatim’ account of all verbal (and sometimes nonverbal eg, coughs) utterances” (Braun & Clarke 2006: 88), and staying true to utterances’ original nature, through the use of punctuation, notes on changes in tone, or sounds, etc. (see transcriptions in appendix). Following Shelton and Flint (2018), I aimed to stay aware that transcription carries ethical implications related to interpretation and representation. This shall be addressed further in the reflections on ethics and positioning.

Retrieval of Literature

To retrieve relevant literature, I used different search engines. To find public reports, newspaper articles, and think pieces *Google* (<http://www.google.com>) was used, with searches such as: ‘Youths without job and education’, ‘NEET Denmark’ and ‘Youths mental health issues’ (all searches made in Danish). For journal articles and other academic works, Aalborg University Library’s search portal *Primo* (https://kdbk-aub.primo.exlibrisgroup.com/discovery/search?vid=45KBDK_AUB:AUB) was used with searches such as: ‘Critical ethnographic inquiry’, ‘NEET Denmark’, ‘Unemployment’, ‘Short-term ethnography’ and ‘Thematic analysis’. Finally, much literature was retrieved through ‘snowballing’, also known as ‘citation chaining’ (Cranfield University Library Services n.d.), where one searches the citations of works already read to identify other relevant materials.

Analytical Approach: Reflexive Thematic Analysis

The analytical process was done following Braun and Clarke’s (2006; 2020; 2021; 2022) approach to thematic analysis (TA), which they term ‘reflexive’. Their version of TA separates technique from theory, allowing researchers to bring their own theoretical assumptions and frameworks into the analysis. The approach focuses on understanding people’s experiences, by identifying patterns across diverse data sets while remaining attentive to individual meaning-making, and offering both analytical rigor and accessibility (Braun & Clarke 2006). When used within a critical framework—such as the postmodern, feminist approach I apply—reflexive TA can function similarly to pattern-based discursive approaches (Braun & Clarke 2013 in Braun & Clarke 2020). It offers a way to analyze how cultural narratives, and normative structures materialize in lived experience.

I followed Braun and Clarke’s (2006: 87) six phases of TA: 1) Familiarizing myself with the data, by writing, editing and re-reading fieldnotes, and transcribing and re-reading interviews. Then came 2) Generating initial codes: Using Microsoft Word I coded interesting features of the data systematically. For this step I followed Miles et al.’s (2017: 81) definition of ‘inductive coding’, which means empirically grounding the codes, in order to stay “[...] open to what the site has to say”, rather than pushing data to match pre-existing codes. The types of coding used include: Descriptive coding (summarizing data), in vivo coding (using the participants’ own language), emotion coding (labelling emotions expressed), values coding (data reflecting values, attitudes and beliefs), and causation coding (participants’ views on *how* outcomes came to happen) (Miles et al. 2017).

Next step was 3) Searching for relevant themes. Here I made a mind map, organizing codes into potential themes. Then 4) Reviewing themes, I checked if the themes matched the coded extracts and edited the map of themes. Finally, 5) Defining and naming themes, and 6) Producing the report, were done simultaneously as the ongoing analysis and ‘writing out’ of the themes spilled into the final part of analysis working with selected extracts, relating it back to literature and theory.

Ethical Reflections and Researcher Positioning: A View from a Body

Building on the earlier discussion of ‘embodied vision’ researchers should expose the parts of their persons that shape their ‘viewing’. I aim to do so here.

I am a walking contradiction with a foot in both worlds - in the dominant privileged institutions *and* in the marginalized communities. (Villenas 1996: 714, original highlighting)

This metaphor leads to Villenas’ argument, that researchers should scrutinize their lived experiences, with being part of a minoritized group, as a central part of working academically with identifying, exploring, and confronting dominating discourses othering that particular minority group (Villenas 1996).

The focus of this thesis grew out of my own experiences with being on sick leave due to mental health issues; times when I had to reimagine life beyond work and study. These experiences formed a key part of the motivation behind the project and can never be completely. Inspired by Villenas’ (1996) notion of the ethnographer as both ‘colonizer’ and ‘colonized’, I conceptualize my positioning through the terms ‘minoritizer’ and ‘minoritized’. Rather than adopting terminology tied to racialized colonial histories, I use these terms to reflect the specific context: ‘Minoritized’ signals the position as someone living with mental health challenges, ‘minoritizer’ acknowledges the academic and institutional privileges I carry with me into the field. This conceptualization directly informs the ethical and methodological approach, highlighting the responsibility to make my dual position visible.

Disclosure as Method and Solidarity

Minh-Ha’s (1989) insight that majority voices are often labelled ‘impersonal’ or ‘neutral’, while minority accounts are seen as ‘too personal’ or ‘biased’, continues to resonate today. While Minh-Ha

primarily addressed race and gender, her point applies to other marginalized identities. Contemporary Danish cases confirm that issues with bias towards minority students and researchers persists (Fjeldberg 2016; Mortensen et al. 2021; Børch & Jacobsen 2023; Snekkerup 2023). Transparent positioning is therefore not only a question of reflexivity, but also of ethical alignment and academic resistance. To write and speak from a body that might otherwise pass as ‘functional’ or ‘neutral’ and choosing to mark it by disclosing becomes a gesture toward those who cannot, or will not, hide the parts of their lives, identities, or bodies that make people categorize or interact with them as ‘other’.

Returning to the position of ‘minoritizer’, reflections on the act of *representation* is presented, as well as how to accommodate accompanying challenges.

Writing and Representation: Language as Practice

Villenas warns that writing can perpetuate othering if we ignore our privilege (1996: 713). This includes the act of representing people, when they are not there to make objections. As such, writing up ethnographic work is “[...] morally, politically, even epistemologically, delicate” (Geertz 1988: 130 in Conquergood 2013: 101).

Therefore, a key ethical concern in this project has been language. Following Caldera et al. (2020) I draw on the distinction between being a minority (as a stable identity) and being minoritized (as a relational process shaped by societal dynamics).

Additionally, I am mindful that not all meaning is verbal. Inspired by Conquergood (2013), cultural expression is treated as multimodal: Meaning is conveyed through bodies, gestures, silences, actions, etc. This informed the fieldnotes and transcriptions and therefore also the analysis.

Disclosing in the Field: Ethics of (Potential) Shared Vulnerability

Before entering the field, I grappled with whether, and how, to disclose my experiences with mental health challenges. Such disclosure needed to serve both ethical rapport-building and research integrity.

While Hastrup (2020: 81) argues, that researchers enter the field as “strangers”, even when being close to familiar social circles or languages, Villenas (1996) shows that by sharing experiences with a community, you can gradually be accepted as a member. Furthermore, Hymes (1996: 13) insist that good ethnography requires conditions of trust, and that this makes it impossible to aim towards the role of “impartial observer”, as “[...] normal people from whom one has to learn will not put up with that”. Similarly, O’Reilly (2012) found that an empathetic, informal tone often works better than overt professionalism, especially in settings where academic authority may be viewed with skepticism.

Given the setting of the fieldwork, a space organized by Jobcenter, which is often distrusted by its users, a minimally academic tone was adopted, and I made brief strategic disclosures about my background. This helped build rapport, distinguish my role from institutional staff, and position myself as an empathetic, non-authoritative presence. The approach was discussed with my contact at Frederiksberg Hospital, who supported it.

To guide this process, I developed three principles for disclosure.

1) Disclose only shared reference points

One should only reveal what one can assume participants recognize as a shared reference point (Abell et al. 2006). Since all interviewees identified as living with mental health challenges, I included this detail about myself in a brief introduction of myself (see interview guide in appendix). In one case, I used a second-hand example (“One of my friends with ADHD and autism...”) to “unaccountably” offer an “insider experience” (Abell et al. 2006: 227).

Secondly, it is important not to disclose in a way that conveys that the interviewer, has “*greater* category entitlement to talk about a particular topic than the interviewee” (Abell et al. 2006: 235, original highlighting), as this can take the floor from the respondent. This was managed by the next principle.

2) Awareness of difference

In drawing attention towards dissimilarities, the researcher can highlight their role as a “naïve speaker” (Abell et al. 2006: 237), which reiterates to the interviewee that they are the experts of their lives. This can be seen in the following question from the interview guide:

[...] I don't know what it's like for example to have to leave school or stop working. Would you mind telling me a bit about what that was like for you?

3) *Stay open to adjustments (iterative fine-tuning)*

Lastly, following O'Reilly's (2012: 145) notion, that "[...] there is more to interviewing than interviewing", and her argument, that it also includes "[...] thinking, planning, writing, discussing [...] sorting through for themes, reading notes and transcripts and thinking again", I treated each interaction as data for refining the approach. This meant learning from moments of discomfort, silence, 'putting my foot in my mouth', and other to-be-expected moments of awkwardness when entering a new place (Eriksen 2015).

Limitations

Given the small sample size, the findings of this thesis cannot be generalized to a broader population of young adults who are not in work or education due to mental health challenges. However, the aim is not to establish a 'typical experience', but rather to give voice to individual perspectives and explore what it might mean to be positioned as 'different'. This reflects an intentional move away from essentialist or binary understandings of mental health and productivity. Following Schofield (2009) 'internal validity' is prioritized over generalizability, understood as the degree of 'fit' between the studied context and its representation (Schofield 2009: 92–93). Here, 'thick description' becomes key, as it provides the information necessary to assess such a fit. While findings may not be replicable in a strict sense, their validity lies in whether alternative interpretations would remain consistent with the original account (Schofield 2009: 71).

Another potential limitation relates to what Eriksen (2015: 40) calls 'homeblindness', as the fieldwork was conducted in a "semi-familiar setting". Eriksen (2015: 40) argues that while such familiarity can be advantageous—by mastering language and cultural conventions relatively smoothly—it can also lead the researcher to take too much for granted. He notes this can be mitigated through training. Although I cannot claim to be a trained ethnographer, instead I have sought to counter this limitation by devoting an extended amount of effort and space for reflections on this matter in the methodological sections, and by returning to these throughout the project.

Finally, the prolonged effort to gain access to the Jobcenter posed a practical constraint. Earlier contact might have allowed for more time in the field and the implementation of the originally planned multi-step approach. However, this was my first encounter with the institution, and organizational changes and staff sick leave were difficult to foresee.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review is divided into two main parts. ‘Part 1’ presents existing research on the social group in question: Young adults with mental health challenges who are not currently in education or employment – including both common barriers, supporting elements related to labor market participation, and relevant perspectives from employment law and policy. Then, in ‘Part 2’ the focus is shifted to a discursive perspective, exploring how dominant political and cultural ideas shape understandings of this group, and whether alternative perspectives might point to new ways of understanding and engaging with the problem area.

This structure reflects the aim to build an informed foundation while also critically engaging with the assumptions that underpin most research and policy-work on the area.

Part 1. Young Adults with Mental Health Challenges Who Are Not Able to Work or Study

To Be NEET or Not?

Since the financial crisis of 2008, the proportion of young people facing mental illness, homelessness, and detachment from education or work has increased markedly in Denmark (Katznelson et al. 2019). This trend has spurred research on the so-called NEET group (Not in Employment, Education, or Training), a highly heterogeneous group for whom more standardized international or national definitions are still lacking (Work4Youth 2015; Bolvig et al. 2019; Bolvig 2023). As a result, NEET rates vary across studies, and simplified uses of the term can lead to over- or underestimates of youth vulnerability.

However, a lot of Danish research adopts the NEET terminology, and the social group studied in this thesis *can be* considered a “subcategory” or “subgroup” to the larger NEET group. This is demonstrated in the report by Bolvig et al. (2019) exploring what they term ‘the most vulnerable part of the Danish NEET-group’(DA: de mest udsatte).⁹ Still, when mentioning the specific participants of this thesis, I avoid using the NEET label to prevent unwarranted stigma, as the term is frequently, yet imprecisely, equated with marginalization, discouragement, or exclusion, which may obscure the specific circumstances of the youths in question (Work4Youth 2015; Bolvig et al. 2019; Bolvig 2023).

Given the absence of a clear NEET definition and the wide variations regarding for example age and available support-systems (e.g. family support vs. social benefits), this literature review is guided by the contexts of the field sites: The youth department at Jobcenter (serving ages 15-30), for people who are unemployed, and MeetUp (serving ages 16–29) for anyone who “needs someone to talk to”(Anonymized municipality 2025). As such, the context-based focus justified a broad literature scope – both with regards to age and mental health related issues - to capture the full range of factors shaping young people’s access to/exclusion from work and education. All included research in the following sections focuses on a Danish context, as this is of highest relevance to the study, being

⁹ Bolvig et al.’s (2019) vulnerable NEET-group: people between 18-24 years of age, who have not been in work or education for at least a year and have complex challenges such as low education level, social or psychological challenges such as mental health diagnoses or criminal experience.

centered around fieldwork in Denmark with Danish citizens. I begin by synthesizing research on *barriers* regarding entering and retaining work or education.

Barriers on the Path to Labor Market Integration

VIVE has been part of two recent projects exploring the NEET group (Bolvig et al. 2019; Bolvig 2023). Their findings show that NEET youths with mental health issues face a heightened risk of permanent marginalization. Below, I briefly map the five most salient barrier-themes I found across the research regarding this group's possibility to move out of permanent marginalization.

1) Social Exclusion and Vulnerability

Larsen et al. (2012) frame long-term unemployment as not merely a “lack of work”, but as a complex issue constituted by many factors such as upbringing, educational achievements, substance use, and social ties, which collectively effect social in- or exclusion and identity.

In the 2013 reform of the Danish benefit system, people under the age of 30 without professional qualifications were mandated into education or work-oriented initiatives. The Job-bridge to Education program (DA: Job-bro til Uddannelse) (Cefu et al. 2020) deployed internships plus mentoring across eleven Jobcenter-offices between January 2018 and March 2020 but achieved no net gain in education or employment outcomes. Instead, a cluster-analysis of the participants revealed five approximately equally sized profiles:

- Academically high-achieving women with psychiatric diagnoses
 - Academically low-achieving men with substance abuse, ADHD, and a criminal record
 - Women from disadvantaged homes with childcare responsibilities and some academic challenges
 - Academically low-achieving women with prolonged benefit-dependency
 - Men living at home with better socioeconomic conditions
- (Cefu et al. 2020: 6, my translations)

These clusters highlight the heterogeneity of social vulnerabilities in the NEET-group. The key risk factors for becoming NEET include mental illness, substance abuse, foster-care background, parental

unemployment or low level of education (Bolvig et al. 2019; Cefu et al. 2020). Negative school experiences, such as bullying, nonattendance, academic underperformance, and weak social networks can further reinforce exclusion (Larsen et al. 2012; Katznelson & Görlich 2017; Katznelson et al. 2019; Jeppesen et al. 2020)

2) Health-Related Barriers

Studies consistently find that long-term unemployment and lack of professional qualifications coincide with elevated health challenges. Larsen et al. (2012) note that sustained unemployment can both stem from *and* exacerbate physical or psychiatric illness, while Bolvig et al. (2019: 31) report that the most vulnerable NEET-group experiences disproportionately high rates of health issues; a factor that also predicts prolonged NEET-status.

In the evaluation of Job-bridge to Education it was found that 70% of the participants had engaged with psychiatric services, including diagnostic processes, treatments, enduring long wait times, etc., as such many exited the internships due to health-related reasons (Cefu et al. 2020). These findings stress how lengthy, fragmented, care pathways can interrupt attempts at education or work. Supporting findings show that premature activation initiatives can hinder rather than help recovery (Danneris & Herup Nielsen 2018; SIND & Psykiatrifonden 2019).

The health disparities among NEET-populations reflect broader social inequalities: Lower socioeconomic status correlates with higher risks of both physical and psychiatric illness (Martin 2021). Yet policy often emphasizes individual lifestyles over structural determinants, overlooking how factors such as housing, education, labor market affiliation, income, and ethnicity affect health (Vallgård 2019 in Martin 2021).

3) Structural and Institutional Barriers

Most Danish youths, without a completed education, have in fact spent years within the school system before stalling, often around age 21 (Bolvig et al. 2019: 26). This suggests that youths encounter institutional hurdles rather than solely individual reasons for early drop-out. According to Bolvig et al. (2019) these obstacles include limited vocational-training internships, rigid exam and scheduling requirements, and high university entry standards.

Beyond tangible issues, broader cultural logics shape young people's experiences with institutional systems. Görlich et al. (2024: 8) identify three interrelated trends: 'Acceleration' (the speeding up of almost all parts of life), 'performance culture' (a pervasive "profound performance logic" in all of life's domains), and 'psychologization' (the demand for continuous self-optimization) that can heighten experiences of stress, exclusion, and pressure. Acceleration leaves disadvantaged youths unable to keep pace with educational and workplace expectations, while performance culture and singularization pressure everyone towards exceptionalism (Reckwitz 2020 in Görlich et al. 2024). These dynamics are reflected in how schooling and work are organized, which suggests that changes concerning bettering the general population's mental health should address the cultural frames that shape young people's capacity to complete education and enter employment.

4) *"Messy" Municipal Coordination and Governance*

Danish municipalities face rising demands and costs for social services, more precisely a 4.5 billion DKK increase in expenses from 2018–2022, without clear evidence that quality of care and support has improved (Ekspertudvalget på socialområdet from here on EUPS 2024: 10). An expert committee, formed to study this development, identifies two relevant major challenges:

- **Legal Ambiguity:** Unclear, interpretable legislation can cause confusion among citizens and social workers, potentially fueling conflict and diverting resources from the core purposes (EUPS 2024: 11).
- **Limited Evidence-Based Knowledge:** A scarcity of reliable data, on what makes initiatives work, as well as when and why they work, challenges the effectiveness of support-options. Improved dialogue between citizens and authorities could reduce wasted effort and help tailor services better (EUPS 2024: 11–12).

Furthermore, the committee argues that *preventive initiatives*, which are mostly non-mandatory, offer valuable long-term benefits, for both society as a whole and for the individual (EUPS 2024). However, these remain vulnerable to budget cuts and shifts in local politics (Fieldnotes 05.02.25). MeetUp is one of these initiatives.

Finally, the committee found that the transition, that happens when one turns 18, further complicates support: Young adults must navigate both social-, employment-, and educational systems that often

fail to coordinate well, while frequent case-worker changes jeopardize continuity of care (EUPS 2024; Rasmussen & Brandt 2019). Together, these governance issues hinder the municipalities' capacity to provide coherent appropriate support.

5) *Labor Market and Employment System Configurations*

Larsen et al. (2012: 99) argue that the labor market might not be “receiver-ready” for individuals in vulnerable positions. Rather than improving one's social situation, certain employment opportunities, characterized by short-term contracts, inflexible demands, or lack of social inclusion at the workplace/place of internship, may even reproduce exclusion. Similarly, Danneris (2018) found that slow or misaligned decisions within the employment system can push individuals further away from the labor market. Additionally, Rasmussen and Brandt (2019) found that many social workers feel ill-equipped to support clients with mental health issues, which can compromise the quality of support.

Together, these dynamics suggest that if the political goal for young people with mental health challenges is to participate in the labor market and/or educational system, these must adapt to vulnerable youths, not only vice versa (Larsen et al. 2012).

Similarly, I gathered an overview of *supporting elements* regarding this systemic adjustment, these are presented below.

Supporting Elements on the Path to Labor Market Integration

1) *Individualized, Motivation- and Resource-Centered Support*

No single intervention fits all. Studies show that effectiveness relies on tailoring initiatives to each young person's story, resources, needs, and interests (Danneris 2018; Jacobi & Gahrn 2019). Important features in this process include:

- Formulating goals around personal motivations and strengths (Katznelson & Görlich 2017).
- Matching participants with work or training placements that align with their interests (Rambøll & Væksthuset 2017).
- Framing youths as resourceful actors and not merely ‘at risk’ (Katznelson et al. 2019).

2) Early Well-Coordinated Intervention

As risk factors, concerning being in the vulnerable or long-term NEET-group, often emerge in childhood or early teenage years, preventive measures should be put into action early in life (Bolvig et al. 2019; Jacobi & Gahrn 2019; EUPS 2024). Key practices include:

- Integrating education, health, and social services to create coherent trajectories (Bolvig et al. 2019; Cefu et al. 2020).
- Setting clear, joint goals that allow young people to navigate support independently (Danneris 2018).

3) Prioritizing Social Relations and Community

Strong, trusting relationships and peer communities boost engagement and labor market integration (Rambøll & Væksthuset 2017; Cefu et al. 2020; Bukdal & Vickory 2022). Effective elements are:

- Mentors or role models who believe in the young person's potential (Katznelson & Görlich 2017).
- Safe peer groups that facilitate mutual support and skill-building (Bukdal & Vickery 2022).
- Pathways from these groups into broader social activities, such as volunteering, sports and cultural projects, to expand social networks (Bukdal & Vickery 2022).

Finally, for people who are not part of employment- og educational forms of community, Larsen et al. (2012) argue that it is important to focus on strengthening alternative local communities that people, who are otherwise socially excluded, take part in. These communities help disrupt exclusionary mechanisms and can potentially help a process towards labor market integration in the long run. Before moving to 'Part 2' of the literature review a short exploration of Danish employment law and policy is presented.

A Brief Look into Employment Law and Policy

In Denmark you are primarily covered by the Child's Act (Barnets Lov 2024) until you turn 18. Then you are covered by the Law of Active Employment Effort (Lov om en aktiv beskæftigelsesindsats 2022) amongst others. In the first chapter of the Child's Act 'Aim and Target Area' one finds phrases

such as “offer support, help and counselling”, “accommodate special needs”, “quality of life for the child and the family”, and “securing the child’s or youth’s possibilities for personal development and building competencies” (Barnets Lov 2024: §1-2, my translations). In the Law of Active Employment Effort, the first statement reads “The aim of this law is to contribute to a fully functioning labor market [...]” (Lov om en aktiv beskæftigelsesindsats 2022: §1, my translation). Thus, the wording is no longer focused on the flourishing of the individual, but on the functionality of the labor market as a whole. This means, that by the workings of the law, once a person turns 18, there is a focus shift from support and quality of life to participation in the labor market. This shift in can be seen in light of the *significant changes* in Western labor market policies, particularly during the past two decades (Danneris 2016: 1). Danneris (2016: 1) argues that these changes amount to a transition

[...] from a social welfare perspective to a workfare perspective, where the primacy of work has been promoted while the provision of welfare has been increasingly limited and made conditional on making the transition from welfare to work.

She also points to the aforementioned reform of 2013, as one of the major steps in this transition, as the reform focused on enhancing the individual’s ability to work and introduced harder economic sanctions on the individual. She explains that these sanctions were thought up by the Ministry of Employment with especially one group of clients in mind: “[...] those who “*systematically avoid the demands placed upon them*”” (Ministry of Employment 2013 In Danneris 2016: 17, original highlighting), however, it is never specified by the ministry who this group actually consist of. As such, it seems to remain a relevant task to learn more about people who are unable to work or study, both within an academic and a political context. It seems especially pressing regarding the young group, as Bolvig et al. (2019) argue, there is limited knowledge about this group of youths who experience challenges *aside* from lacking a job or education. For instance, this could be the increasing number of young people receiving disability pension (DA: Førtidspension)¹⁰ due to mental health issues (Bergenser 2024). To the Danish Minister of Employment, Ane Halsboe-Jørgensen, it is “deeply horrible” to have to

¹⁰ This pension is used “[...] if your work capacity is permanently reduced to such a degree that you are unable to work under ordinary terms or in flexible employment” (Udbetaling Danmark 2025: ll. 1-5). However, you are not entitled if you are able to improve your work capacity via activation, treatment, etc.

[...] put thousands of young people on disability pension, because we do not believe they will ever get a job or a place in the community. (In Holm 2023: 1. 22-24)

This quote points towards underlying assumptions surrounding labor market participation and social inclusion. The goal of this thesis is to go beyond common ‘barrier research’, and hopefully, following Katznelson et al. (2019), nuance the idea of youths as merely having risk factors. As most studies exploring the ‘NEET-group’ has focused on *what goes wrong* in labor market integration, and *how to fix it*, they often do not ask which cultural or discursive ideals that might be part of the issue. This is explored in the following.

Part 2. Discursive Contexts

Labor Market Integration, Imagined Community and Individuality

Danneris and Herup Nielsen (2018) explain that one of the dominant characteristics of the political discourse surrounding unemployment is the “[...] peculiar dual emphasis on labor market participation as both a right and a duty of the individual” (p. 1449). As such, having a job is positioned as one of the main elements of ‘the good life’, which is reflected in current labor market politics that repeatedly refer to the target of living a good life as something that happens through labor market integration. At the same time, finding a job is viewed as becoming a part of the Danish society and performing your civic duty, contributing to a greater good. This positions the unemployed as excluded from both self-realization and the national community (Danneris & Herup Nielsen 2018).

Benedict Anderson (2006) defines the nation as an ‘imagined political community’, where the members constitutively are unable to know (or know of) all of each other, but among which an idea or image of communion nevertheless lives. As such, to Anderson (2006), the understanding of ‘community’ is that the members *feel* as they belong together. This connection, between the individual feeling of being part of a community (the Danish society) and the discursive tendencies shaping how this happens (ex: through political discourse on unemployment), is an important contextual element for this study, especially insofar as it relates to who might experience being ‘in’ or ‘out’ of the community.

Another relevant contextual element are processes of ‘individualization’. This is clear from Eriksson’s (2009) studies on being socialized for individuality. In these, she shows that the idea of the nation state as an imagined community could only grow strong because it was introduced at a time where people needed something to create meaning and community, as religious beliefs were fading more to the background. She explains that sociological studies repeatedly disprove the neoliberal idea of individuality, where the individual person is considered self-sufficient, self-reliant, etc. She argues that both research and everyday life points to “[...] the individual as incomplete and as referred to and bound by others [...]” (Eriksson 2009: 88). However, she writes, modern society is fundamentally individualizing in its structure, creating a dynamic that demands of the individual to self-promote, self-express, and so forth.

This can be related to Görlich et al.’s (2024: 8) term ‘performance culture’, as mentioned above, they explain that this is linked to the intensification of individualization in which each person is expected to continually pursue optimization and bettering their ‘unique self’. A part of this process is also the expectation to monitor and work on one’s psyche. As Görlich et al. (2024) argue, psychological and therapeutic language has made its way into the language of Danish everyday life, forming how we relate to ourselves and others. They name this ‘psychologization’, explaining that it “[...] involves understanding moral, political and social categories as psychological phenomena related to mental health or self-development” (Görlich et al. 2024: 9).

According to Görlich et al. (2024) it can be very challenging for young people, trying to navigate these tendencies, to manage the extra pressure the trends come with. It can lead to overly critical self-monitoring and self-judgement, as well as exhaustion from constantly struggling to reach ideals and goals. So, even as psychologization culture can be argued to be helpful, as it can offer language for and ways to deal with psychological hurt, it can also intensify psychological states and enhance focus on the individual to solve issues within themselves (Görlich et al. 2024). As psychologization introduces a specific vocabulary and set of possible solutions, which are embedded in the individual-focused discourse, it can work to mobilize and stabilize status quo (Krogh Kjeldgaard og Kirkegaard 2021). According to Görlich et al. (2024: 11) this can “[...] create a blindness towards the role of external conditions in understanding the challenges some young people face” and as such produce even more suffering by placing society’s ills on the shoulders of individuals.

In Danneris and Herup Nielsen's (2018) study, exploring interviews with 25 vulnerable Danish unemployed welfare claimants, they found that people do *not* always internalize the dominating discourse. On the contrary, several participants did *not* view labor market participation as the primary goal of life. Danneris and Herup Nielsen (2018) argue that these participants challenge the dual understanding of labor market participation as either a fundamental individual right or an important duty to society. Following these findings, I explore further whether there are more 'openings' or 'cracks' in the dominating discourse that is relevant to the thesis' research question.

Alternative Openings

When talking about discourse in a Foucauldian manner, power and freedom are not contradictory forces, on the contrary you cannot have one without the other (Christensen & Hamre 2018). This means that even though dominating discourses can seem powerful, they are also local and unstable (Foucault 1994: 98), containing 'cracks' where resistance and alternative possibilities for discourse and subjects can grow (Christensen & Hamre 2018: 118).

Mitchell and Snyder's book *The Biopolitics of Disability* (2015) offers one such opening, as they present alternative ways in which disability can be studied.¹¹ They critique how disability is managed, commodified, and regulated, yet they also highlight ways disabled individuals *resist* these structures. They argue that there needs to be a rethinking of disability as an active and creative form of embodiment. This can be the 'crack' in the discourse, the 'wobble room' for alternative understandings.

Beyond the common aims of removing discriminating barriers or documenting experiences of disability, both vital to international disability rights movements, Mitchell and Snyder (2015: 2) call for attention to "[...] the active transformation of life that the alternative corporealities of disability creatively entail". Moreover, they show that standard forms of inclusion under neoliberal frameworks still center on able-bodied, rational, and heteronormative ideals, thereby reinforcing those norms even as they offer minor recognition. Instead, Mitchell and Snyder (2015) urge the academic community to foreground the generative, anti-normative capacities of disabled bodies and minds.

¹¹ 'Disability' is meant here in the broadest sense. I lean on Mitchell and Snyder's (2015: 3) argument, regarding making use of disability, queer and other minority approaches together, as they all recognize bodies (and minds) that are "excessively deviant".

With this thesis, it is proposed to apply this perspective in relation to young unemployed people with mental health challenges to hopefully explore an outlook that views voices of marginalization not as problems to be fixed, but as holding productive and creative capacities for new futures. This calls for a theoretical framework which allows sensitive and responsible engagement with potentially marginalized communities and their social practices and realities. This is presented in the following chapter.

Chapter 3. Theoretical framework

Following the abductive approach, once the empirical data was collected the next step was to explore relevant theoretical perspectives that might offer new insights and provide the most fitting explanations with regards to how young adults make sense of their everyday lives, living with mental health issues and no attachment to the labor market or the educational system. Exploring the data, it seemed relevant to study both the individual experiences and views on life *while simultaneously* exploring the systems and contexts these individuals navigate. As the participants repeatedly made statements about feeling different, trying or failing to fit in, working on becoming employable, and social in a certain way, it became clear that the participants' perspectives might also point to normative expectations of 'living the good life' in a modern society, and give testimonies to how material and discursive structures including perceptions of normality and abnormality are affectively loaded.

In adopting a norm-critical perspective throughout the thesis, I particularly draw on Michel Foucault's notion of the plurality of power-relations and on Sara Ahmed's queer phenomenology and approach to affect theory.¹² This serves as a critical framework for the analysis of how certain lives become positioned as problematic or even threatening to dominant social ideals. Employing this alongside the ethnographic lens allows me to include relevant observations of how social and cultural interactions shape the meaning of 'the good life'.

Eriksen (2015: 9) argues, that much anthropological research has looked into "negative" affective themes such as pathology, war, violence and unhappiness, and fewer enquiries have been made about 'feeling well' and 'living a good life', or what can be termed 'happiness regimes' (Eriksen 2015: 9): Contrasting notions of 'the good life'. Eriksen (2015) advocates for more work to be done in this field and argues that ethnographic fieldwork in particular has many strengths to offer this form of research. As such I hope the engagement with fieldwork at MeetUp and Jobcenter can add to this field.

Applying ethnographic fieldwork, alongside Foucault and Ahmed, allows the thesis to explore power as multiple, discursive, and implicit. By following the Foucauldian (1994) call for research to look outside of laws or juridical frameworks to discover how some ways of being and living are made to look 'normal' or 'good' while others are marked 'abnormal' or 'wrong', one can also explore which types of knowledges that allow these perceptions to persist. Ahmed's phenomenological and affect-related lens matches the ethnographic perspective as the combination allows the exploration of how these powerful scripts *move* bodies, make certain objects affective, *and* affect practices surrounding the organization of lives lived.

The following section introduces key Foucauldian ideas of power and discourse, as a basis for exploring how Ahmed expands and develops this framework in new directions.

¹² Queer approaches are employed throughout the thesis, not to discuss LGBT+ themes, but for decades of contributions to the study of how it is to be constructed as an 'outsider'.

Introduction to Foucault

Michel Foucault's academic heritage is vast, so to stay within the scope of this thesis, a selective approach is necessary. The focus here is on concepts that directly inform the following sections on Ahmed's theoretical perspectives and thus the analytical framework.

A useful entry point into Foucault's thinking is his critique of conventional notions of power, especially as presented in the first volume of *The History of Sexuality* (French: *Histoire de la sexualité*) called *The Will to Knowledge* (French: *La Volonté de savoir*) originally from 1976 (Foucault 1994). Here, Foucault argues that legal and political systems have historically been (and are still predominantly) seen as sources of power; entities in which power is centered and exercised from. However, he suggests this is not power itself, but the 'code' through which power is made visible, i.e. how power represents and legitimizes itself (Foucault 1994: 94). Thus, Foucault argues, the history of the monarchy (and the accompanying legal systems) has developed in parallel with the blurring of how power works, and, as monarchic systems evolve and new forms of governance emerge, modern societies still tend to understand power as 1) essential in nature and 2) exercised from legal authority (Foucault 1994: 95).

Foucault (1994) urges researchers to move beyond a theoretical privileging of sovereign or juridical models of power. Instead, he argues, power must be analyzed in its historical and practical methods outside legal frameworks. This requires a rethinking of what power is and from where it operates.

Power in Foucauldian Terms

In Foucault's (1994: 98) understanding, power is not about succumbing to a set of rules put in place by powerful group or institution. Instead, it is a multitude of power relations, a web or network of different forces that clash, fight, support, shift, oppose and/or contradict, and move through institutions, organizations, and social formations. Power is not fixed to one location or actor; it is *everywhere* because it *comes from everywhere*, and it works through "[...] its permanent, repetitive, sluggish and self-producing aspects" (Foucault 1994: 99, my translation).

Foucault (1994: 101) believes that power is intentional and directed, and to be found in local strategies or tactics that are "[...] linked, mutually producing, and expanding each other" (my translation).

These tactics are often implicit, unspoken, and anonymous, and it is the task of analysis to make them visible. This involves asking: What kinds of discourses allow certain truths to dominate? Which local power relations are at play, and how are they made possible? And are these local logics tied to broader strategies (Foucault 1994: 103)?

Lastly, Foucault's (1994) views on *resistance*, or as referred to in the literature review 'alternative openings', offers a crucial point to his theory of power. Resistance is power's irreducible counterpart. Just as power is everywhere, so is resistance. Not as a single force, but as multiple, diverse "species" of resistance, which can be both possible, impossible, spontaneous, silent, necessary, violent, compromise-seeking, etc. (Foucault 1994: 101–102). It is, according to Foucault, an academic responsibility to trace and describe these points of resistance that stretch across individual, social, and institutional terrains.

Introduction to Ahmed

Central to Ahmed's thinking is the idea that affects (defined below) are not individual, but deeply social and embedded in cultural practices, resonating strongly with the ethnographic framework, which seeks to explore how meaning is lived, shared, and negotiated in everyday practices. This also situates Ahmed (2010; 2014) as part of what is often described as 'the affective turn', which explores affects' embedment in history, language, and culture (Reestorff & Stage 2018). Additionally, departing from phenomenological traditions as seen in the works of e.g. Husserl, Heidegger, and Merleau-Ponty, Ahmed (2006) reworks their insights through a critical, feminist, and queer theoretical lens, drawing on names such as Haraway and Marx, to show how embodied orientation is associated with histories of inclusion and exclusion. Across her works, Ahmed develops a coherent theoretical framework. Accordingly, I cite her texts interchangeably where they best inform and complement one another in relation to this thesis, while remaining faithful to her overarching arguments.

The following sections center around four concepts from Ahmed's work that appear most relevant to the data: Affect, happiness, orientation, and lines. By engaging with these, one can study not only those who experience exclusion, but even more importantly, the normative violence of the dominant cultural scripts that make it so.

Affect and Cultural Narratives

Ahmed does not distinguish between emotion or affect, she argues that these are all created through activities of attraction or repulsion. She states:

While you can separate an affective response from an emotion that is attributed as such (the bodily sensations from the feeling of being afraid), this does not mean that in practice, or in everyday life, they are separate. In fact, they are contiguous; they slide into each other; they stick, and cohere, even when they are separated. (Ahmed 2010: 231)

As such, to Ahmed (2010: 21) ‘affect’ refers to being emotionally affected by something. As she sees it, affects do not simply reside in subjects, they are passed around, changed, or converted, they stick to things, and they “accumulate “around” objects, such that those objects become sticky” (Ahmed 2010: 44). The term ‘sticky’ is employed throughout the thesis to highlight Ahmed’s focus on affects as socially contingent sensations that connect ideas, values and objects (2010: 230). The relation between affects and objects is important, as Ahmed argues that affects are based in contact between subjects and objects, and that “Contact involves the subject, as well as histories that come before the subject” (Ahmed 2014: 6). As an example, she draws on the child-meets-bear story: A child sees a bear, gets frightened, and runs away. Instead of focusing solely on what happens internally in the child, Ahmed asks:

Why is the child afraid of the bear? The child must ‘already know’ the bear is fearsome. This decision is not necessarily made by her, and it might not even be dependent on past experiences. This could be a ‘first time’ encounter, and the child still runs for it. But what is she running from? What does she see when she sees the bear? We have an image of the bear as an animal *to be feared*, as an image that is shaped by cultural histories and memories. (2014: 7, original highlighting)

In this way, affect is culturally and historically contingent through narratives that locate and distribute emotions like fear, happiness, and sorrow in particular ways and places (Reestorff & Stage 2018; Ahmed 2010, 2014). To elaborate further, the following section explores Ahmed’s work on happiness and happy objects.

Happiness and Objects

Ahmed does not believe in happiness as an autonomous thing, instead she focuses on the messiness of bodies in the world and “how we are touched by what comes near” (2010: 22). She explains that happiness originally meant being lucky or fortunate, something positive that *happens* to us. Quite different from a more modern ideal of happiness, as something to be achieved through individual effort. Ahmed goes on to present her take on *how* some things come to affect us positively:

It is not that good things cause pleasure, but that experience of pleasure is how some things becomes good for us over time. (2010: 23)

Drawing on Locke, Descartes and Spinoza, Ahmed (2010: 23) argues that “[...] to be affected by something, is to evaluate that thing”, expressed with *the body by turning towards it*. This directedness is what Ahmed refers to as ‘orientation’, which I shall return to in the following sections. Furthermore, she adds, if we seek to orientate ourselves towards and be near happy objects, then objects in proximity can become happy by association (Ahmed 2010: 25). But how does it happen then, that things become good over time? Much like the child learns to fear the bear before encountering it, some objects are made happy in *advance*. This means, the nature of happiness holds a promise of the future: If we do the right things, we get to encounter happy objects. Thus, happiness depends on a narrative of ‘forward direction’, an expectation to always be moving towards something of happiness (Ahmed 2010: 32).

Happiness and Expectations

When Ahmed (2010: 21) talks about happy objects, she also explains how they structure a shared horizon of experience. Happiness is to learn, within your culture, to be affected by the *right* objects in the *right* way, and to regulate one’s desires accordingly (Ahmed 2010: 36).

Ahmed (2010) uses ‘family’ as an example of something that is both a happy object and something that circulates through other objects. Firstly, you are supposed to work to achieve and hold a family together. Additionally, the idea of family circulates through other objects such as a beloved family recipe.

Staying with the context of family, happiness can also take the form of a duty: “The obligation

of the child to be happy [...]”, a kind of repaying what the parents have given up for the child (Ahmed 2010: 59). To fulfill this duty the child must both be happy, or show signs of it, and do this in the right way – one that is recognizable as happy. However, sometimes individuals disturb the (family) order. They might dislike or even throw out the family recipe. These individuals become what Ahmed calls ‘affect aliens’ or ‘killjoys’, as they are alienated from the promise of happiness (Ahmed 2010: 49). These are the people whose divergence from the happiness scripts converts good feelings into bad, and the terms offer a crucial entry point for understanding how some lives are positioned as threats or failures in relation to dominant scripts of happiness (Ahmed 2006; 2010).

In the following, I further explore this idea of deviation, through Ahmed’s concepts of *orientation* and *lines*.

Orientation and Lines

Ahmed (2006: 14) argues that people tend to follow specific lines that make some objects *reachable*. These lines are supposed to give direction and help us find our way. In this context, Ahmed (2006: 15) also mentions alignment; when people are following the same lines, they face the same way, looking towards the same things, hence they are *in line* with each other. This means, according to Ahmed (2006), people are guided towards collective direction, and she argues that we as groups, cities, or even nations, share directedness in our social and cultural understandings and doings of life – thus, following the right path also means achieving *community*.

Concurrently, certain paths leave other things out of sight and reach. “The direction we take excludes things for us, before we even get there”, as Ahmed articulates (2006: 15). In this sense, people who deviate from the straight lines *see other things* and might have a different view on the (happy) objects they cannot reach or the communities they are excluded from. Thus, with this thesis, I wonder what people who are excluded from a ‘typical’ career or education-directedness might see that others do not.

Finally, Ahmed (2006) argues that the lines that are often followed, become difficult to see from repetition; they are so engraved in our lives that we cannot separate them from the rest of the stuff that lives are made up off. The straight lines become what ‘feels natural’. Moreover, the repetition is exactly how lines are created: “[...] they depend on the repetition of norms and conventions [...], but

they are also created as an effect of this repetition” (Ahmed 2006: 16). As such, we tread paths that are already cleared for us by years of people going that same way. These paths become a form of instruction about *where*, *how*, and *what* (Ahmed 2006: 16). The directions take us somewhere by the very requirement that we (work hard to) follow a line that is drawn in advance.

Deviation, Alternative Lines, and Re-Organization

Alternative lines or directions are created when bodies make contact with objects that are not supposed to be there, creating new possibilities. However, this does not happen without hurt. Dominating norms and ‘straightening devices’ are constantly at work to pull bodies that deviate back in line. As such, straightening devices are systems that rereads anything that deviates as exactly this: Deviations to be *reorganized* (Ahmed 2006: 23).

In Ahmed’s paper “‘She’ll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She’s Turned into a Nigger’” (1999), she gives a detailed example of how some bodies are categorized as deviations. Ahmed employs the novel’s perspective in theorizing the term ‘passing’, a person of color being perceived as white. Ahmed (1999: 88) argues, that instead of viewing ‘passing’ as a potentially radical and transgressive practice that destabilize systems of power in which subjectivity and identity is formed, this ‘destabilization’ could paradoxically be part of how the system is further secured. She asks:

How are differences that threaten the system recuperated? How do ambiguous bodies get read in a way which further support the enunciative power of those who are telling the difference? (Ahmed 1999: 89)

One could also ask, who “needs” to be categorized as different or deviant for the system to maintain its meaning? And who are the subjects “who knows the difference” (Ahmed 1999: 100)? Ahmed (1999: 91) argues that ‘the system’ becomes an “economy of desire to tell the difference”, which assumes that such differences can be found on or in ambiguous bodies; bodies that do not fit criteria for being kept in place. In this context the white subject is the one who knows and can point out the ‘difference’, however, I propose that this terminology can also be relevant when exploring bodies or psyches deemed deviant in other contexts, and by who.

In the following analysis Ahmed's frameworks will be applied as the primary theoretical foundation, whereas Foucault is seen as a form of 'building block'; Ahmed's work would not exist or make sense without his extensive work as a foundation. As such Foucault is predominantly referenced to draw attention to broad discursive tendencies as well as (local) workings of power and positioning however, Ahmed's affect theory and queer phenomenology, concerned with how power operates not only through discourse but also through the spatial orientation and direction of bodies, is centered. As such, the analytical focus will not be on language in a narrow sense, requiring micro-level analysis of linguistic form, as seen in other forms of discourse analysis (Braun & Clarke 2020), but on the broader cultural and social discourses that make certain truths and paths more visible or legitimate than others.

Chapter 4. Analysis

The following analysis engages with both the interview transcripts and fieldnotes. Following Braun and Clarke (2006: 84) themes can either be addressed in terms of *semantics*, formed from the participants' explicit statements, not looking for anything beyond, or they can be at the *latent* level which means going beyond the semantic content of the data to identify underlying ideas, assumptions, or ideologies that give shape to or inform the content. The analysis was done using the latent thematic approach, involving interpretive, theoretical efforts already in the developmental stages of working with the themes (Braun & Clarke 2006: 84). Five key themes were found: 1) Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity, 2) Social Life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams, 3) To Be Different or to Be Made Out to Be Different?, 4) Standing Still or Moving Forward: On Home, Movement, and Belonging, and 5) Meeting the Municipal System – and Being Met by It.

1. Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity

The data illustrates a complex, ambivalent relationship between the participants and education/employment. On one hand, work and education are represented as necessary steps towards self-sufficiency and living well. On the other hand, participants express doubts, frustrations, and moments of relief when stepping away from formal education.

The idea of work as a necessity emerges through statements such as:

[...] for me the most important thing is getting a job, that I like, aaand... that I can maintain... And, eh, like have an income big enough to make my everyday life, eh, go around. (Interview 1: 6)

This comment, by the participant Sune, situates work as a crucial part of *self-reliance* and *individual success*, a view echoed in his follow-up comment phrasing that having a job provides self-confidence (Interview 1: 7). This reflects the dominant political discourse described in the literature review, tying employment to feelings of self-worth. Moreover, these comments show the appeal the labor market

has within the culture of individualization, as it promotes the idea of ‘taking care of oneself’, reflected in Sune’s wish to be able to financially support himself. The emphasis on individual responsibility resonates with cultural narratives centering independence.

Another point about what makes life valuable and adds meaning, which is made across the interviews, is that of fighting for something and achieving good results. Both participants bring up situations of achievement related to working hard for a goal. As an example, when asked about a situation that made him feel particularly good, Sune mentions having achieved an A at an exam. When asked for more details Sune explains:

Then I kind of celebrate inside myself [...] and kind of cheer on the inside and become like bubbly and happy and... become like proud of myself. (Interview 1: 12-13)

When asked which part of the situation in particular made him feel this way, Sune answered: “Having achieved something... that I... that I rarely have in my life” (Interview 1: 13). Similarly, the other participant, Martin, describes being on “a whole journey, politically”, “fighting bravely” (Interview 2: 17-18) alongside others, and the excitement of achieving the results they wished for. These accounts illustrate how success is represented as *hard-earned* and something to be positively affected by. Thinking with Ahmed’s (2006: 17) conceptualization of norms and conventions as ‘lines’ to follow towards happiness, immense effort seems a key requirement in socially sanctioned directions promising good outcomes. This is mirrored in the interviews, where great moments are considered rare and the result of determination and struggle, rather than something that happens by chance.

As the participants connect success, accomplishment, and results to the peaks of life, they see situations where things do not go as planned or when they could not do what was expected of them as downfalls. For example, Sune explains that it “[...] tears you down.. eh... a little..” (Interview 1: 5) to have to quit school, because it interferes with one’s hopes and ideas for the future. When asked if Sune remembers what his expectations of the future were when he was younger, he states:

Ehm... (Long pause)... No, I don’t remember, but I think I expected to do something cool. (Small laughter). Sooo... Ehm, I just try to, eh, like train for becoming a programmer, like my dad. (Interview1: 5)

For the time being, this training happens at weekly workshops organized by Jobcenter, offering different kinds of work-related activities (Interview 1: 3). According to Sune, he goes there “Because it is less intense, in comparison with studying or working” (Interview 1: 4). When I ask what makes these things “intense” or hard to take part in, Sune reflects on the ability to keep up with and maintain “stuff” (Interview 1: 5). When I probe further, asking what in particular he finds difficult about studying/working, he explains:

“[...] like having something going on constantly. And like being active. [...] Like getting started, having the motivation to stay engaged and keep moving and such. (Interview 1: 6)

He also mentions which consequences these issues has had in his life:

Well... I was doing a Higher Preparatory Examination (DA: HF), and I have started many other studies before also, but it got too hard to maintain due to my mental health issues and stuff... So, I had to drop out each time. (Interview 1: 4)

These reflections mirror mixed feelings of struggling with the organizational fast-moving structure of ‘ordinary’ education, and disappointment when leaving school, while highlighting Jobcenter’s role in preparation and training for re-entering the labor market.

In Martin’s case he points to the fact that it was hard to leave the social connections he had made at school. However, it was also “a bit relieving” to drop out, as he explained: “[...] now I didn’t have that on my shoulders anymore, at least for now” (Interview 2: 6). This challenges the view on dropping out as purely negative, as he felt some kind of weight lifted with stepping out of upper secondary school (DA: gymnasium) and the associated expectations for a while. However, his “at least for now” hints that the decision to leave is not final.

Sune also expresses ambivalence towards education. On multiple occasions he mentions that he is “tired of school” (Interview 1: 5, 8), while also noting that “of course it is important to get an education” (Interview 1: 6) and that he is planning to “get into an education and then maintain it” (Interview 1: 5). As such, it becomes clear that even though Sune and Martin do not necessarily find school fun or motivating, they seem to see it as *one of the right steps to take*. According to Ahmed (2006: 17), we can think of following certain steps, towards ‘the good life’, as “forms of social

investment”. As such, education can be seen as a forward step characterized by a promised return. As she argues, for a life to count as a good one,

[...] it must return the debt of its life by taking on the direction promised as a social good, which means imagining one’s futurity in terms of reaching certain points along a life course. (Ahmed 2006: 21).

This might explain why the participants describe a certain feel of necessity and responsibility to attain an education, as it is considered an important milestone to reach in life, despite experiencing ambivalence about doing so. The experience of juggling fatigue, relief, a fast institutional pace, and a sense of necessity, illustrates how deeply some life directions are embedded as truths. Although the participants never say that anyone is forcing them to go back to school, the pervasive sense that education is the ‘right step’, although not necessarily very pleasant, represented in the interviews, might reflect the workings of power. Not power as coercion, but as a diffuse web of relations which operates through expectations, norms, and internalized ideals (Foucault 1994).

That dropping out can feel both like failure and relief illustrates what Foucault (1994) refers to as the productive nature of power: It does not merely repress or deny, but shapes desires and imaginaries. Martin’s sense of relief, when leaving school, could be seen as a brief loosening of the grip of these power relations, yet they still operate in the background, as school is viewed as something to eventually return to. In this way, the ‘should’ of education is not simply shaped by external pressures, but constitutes a form of internalized directional force. However, this does not mean that tangible, institutional structures should be taken out of the equation completely. Examples such as mandated education/work-oriented initiatives for people under the age of 30 without professional qualifications (Cefu et al. 2020), shows how this type of directional power is materialized into institutional settings, demanding anyone who deviates to pull back into line (Ahmed 1999).

Returning to the topic of ambivalence, as Martin describes his dream of becoming an actor, he touches on the challenge of getting access to this form of education:

Yes, well it is a very hard program to get into, eh, the biggest one, which I will not apply to because they only take 18, or yes, of course I will apply, but I also know that it’s not... my goal... eh, but they have like 800 applicants a year and they only take 18. (Interview 2: 7)

Martin seems unsure about how to pursue his goal given the perceived unattainability of the education. He makes the point that he might go back to upper secondary school "[...] if I'm not chosen for any [acting schools], then it's always nice to have a plan B" (Interview 2: 8). This reinforces the idea of 'ordinary' education as minimum entry requirement into normality, even though it might not align with one's interests or dreams, but as an investment in a secure future. However, on multiple occasions Martin actually connects struggling to that of being in education. Following comments point to a pattern:

[...] I also struggled with some things in the end of 9th [grade] and then I got into 10th grade, where I got this awesome community. (interview 2: 5)

And:

I went to upper secondary school (specific name removed for anonymity) in a quarter of a year, eh and then I got into some difficulties, eh, with depression and anxiety. Eh... The depression is gone now fortunately, eh, now it's just the anxiety left. (Interview 2: 4)

Martin also expresses that he finds it weird that it got so bad at upper secondary school, since "things were starting to go better" (Interview 2: 5). However, he also reflects on the fact that starting upper secondary school also meant losing the community feeling from 10th grade. Together with Sune's experiences of "[...] being bullied a lot while I grew up. Ehm, especially in lower secondary school (DA: folkeskole)" (Interview 1: 8), it cannot be concluded that school attendance directly caused mental health struggles, however, the data suggests a connection between educational institutions and emotional strain when combined with lacking a sense of belonging. It seems to be an issue with some school environments being experienced as non-acknowledging or -accepting towards Martin and Sune's persons. Following Ahmed (2010), instead of focusing solely on finding a reason for this *within* these individuals, it might be worth asking, which forms of personhood are made 'sticky' with 'good feelings' in which settings? Especially, since it seems that both participants have experiences of feeling good about themselves in *other settings*, it could be a question of what kind of person it is made easiest to be or to feel good about at certain institutions.

The participants' descriptions of themselves show a striking similarity in two specific areas: Firstly, regarding outgoingness, Sune clarifies "Ehm.. I am not someone who is like so extroverted [...]" (Interview 1: 12). Comparably Martin states in his interview "[...] I am a very quiet type" (Interview 2: 3). Secondly, they both point to the experience of standing on the outside of the common connection between young people (attending education) and party-culture. For example, when I asked Sune if he ever experiences his everyday life as different from most other peoples', he said:

I actually think, that for example others would go out partying or something on a Friday night or something. And I don't do that kind of thing. I don't really enjoy lots of people and loud music and such things. (Interview 1: 11)

Similarly, when Martin talks about feelings of not fitting in very well at school, he states:

[...] I am, ehm, not like most others my age, I don't go to parties... I... Which upper secondary is basically known for, right? (Interview 2: 5)

This statement, together with the fact that Martin viewed himself as not sharing interests with his classmates at that time (Interview 2: 5), highlights how feeling acknowledged or accepted amongst peers at Danish educational institutions might be difficult if one is not interested in the party-culture. Being a person who is quieter, not into big crowds, and has different interests seems to be tied to that of being a loner or not fitting in.

This suggests that educational settings do not merely function as neutral spaces of learning, but as affective sites where certain subjectivities are legitimized, while others are marginalized. Following Foucault (1994), such institutions can be seen as part of broader power formations in which specific discourses — for instance, those tying youth, education and extroverted sociability together — operate as local tactics that shape which kinds of personhood that are seen as intelligible or desirable. In this way, the emotional discomfort expressed by Martin and Sune can be read not as individual maladjustment, but as subtle forms of discomfort with or even resistance to dominant norms that organize which lives feel 'at home' in such institutional environments. Seen through Ahmed's (2010) lens, those who do not participate in the norms (the non-partiers, the quiet types, etc.) risk becoming 'affect aliens' or 'killjoys'; they are positioned as someone who 'wrecks the fun'.

These examples demonstrate how the participants' relationship with education and employment is characterized by *complex positioning* within overlapping, and sometimes conflicting, discourses of individual success and responsibility, societal norms of education, extroversion, and personal self-fulfillment. Rather than being fully embedded in or fully resisting dominant narratives about education and work, the participants appear positioned in spaces of ambivalence, navigating competing demands, external pressures, and inner desires. Their narratives highlight how education and work are not only practical necessities but also *emotionally 'sticky' sites of tension* between hope and doubt, achievement and exhaustion, belonging and alienation.

The next theme further explores topics related to social life and dynamics. The theme also touches upon descriptions of *positive futures*.

2. Social Life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams

A central theme across both interviews is the importance of social life, both as something deeply valued and as something experienced as difficult to achieve. When the participants talk about what brings them joy, being social—spending time with others, laughing, feeling connected—are described as some of the most meaningful aspects of life. This is paired with mentions of hobbies such as writing, different kinds of gaming, watching YouTube-videos and anime, yet these appear as pastimes that occur naturally, whereas social life emerges as an aspiration and sometimes a site of struggle.

Both Martin and Sune present social participation as something that requires active effort and personal improvement. For Martin, sociality is framed as a barrier to employment:

[...] we¹³ saw some things [at an internship] that just needed improvement before I could return to the labor market, eh, such as that of relations with other people [...]. (Interview 2: 3)

Similarly, Sune states that to have more happiness in his life, he would need to

¹³ Unclear if "we" refers to participant and the internship, participant and his assigned caseworker/mentor or all of these.

[...] be better at and find it easier to participate in.. And.. Yes.. Eh.. Because it is very hard for me socially. (Interview 1: 13)

Thus, being social is presented as a necessary skill for both labor market integration and achieving a fulfilling personal life. The understanding, that this requires personal investment, resonates with Ahmed's (2006) concept of 'orientation', where certain futures (like belonging through sociality and labor market participation) are presented as reachable if one 'straightens out' or corrects oneself to fit into these futures. Social participation becomes not just an action, but part of a desired direction for one's life. As in the previous theme, the participants seem to imagine fulfilment as conditional, not only on achievement, but on personal transformation. In this case, the transformation involves becoming what is considered socially skillful. From a Foucauldian (1994) perspective, this framing reflects a form of subjectivation, where individuals are invited to govern themselves according to social norms. Sociality is not simply a skill to acquire but a site where normative power operates and where individuals are shaped by expectations of who they should become.

The emphasis on social life also sheds light on the ambivalence towards education and work discussed in the previous theme. Martin describes how specific learning environments, based on shared interests, have fostered some of his best social experiences:

[...] then I got into this 10th grade, where I got this awesome community, eh, because here you are paired into groups with things that interest you, eh, where you share interests. (Interview 2: 5)

As such, what works well socially for Martin are interest-based communities, whether through creative school subjects or political engagement, about which he states:

This thing where one can meet people one disagrees with and then still be able to, like talk with each other and be friends in that way, right, I find that very strong [...]. (Interview 2: 20)

Martin does not mention any social challenges when reflecting on these places of shared interest, on the contrary they seem to bring flashes of confidence and success in social situations where interaction

is structured around common interests and open reflections. As such, whereas theme one ‘Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity’ showed how work and education are tied to individual success and pride, achieved through hard work, this theme explores work and education as a *relational bridge*, a way to access social life and community. It shows that education and employment are not solely valued for productivity or status, but for the promise of *belonging*, and is thus also relevant to the theme of sociality.

Even when loneliness, isolation, and experiences of bullying have shaped the participants' experiences, work and education are continually imagined as potential remedies for these challenges. For Sune work also represents: “[...] something to get up for, aaand that, ehm, I have something social to take part in” (Interview 1: 12). This aligns with Ahmed’s (2010) notion of ‘the promise of happiness’, where normative structures like work and education hold affective promises of joy and inclusion. Yet, this promise is also mixed with ambivalence, as inclusion requires the individual to modify themselves.

As part of the participants’ relationship with sociality, as something to be improved, plenty remarks are made about positive ideas of being social in the future. As these narratives are so closely related to that of social life, they are be organized into a subtheme:

Subtheme: Dreams of Future Social Life and Impact

A striking feature in both interviews is how dreams of joy and fulfillment are projected into ideal social futures. For Sune, this takes the form of physical closeness and playful intimacy, as he wishes:

Probably that they [people around him] come a little closer, than people mostly do [...] like push each other a little and, eh... be a little like, eh, teasing [...] like maybe push each other or poke each other on the shoulder, if one wants some contact or you know these things where you are like a little more active physically. (Interview 1: 13-14)

This illustrates a wish to break with common Danish social norms of intimacy, where people often aim to interfere minimally with others’ personal space.

Similarly, Martin has a dream of people being better at talking with each other despite their differences (Interview 2: 20), which also resembles a form of intimacy or social acceptance. On top of this, Martin wishes to find meaning through making an impact on others’ lives:

I want to leave something when I die. I f that's children, or forty billion movies or what it is eh... Eh, having changed someone's life, eh, well that, eh, I think that is one of the strongest things one can do. (Interview 2: 20-21)

Though Martin associates this with being *productive*, it seems he does not mean it as a material or labor-related idea of being productive, but as a hope to make a more abstract form of social influence; to be remembered for something. Thus, despite their differences, both participants ultimately return to relational themes when reflecting on life's meaning and hopes for the future. Sune emphasizes the necessity of enjoyment and connection: "[...] life is not worth it if you don't enjoy it" (Interview 1: 14), and to him this means: "good friends", "a job that you like to do and be a part of", and "lots of lovely family" (Interview 1: 14).

This highlights how joy or happiness can be assigned to the future, to when one reaches certain goals, skills, or steps in life. As Ahmed (2010) describes, happiness often attaches itself to certain social forms—like the image of 'the good life' involving friends, meaningful work, and family. For the participants, happiness on the one hand becomes imagined as contingent upon achieving these normative social forms, representing happiness as a regulatory fantasy, making current struggles appear as personal failures rather than effects of social structures. On the other hand, they both mention alternative imaginaries, which do not necessarily center such common concepts of work or family, rather these rely on different ideas of intimacy and meaning making.

As such, on one side there might be an internalization of failure which resonates with Foucault's (1994) take on power not as repressing subjects, but producing them, through norms that make individuals responsible for their own inclusion or exclusion. Here, happiness is promised through sociability and intimacy, but only if one succeeds in becoming someone who deserves it. On the other side, the participants' stories represent 'resistance' or 'cracks' in the dominant discourse, where ideas of new forms of intimacy and social acceptance can grow (Foucault 1994; Christensen & Hamre).

As with the participants' reflections on achievement in theme one 'Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity', here too, the possibility of future happiness is tied to the imperative to work on themselves — to overcome shyness, awkwardness, or difficulty — in order to be closer to connection. In this sense, for the participants employment and

education do not merely represent desired endpoints in themselves. Rather they are framed as *pathways* toward accomplishment, belonging, and heightened self-worth. Improving one's social skills becomes a key to unlock these futures. From Ahmed's (2010) perspective, this attaches affective value to sociability itself: The idea that if one can 'fix' oneself socially, the promised happiness tied to belonging will be attainable. Yet alongside this regulatory logic, the participants also express desires that reach beyond conventional ideals of social life — whether through dreams of physical playfulness, interest-based communities, or the hope of being remembered for one's impact. These gestures suggest that sociality is not only an affective horizon shaped by normative demands, but also a site of subtle resistance and reimagination. Within the 'cracks' of dominant narratives, alternative visions of intimacy, connection, and meaning emerge.

This theme highlights the *intertwining* of sociality, identity, and imagined futures, and sets the stage for the next theme's engagement with questions of difference and social categorization.

3. To Be Different or to Be Made Out to Be Different?

When asked whether they believe that their mental health challenges affect how other people view them, both participants seem hesitant. In the silences and follow-up questions, it becomes clear that they do not necessarily expect others to know this information about them, and if they do, Martin argues "I sure hope they see me for me and not the little things about me" (Interview 2: 11). Overall, they don't spend much time explicitly connecting mental health challenges to feeling different from others. However, when going beneath surface level, both participants make statements about *being* or *feeling different*. Sune, in particular, ends up associating some of his perceived differences with his mental health. He explains that he wishes he had been diagnosed earlier in life, mentioning it would have made some things easier:

One would have something to blame it on, or something to tell people, that if I'm a little weird, then this is why. (Interview 1: 8)

When asked if receiving a mental health diagnosis affected how he views himself, Sune adds:

Ehmm... Yes, I would prefer to see myself as there is nothing wrong with me, and that I am completely psychologically normal and... yeah... (Interview 1: 8)

Thus, for Sune his diagnosis functions ambivalently: It serves both as a shield or explanation in potentially stigmatizing situations, and as a mark suggesting something is wrong with him.

Martin focuses on it feeling “strange” (Interview 2: 15) to see that he is not doing what other people his age are doing; that his peers are further along in their educations, while he is “mostly at home” (Interview 2: 15). Reflecting on his time at upper secondary school, Martin explains that he didn’t feel he was among “types like him” (Interview 2: 5). He also describes:

[...] it’s easier for me to act as someone else than myself, eh, because then I also think I speak more clearly. This was also a thing me and my youth counsellor (DA: ungeguide) worked with when I was still at school, entering not as ‘Martin’ but as ‘student’. (Interview 2: 6-7)

Thus, Martin felt so uncomfortable being his own self at school, that it felt safer to take on another role altogether. These quotes, along with the examples from the previous theme ‘Social life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams’, illustrating both the participants’ experiences with being more introverted or quiet than their peers, and their emphasis on their perceived need to ‘work on’ social skills, all point towards a kind of internalized experience of *deviance*. A sense that they need to change or mold who they are to better fit the expectations of life.

This theme also surfaced at other occasions during fieldwork. While arranging my visits at MeetUp I was encouraged to arrive early and stay late to engage in additional conversations with the facilitators. On the first night, before the youths arrived, I asked them if they knew, if any of the youths had had concerns about my visit.¹⁴ A facilitator said, that one of the regular attendees had been worried that my presence would feel like “being an animal at the zoo” (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). This remark might suggest that the particular youth views herself as part of a group that stands out or is different enough to be gawked at, *or* that she imagines I might perceive it so. Notably, the attendee was not present at MeetUp during any of my visits. While I cannot know the reasons for this, her

¹⁴ I knew that the facilitators had notified the attendees of my participation in advance, and that they had discussed the general themes of my thesis in preparation for my visits (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024).

earlier concerns open the possibility that staying away could serve as a form of self-protection against perceived exposure or stigmatization. Whether or not this was the case, the fact that such a worry was voiced at all indicates how charged and vulnerable the dynamics of visibility and difference can be in such contexts. Following Foucault's (2024) call to ask what kind of discourse allows these 'truths' to circulate, one is drawn to examine the local power relations that make such logics possible. This brings me to the role of the facilitators.

An illustrative example of the importance of the facilitators emerged in a reflection on a dinner conversation at MeetUp, during which one of the youths shared something about her personal struggle regarding attending folk high school (DA: højskole). The youth explained that her experiences were not like what was depicted on the school website, expressing frustration that things were not as expected. Later on, after the youths had gone home, one of the facilitators reflected on the conversation and offered her interpretation of it: She told me that it was "the first time life got pretty tough" for this particular attendant, and additionally that this was when "she found out that she is not quite like others" (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). These words were not used by the attendant in the conversation. The facilitator's comment signals that she, who is part of a group of trusted adults with whom the youths share important relationships, implicitly holds and circulates the belief that this young person is "not quite like others". Following Foucault (1994), this view can be seen not as a neutral reflection of the youth's own narrative, but as the result of discursive formations that mark certain behaviors, life trajectories, or emotional difficulties as abnormal. These do not operate abstractly; they take shape, gain power, and are reinforced through everyday relationships and spaces. Here, power is enacted through interactions with authority figures, such as facilitators, who contribute to defining concepts such as 'normal' or 'different'.

Thus, as I will return to in theme five 'Meeting the Municipal System – and Being Met by It' these adults play key roles in shaping the local environment and social norms. If difference is being, even unconsciously, reinforced by those with authority in the setting, this may serve to uphold or even foster the youths' experiences of standing out. Here, Ahmed's (1999) argument about who has the power to name difference becomes highly relevant. She argues that difference is not something that simply *is* but something which is *produced* through social practices, institutional language, and repeated naming. The key question thus is not necessarily whether the participants *are* different, but who has the power to *define* this difference, and where that definition is reinforced or challenged.

Lastly, to explore which qualities or behaviors the youths themselves point to that make them ‘different’, I compiled a list of the things they described struggling with. These were issues such as lack of motivation, difficulties navigating social life, school fatigue, life’s ups and downs, lack of community, discomfort in larger groups, and difficulties with new people or situations. These struggles can hardly be described as unique to this group. In fact, according to Görlich et al. (2024), they seem rather universal, or at least common to many young people. However, this should not serve to neglect or downplay these struggles. As presented in the literature review, Görlich et al. (2024) view trends of acceleration, performance culture and psychologization as relevant when exploring struggles amongst youths. Together these trends place a heightened pressure in the individual to perform and express their own unique identity, while simultaneously enhancing the focus on the individual to solve their own problems, as opposed to viewing this in a collective or community-centered context. In this discursive landscape of modern western societies, could it be that we operate with such narrow expectations for what a ‘normal’ life trajectory looks like that one can quite easily be categorized as different by not meeting these benchmarks? In this light, the question also becomes: Is ‘different’ something these young people *are*, or something they have been *positioned as*?

In the following theme, experiences of difference, are related to spatial, temporal, and orientation related factors.

4. Standing Still or Moving Forward: On Home, Movement, and Belonging

The third theme explores the sense of being different as explicitly tied to contrasts between standing still and moving forward, and between the spatial locations of home vs. out in the world.

Sune believes that getting a job would give him more confidence, help him fill his days, and get out of the house more. He explains that having a job would provide more social contact, because as it is currently, he says: “I think I am more home than many others would be” (Interview 1:11), contrasting his experience with that of most others. Additionally, Sune explains why it is hard to get out of the house:

[...] because I don't have, eh, very many friends, so it becomes very isolated and very like... sad and lonely, eh, very fast. (Interview 1: 7)

Similarly, Martin also contrasts being at home a lot with being out in the world, doing things, going places. When asked if he believes that his day-to-day-life differs from others' in any way, Martin replies:

Ehmm... Well... This thing that I am very much a home-person, well... Yes... I am at home a lot. Whereas many others I know and see are out much more. (Interview 2: 14)

Additionally, Martin connects this contrast to the forward motion of education, as he compares himself with peers:

Well, yes, it is very insane to think that during the three years they spent in upper secondary school, I spent... Yes of course, I also did 10th grade and started at (name of upper secondary school), right, but otherwise home, at home. (Interview 2: 15)

In both these quotes, it seems Martin positions 'home' as associated with 'standing still', contrasted with his peers progressing through education. Both Martin and Sune view themselves as being at home more than other people and mention this in relation to observing others, who are not at home as much, but 'out there', for example finishing an education. However, none of them experience being at home a lot as *entirely negative* — Martin describes it as "somewhere in between" (Interview 2: 15), and Sune as:

I don't think it's weird. I think it can be a little boring and a little ehh, like then you just kinda sleep, and then what should fill out the day? (Interview 1: 12)

Nonetheless, they both relate the practice of being home a lot to the experience of 'deviance'. Martin in particular relates it to not liking partying. In this context he categorizes himself as "childish" (Interview 2: 5) in comparison to his peers, since he "don't go to parties" (Interview 2:5), while expressing this as an integral part of what people at his stage of life should be doing; partying is what "upper secondary is basically known for, right?" (Interview 2: 5). As such the strong association

between school and partying is reiterated and contrasted with that of being at home, maybe a bit bored. This takes part in creating a *spatial* contrast of home or out partying/at school.

On several occasions Sune links the idea of acquiring a job to solving his experienced loneliness and isolation at home, a way to *move* towards being a part of something (Interview 1: 12, 14). Martin also mentions work when talking about finding *direction* in life. He tells me about acting:

It became my biggest dream after I saw something called Cirkusrevyen... [...] then I just knew that this was what I want to spend my life on. (Interview 2: 9)

Hence, Sune and Martin both talk about work and education in relation to taking one's life *forward*. Again, Ahmed's (2006) concept of 'orientation' becomes crucial, as these phenomena appear embedded in a broader horizon of expectations; a kind of future-orientation that ties adulthood, belonging, and forward-motion together. Being 'at home' stands as the opposite of movement, direction, and closeness with other people. Whereas being 'out in the world' is connected to personal development as well as educational, career-related, and social success and connection. Relating this to the findings from theme two 'Social life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams', in which Sune longs for people to *physically* come closer to him, loneliness, then, is not just emotional; it is spatial.

Ahmed (2006: 137) explains how "[...] bodies come to feel at home in spaces by being oriented [...]", and that this orientation is shaped by what one brings with them. Here Ahmed's Foucauldian inspirations shine through. Similar to Foucault's (1994) attention to genealogy and subjects' embedment in historical contexts, Ahmed notes (2006) that the 'things' one brings into spaces are: One's genealogy, background, and class position. Therefore 'home' is not a neutral location; it is an effect of social positioning. Ahmed (2006: 137) argues that capital "[...] can 'propel' you forward and up [...]" in life, granting access to spaces and the positive feelings of for example comfort 'sticking' to these spaces. This helps illuminate why being at home can feel very different depending on one's social position.

In Denmark, more and more people decide to retire themselves early (Pedersen 2024). Pedersen (2024) explain that this opportunity is mostly sought by people with long educations and well-paying jobs, for whom spending more time at home is a *luxury* and pursued as a *goal*. For the young people in this thesis, however, being at home often seems to be affective with feelings or sensations such as

slowness, inadequacy, loneliness or difference, imagining a more ‘proper’ form of being taking place outside of the home. It seems, then, that to be oriented primarily towards ‘home’, as a space of positive connotations, is mainly accessible to those holding certain (financial) privileges or who have arrived at certain life-steps. As such it is both a question of social positioning *and* temporality. Thus, in addition to Ahmed’s (2006) theory of social direction and forward-movement, the concept of time seems of particular importance. It seems there are stages of life where being directed towards home is considered natural or even positive, and not liking parties and loud music might just be part of life. Simultaneously, it seems young people are at a specific time and place in their life trajectories, where a strong physical orientation towards ‘home’ can feel as being stuck, when navigating cultural expectations centering forward-motion.

Thus, adding to theme two ‘Social life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams’, to belong is not just about being with others, but about which spaces that *allow* you to belong, and which trajectories make belonging possible at what *time*. Movement out into the world is both spatial, social, and temporal. And if the road forward is blocked, for example by precarity, mental health challenges, or structural exclusion, then standing still at home is not so much a choice, as it is a consequence of how *some bodies* are differently organized and oriented in relation to social life.

5. Meeting the Municipal System – and Being Met by It

‘The municipal system’ as used in this section refers collectively to MeetUp, the youth department at the local Jobcenter-office, and other related initiatives mentioned by the participants. The fieldwork included visits to both MeetUp and the youth department, and that both interviewees had relations to people and activities at both locations as well as other related initiatives. Firstly, I focus on how the youths view the municipal system and relevant employees. From here I go on to present a subtheme, exploring how actors of the municipal system view and engage with youths.

Overall, the participants express numerous positive impressions of the municipal system and the employees they have encountered there. Sune describes MeetUp as both “fun” and “cozy” (Interview 1: 1), and Martin states: “I really like to be here” (Interview 2: 1). For Martin, MeetUp clearly represents a space of *community*, as this is something he immediately associates with the initiative (Interview 2: 2). When asked if he experiences this elsewhere, his first thought is of another initiative under the local Jobcenter-office (Interview 2: 2), suggesting that the municipality has indeed

succeeded in fostering multiple spaces supporting community among young people. Interestingly, I had to explicitly ask Martin to think of situations outside of Jobcenter context, which he associates with community, before he mentioned his family, with whom he “[...] spends a lot of time” (Interview 2: 2).

Furthermore, Martin highlights the municipal initiatives as places where he is “[...] definitely getting some better relations with people, eh, learning to talk a little more with other people [...]” (Interview 2: 4). This raises various queries: Why is it through a Jobcenter-initiative that a young person is ‘learning to be with people’? Is Jobcenter part of framing this as a skill to be practiced? And who decides when one is ‘good enough’? These questions are especially interesting considering the institution’s primary purpose: To help citizens into employment, education, or availability for the labor market (Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering 2025). Additionally, the purpose of MeetUp is blurred. As mentioned earlier, the original purpose supported Jobcenter’s primary purpose, by leading towards work or education, however now facilitators argue that it is more directed at being social (Fieldnotes 06.11.2024, 20.11.2024).

Sune’s general account regarding the municipal system is a bit more hesitant than Martin’s. When asked whether he looks forward to going to MeetUp, he replies:

Yes, well.. It’s okay.. Ehm... Sometimes I look forward to it, for example if we are watching movies and stuff like that... Ehm.. But for the most part it’s more like.. Yeahh, I might as well go if I don’t have anything else to do. (Interview 1: 1)

Later, he reflects on whether MeetUp feels like community to him, stating:

I don’t know if I would call it a feeling of community... Ehm... But a feeling of togetherness. I can recognize that. (Interview 1: 13)

As such, for Sune, the positives of MeetUp are primarily having something to do and “[...] talking with someone and being social with someone” (Interview 1: 2). This reiterates these spaces as important social contexts.

The physical locations of MeetUp and the youth department of the local Jobcenter-office show multiple similarities. The youth department is located at a former school (Fieldnotes 29.10.2024), while MeetUp takes place at a functioning school (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). Both spaces have been made more ‘homey’ or ‘cozy’ through design choices. For example, after my visit to the youth department I noted to myself that the rooms seemed bright, warm, and inviting with stuff on the walls (Fieldnotes 29.10.2024). Similarly, when visiting MeetUp and entering the classroom where the activities took place, the first impression was that it did not resemble a regular school to me – rather it felt cozy, with little rooms, big soft armchairs, a lot of real plants, refrigerators in every room, and little fairy lights; giving it a modern atmosphere. Water was served in pretty carafes (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). It seemed inviting for casual hangouts. Later that evening I noted that the place also has an “everyday-like” vibe, as their activities follow the seasons. While I was there, they were planning to do Christmas decorations and make æbleskiver (Danish Christmas cakes) the coming week. One of the participants volunteered to bring a recipe and pan from home (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). Additionally, in the following week I wrote that I was “excited to come back there” (Fieldnotes 28.11.2024), reflecting similar impressions to the participants: *cozy surroundings, nice activities, and kind people*.

Staying with the people, the participants emphasize positive experiences with the professionals involved with the municipal system. When asked about the case workers at Jobcenter Martin says:

[...] I have some amazing, eh... eh... helpers on my path [...] they know that I’m not lazy, even though I’m not... well, they know how much I desire to do something again. (Interview 2: 11)

This highlights the relief of being seen as someone with a “desire to do something” rather than being “lazy”. The statement also implies that Martin is *not* doing something for the time being. Interestingly, Martin writes stories (to be screenplays), and during our interview I asked about the number of stories he had written to which he replied: “Ehm, well last time I counted it was at 80 stories” (Interview 2: 16). These stories center around concepts such as forgiveness. Martin argues that even though this concept is commonly used in screenplays, it is not done

[...] in the right way [...] Like the way we do it today, is that we take someone and make them look like the worst in the whole world and then... go a little deeper in their story, eh... Or I

mean that's how I think it should be [...] Like we should take from both sides, take the story from both sides instead of just taking one. (Interview 2: 21-22)

If creative work, such as writing such a high number of stories, is not necessarily recognized in an institutional context, this raises the question of what “doing something” then entails. Hence, which activities are viewed as meaningful in- and outside frameworks of Jobcenter and why?

Sune also has good experiences with the employees he has met. When I read him an example of a negative experience with caseworkers at Jobcenter, and ask if he recognized anything, he responded: “Eh, no, but I also think that I have some very understanding, eh, what's it called? Case workers” (Interview 1: 9). This may suggest that Sune feels fortunate to have encountered particularly understanding case workers, which could indicate that such understanding is not always expected, or that Sune might have anticipated challenges in being understood.

Despite the participants' positive descriptions of the municipal initiatives, reminders of the institutional context remain. In an entry in the field diary, I note that it was observed that facilitators at MeetUp were typically the ones to initiate conversations, ask questions, and make sure everyone participated somewhat equally (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). Additionally, it could be of relevance to consider the underlying reasons for people to attend MeetUp. It is never explicitly touched upon in the social activities or ‘hang outs’, but early in the research a facilitator told me on the phone, that MeetUp was made as a social space for *all* young people who wishes to meet peers, but in reality most of them have mental health challenges and use MeetUp as one of their main social activities (Fieldnotes 06.11.2024). This form of structured facilitation might be contributing to why Sune doesn't fully recognize MeetUp as community in a deeper sense. And perhaps to the sense of being different if it results in an unspoken experience that ‘this is where the outsiders meet’.

To further explore the encounter between the municipal system and the participants, the following section depicts the other side of this complex dynamic: How the municipal system views the youths.

Subtheme: When Help Becomes Directive

One of the questions I asked the facilitators when I first arrived was how they experience being organized under Jobcenter and initially working with the goal to improve mental health amongst

youths and assist in leading towards education or work (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). One of the facilitators answered that it is “kind of funny” that this was MeetUp’s original purpose, as they do not focus much on work and education anymore. Instead, the facilitators explained, they focus their conversations on “everyday stuff”, and they do not view their positions at MeetUp as very focused on labor market integration (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). However, when I asked the facilitators if they experience a heightened pressure on youths who might struggle to integrate into the labor market, one of them, clearly frustrated, exclaimed: “Why do young people need to adjust, and the labor market doesn’t?” (Fieldnotes 20.11.2024). The comment indicates a critical stance towards the system’s expectations, highlighting a structural imbalance in which individuals are pressured to adapt rather than the system adapting to diversity. Given that this critique comes from someone employed by an institution, whose goal is to promote employability, even though they argue MeetUp specifically does not focus on this anymore, it raises questions about how facilitators navigate their positionality. It is unclear whether this frustration might reflect a conscious awareness of being part of a system that demands change from youths, or if it could signal a perceived distance or tension between the facilitator’s role and the broader institutional pressures. This angle would be interesting and relevant to pursue in future research.

With this facilitator’s critical comment in mind, and the comment mentioned in theme three ‘To Be Different or to Be Made Out to Be Different?’, implying that an attendant in MeetUp is “not quite like others”, the wish for a more diverse and inclusive labor market can be seen in the light of institutional systems making use of categorization of difference to *re-align* or *re-organize* individuals (Ahmed 1999). Ahmed (1999) argues that this reorganization maintains and expands the system, rather than challenging it. She argues that a system claiming inclusivity of ‘deviants’ still organizes itself around categorizing some people as exactly that: Other.

However, it stands out that it is not Jobcenter, MeetUp, or the particular facilitators alone that one could say function as ‘straightening devices’ (Ahmed 2006), but the *cultural narratives* affecting these spaces, subtly shaping ideas about how life should be. What emerges is an implicit, but effective, alignment of care with correction: Help is offered in the form of participation and acquiring certain skills, while broader narratives position these youths as in need of development to align with social expectations and norms. At the same time, power relations are blurred by the facilitators’ presentation of activities, emphasizing ‘life skills’ (learning to cook, socialize, use public transport)

as neutrally addressing ‘everyday stuff’. Skills that in some cases can be seen as part of broader cultural stories of what it means to be functional, capable, and included, narratives which often frame difference as something to be overcome.

However, with the limited time and access to the field, I cannot say whether the youths have been part of choosing the activities, or what that process might have looked like if so. It should also be mentioned that the participants themselves do not complain about the activities or MeetUp. As such the intention here is not to ignore or discredit the various positive and important experiences the youths express about the municipal system, as they are indeed the voices of this thesis. The fact that Sune and Martin experience Jobcenter, associated initiatives and employees as someone they “think really well of” (Interview 1: 3) and as “fantastic helpers” (Interview 2: 11), should stand out and hopefully nuance other more critical findings regarding what it is like to frequent Jobcenter, a system that has otherwise received so much critique from its users (Bolvig et al. 2024).

Nonetheless, this can be seen as an argument *for* a critical approach, when exploring institutional settings that function as major parts of and influences on youths’ lives. Jobcenter can be seen as a link between the political systems and the everyday lives of young people, thus calling for an extensive attentiveness towards and responsibility taken for influencing power relations that shape what we might view as ‘normal’.

Conclusive remarks

This analysis brought out different ways in which the informants expressed views that indicate underlying assumptions regarding normative commitments to a ‘good life’, following ‘straight’ life trajectories.

In the first theme ‘Work, Education and Accomplishment: Navigating Hope, Ambivalence, and Necessity’, it was found that working hard for success, particularly through education and labor, was seen as a source of meaning, something to get up for, and as a marker of success and direction in life, even when institutions of education or work might be part of painful or tiring experiences.

In the second theme ‘Social life: Community, Struggles, and Dreams’ the focus for correcting oneself was seen in the context of practicing and developing social skills. In this context work and education were often associated with promises of community and belonging, presented as affective horizons to unlock through social skills.

The third theme ‘To Be Different or to Be Made Out to Be Different?’ explored experiences of difference and posed the question whether some types of personhood (extroversion) are positioned more favorably than others (introversion) in current discursive trends, making the matter of loneliness and exclusion a shared social problem rather than individual. Additionally, it was explored how important authority figures take part in sustaining cultural ideas of difference and normalcy.

For the fourth theme ‘Standing Still or Moving Forward: On Home, Movement, and Belonging’ it was found that loneliness was not just expressed in relational or emotional terms, but was also related to location, as being at home often was tied to isolation and, again, ‘difference’. Additionally, it was found that the temporality of forward movement played a role in dominating narratives of a ‘common’ life trajectory, posing when one should be at certain places and stages in life.

Finally, theme five ‘Meeting the Municipal System – and Being Met by It’ addressed how the youths of the study view the municipal system and vice versa. It was clear that the youths view the system as a helpful resource and support system. To some it is even considered a place of community or somewhere to practice socializing and learn important skills. At the same time, reminders of the institutional settings did not go completely unnoticed, as the facilitators’ role in organizing and coordinating activities and socializing came across quite clear. Additionally, it seems the Jobcenter-context influences which things that are made to “count” as doing something of value. Finally, the facilitators’ role in framing ideas of normalcy was revisited as part of how they ‘meet’ the youths, exploring what discursive consequences it might have when help also becomes directive.

In the following section these findings will be further discussed and related to additional relevant perspectives.

Chapter 5. Discussion

The following discussion addresses the findings from the analysis and perspectives they generate for potential future research and political direction. This includes final reflections on the methodological and theoretical framework. The findings showed that young adults' stories of their everyday experiences and practices as individuals living with mental health challenges and no attachment to the labor market or educational system reflect broader societal understandings of phenomena such as mental health, meaningful activity, the good life, and work. In this discussion I include a critical perspective onto the idea of labor, value and happiness, reflected in the responses from my informants.

Even though making conclusions from 'few' units of data might seem fragile, as mentioned in the methodology section, qualitative research should not be assessed solely on its generalizability, but on other forms of criteria. In the following sections I engage with the idea of 'relevance', which can be argued to represent such criteria. Bundgaard and Gammeltoft (2018: 28) present different forms of relevance to consider when exploring what makes a study meaningful to conduct. Following these, I include reflections on the thesis' potential to be of ethnographic, practical, and political relevance.

Value, Independence and Meaningful Activity

The participant Martin in particular shows an alternative, abstract stance towards value as opposed to normative ideals. He highlights value and productivity as associated with making creative, human impact, showing us that in line with Foucault's (1994) understanding of power and resistance, opposing ideas to dominant discourse continue to exist.

The concept of *value* is exactly what Emma Holten, feminist activist and gender policy consultant, explores in her recent book *Deficit: On the value of care* (2024). She addresses, what she views as, the existing political system's inability to grasp value beyond capitalist conceptualizations. She argues that in current Danish debates of

[...] the 46.000 youths, who are without job or education [...] we are operating with a very simple understanding of value. (Holten 2024: 203, my translation).

Holten (2024: 203) adds that within this understanding the idea of the “normal employee” can be very hard to live up to, especially when living with mental health issues or other disabilities. She argues that this is the consequence of having a society with a highly competitive labor market, where value is calculated on the basis of cost-benefit-analyses, rooted in the idea that all employees must “generate measurable effectiveness” (Holten 2024: 199, my translation). This leads to undervaluing elements such as care, patience and inclusivity. Holten (2024) argues that this creates a society where some people and activities are positioned as worth more than others.

In addition to the connection between labor and value, a relevant discussion point reflected in the interviews is the matter of employment as an *entry point*. As presented in the literature review a current dominant political discourse presents employment as both a right and a civic duty (Danneris & Herup Nielsen 2018). This duty is presented as a way to contribute to and become part of the national community. This thesis confirms and adds to this perspective, as it introduces an additional nuance. The findings at hand point not only to employment as an entry point to national community, but to community and belonging altogether. Work is presented as a context to strive, train, and aim for, in order to lead a meaningful life overall. The narratives highlight that to gain access to community through labor, effort to be deemed ready for this kind of inclusion is required; for instance, by ‘bettering’ one’s social skills.

A critical view on the concept of ‘work’ is not new. Criticisms can be seen as early as the 1800s with thinkers such as Karl Marx (Groth 2024). With roots in Marxist theories some still argue that wage-labor as an institution should be abolished, since it seizes and colonizes almost all parts of the human existence (Halberg 2017). However, as Søren Mau (2018) argues, the concept of ‘work’ in both earlier and current debates seems ambiguous and calls for a closer inspection. This is examined as a backdrop to further discussions of the findings from the analysis regarding which activities might ‘count’ as meaningful in labor-centered contexts.

Mau (2018) explores different approaches to the concept of ‘work’, more specifically developments and fluctuations in Marx’ theorizing and employment of the term. Mau (2018) explains how Marx, inspired by political economy, characterizes ‘work’ as “[...] the practical and productive activity, which brings material wealth [...]” (p. 98, my translation). This understanding is informed by

categories such as money, production, trade, and capital. In such a capitalist political economy, Adler-Bolton and Vierkant (2022: 43) argue,

Frequent or prolonged illness is often seen as disqualifying or devaluing an individual's labor power. There is a rush to be over with ill health and get back to work as quickly as possible.

As such a 'rehabilitation movement' has grown, in which disability, impairment, illness etc. are seen as risks to be treated and overcome. This is also reflected in a Danish context, an example being the increasing interest in "Recovery-oriented rehabilitation" (Sekretariatet for Ekspertudvalget på socialområdet from here on SES 2024). As part of the Danish Authority of Social Services and Housing's 10-year-plan of 2022 to "improve mental health and strengthen initiatives for people with mental health illnesses" (SES 2024: 3), they recommend systematically incorporating the recovery-approach across the country. The recovery-oriented rehabilitation approach is defined as:

[...] a social welfare approach, with a targeted focus on citizens' potentials to get better and in that way live as satisfying and independent a life as possible. It will be different what each individual citizen can achieve, but overall Recovery-oriented rehabilitation has the potential to support more people in living independent lives with less or even completely without support and with active participation in public communities and the labor market. (SES 2024: 1-2, my translation)

This focus is also reflected in the findings of this thesis, as participants connect success with living *independently* and preferably *through participation in the labor market*. In addition, the recovery-oriented rehabilitation adds a responsibility and obligation to *get better*, without clearly stating what this entails, outside of independency and (labor-oriented) activity. This is also reflected in the results, as the participants' eagerness to work on themselves and their imagined positive futures achieved through getting to a point where attaining an education and a job is realistic. Both within quite specific fields: Acting (Martin) and programming (Sune).

Marx et al. (2004 in Mau 2018: 100) criticize the idea of work as a "specific kind of activity", and argue to dissolve the idea the division of labor, so that one can:

[...] hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, engage in cattle breeding in the evening and critical reflection over dinner, just what I want to do, without ever becoming a hunter, fisher, herdsman or critic. (Marx et al. 2004 in Mau 2018: 100)

As such this critique of labor entails a re-framing of work or activity to correspond with “the human existence” (Mau 2018: 98), where one performs activities in accordance with wants, wishes, and needs. In such a society, the participants of this study, in all probability, perform several activities (such as relaxing, watching YouTube-videos, gaming, cooking dinner, socializing, hanging out with family and pets, engaging with political work, and creative writing), which could be appreciated differently, despite oftentimes not being recognized as activities of particular value in the current political approach to the employment system.

The points discussed here can be argued to point to the thesis’ ethnographic and political relevance. In accordance with Bundgaard and Gammeltoft (2018: 28) what constitutes ethnographic relevance is:

[...] to shed light on aspects of society and human life, of which there is a lack of empirical knowledge, with the intention of contributing to understanding specific societal issues. (My translation).

I argue that in the context of the circulating ‘societal issue’ of young adults who are not in education or employment, the findings of this thesis point to a need for further critical discussions regarding how lives are made to matter and *feel* valuable. The thesis contributes by bringing forth questions such as: Is the value of lives and experiences of meaning mainly to be seen in an economic context focusing on individual efficiency, or is it possible to support people in alternative ways of experiencing meaning? This points to the political relevance. According to Bundgaard and Gammeltoft (2018: 28) this entails “[...] a wish to affect some of the structures that influence social and cultural worlds”. With the findings and discussions in mind, I wonder: Are we worried that if we start a political conversation of what ‘the good life’ might look like outside of employment, everyone will just lie down and do nothing? Is that the feared endpoint? This would be peculiar, as we know from earlier research (e.g. Katznelson & Görlich 2017), supported by the findings of this thesis, that *most young people really wish to educate themselves and work; to contribute*. So, should there not be

narratives allowing exploration of alternative ways of accessing a good life, if one does not currently fit into the employment system? And should belonging only happen through the labor market? Or could systems be changed to celebrate and center voices and experiences of minorities? These questions will be explored in the following sections.

Happiness and the Good Life Revisited

Within psychology there are many takes on what ‘the good life’ might be made up of. Svend Brinkmann has made the case that in our modern, optimizable, efficient lives ‘the good life’ might be *threatened* (Tulinius 2022). In an interview he argues that the time and skills

[...] to immerse oneself in existential questions such as: ‘what is the good life?’ and ‘how can we organize a just society?’ do not only enrich our own life, but are crucial to our collective life, our society and democracy. (Tulinius 2022: l. 24-28, my translation).

Brinkmann explains how instead of focusing on an active life (consisting of tangible actions), he wishes to concentrate on a contemplative life, which deals with one’s inner world, and is shaped through dialogue with others who might offer different insights. He believes that the road to the good life is not through the otherwise commonly debated idea of “living in the moment”, on the contrary he argues that “Living in the moment is only done by those who cannot think” (Tulinius 2022: l. 149), as he claims it is “[...] indeed by practicing critical thinking one becomes “spiritually awake”” (Tulinius 2022: ll. 150-151, my translations). If we accept such a standpoint, do Martin and Sune’s reflections on themes such as forgiveness, dialogue despite conflict or disagreement, and whether people might need to be more physically close to each other, perhaps represent exactly this? Would that make them representative of ‘living the good life’ in Brinkmann’s eyes? Returning to Ahmed’s (2010) theoretical framework, it seems that this form of meaning making is *not* central in the social norms and ideals that become affective in regard to happiness. Additionally, as opposed to Brinkmann, Ahmed (2010: 12) does not advocate to emphasize ideas of happiness “linked to the mind” over those linked to the body. She argues that representations of happiness which require time, thought, and labor makes “the being of happiness [...] recognizable as bourgeois” (Ahmed 2010: 12), as only some people have a life that involves “self-ownership, material security, and leisure time” (Ahmed 2010: 13), which are necessary for this form of Aristotelian contemplation. However, in the

case of this thesis, the question arises: What about the people who *have* the time to contemplate, but feel isolated or stuck navigating cultural scripts claiming their inherent difference and need to self-improve? The present findings thus add to Ahmed's (2010) argument, while opposing Brinkmann's: In some instances, when time to contemplate *is* made available, it still might not be experienced as moving one closer to 'the good life'. However, here Brinkmann's perspective (in Tulinius 2022) might maintain that this is due to the amount of time spent in isolation, which is continually mentioned by both Martin and Sune, thus lacking possibilities for *dialogue*. As such, the issue does not become time to reflect, but time spent reflecting *with others*, which is exactly what the participants wish for; more social life.

Taking these reflections into account, it is worth noting that the participants never directly state whether they are *unhappy*. They express experiences of loneliness, standing out, being behind, and wanting to change, nonetheless it does seem a limitation that I did not explicitly ask "are you happy?" or "do you feel/experience happiness overall?", as I cannot, within this thesis, say whether they generally view happiness as lacking from their lives. However, I did ask *what makes them happy*, and on the one hand they showed that they are striving for change in order to have *more* happiness, to come closer to happy objects such as a successful career, hard-earned accomplishments, having a family and a larger friend group. While they on the other hand oftentimes do *not* connect concepts such as work or school with 'happy feelings'. Again, it seems a position of ambivalence, as Martin for example makes contradictory statements, both regarding being happy all the time while also experiencing struggles such as anxiety and depression. However, there might be possible biases in interpretation.

Happiness as Performance or Analytical Bias to Search for Despair?

As outlined in the theory section, 'happiness' may be experienced not only as a personal emotion but as a form of obligation or duty.

When Martin is asked about the last time he felt really happy, he responds with hesitation: "Ehmmm... (Pause) Yees, well... (Long pause) Very happy, hmm..." (Interview 2: 17). Upon further probing, such as whether he can recall a moment where he thought to himself "now I'm happy", he eventually states: "Well I'm happy all the time actually, eh, I try to always stay positive" (Interview 2: 17).

This response could be interpreted as an example of happiness being experienced as a norm or expectation, something to be performed or maintained, as suggested by the phrase “I try to always stay positive”. This could resonate with broader societal trends of psychologization, emphasizing for example self-monitoring. Additionally, the initial hesitation may indicate difficulty in recalling specific moments of happiness, while the subsequent insistence on positivity might function as a form of self-assurance—or even defense—aligning with socially desirable self-presentations. Furthermore, when asked if anything might make his everyday life happier or more satisfying, Martin replies: “(Pause)... (Big breath) Hmm... I don't think so... I'm doing well” (Interview 2: 20). This could initially appear to support the interpretation that happiness is expressed in normative terms. As such, a possible lens is that of the *social desirability bias*, where interviewees respond in ways they believe are socially acceptable, politically correct, or self-enhancing (Aarhus Universitet n.d.).

However, realizing that this interpretation rests on a relatively thin empirical foundation, it raised the question whether certain affective responses were being anticipated in advance. In this light, Ahmed's (2014) take on the ‘child-meets-bear story’ becomes relevant: The bear is *made fearsome in advance*. As such, rather than listening to the participant's affirmation, “I'm doing well”, I was in risk of privileging or searching for narratives of unhappiness or struggle, making the social group *unhappy in advance*. Following Haraway (1991: 191) mine, or any academic perspective, should not be exempt from contestation. As such, I wonder: Was I also taught from cultural norms to expect people with mental health struggles to be generally unhappy? A concept that this thesis, to the contrary, reiterates as something rather different from that of dealing with specific challenges.

Ahmed's (2010: 17) suggestion that “If we listen to those who are cast as wretched, perhaps their wretchedness would no longer belong to them” invites a different outlook. Her idea that

The sorrow of the stranger might give us a different angle on happiness not because it teaches us what it is like or must be like to be a stranger, but because it might estrange us from the very happiness of the familiar. (Ahmed 2010: 17)

offers a way to reflect on how dominant discourses attach certain affects, such as despair, to particular groups, possibly including young people with mental health challenges and no formal engagement in education or employment, even when they are quite literally telling us: “Im happy all the time” (Interview 2: 17). Thus, it becomes necessary to reflect on whether interpretations are at risk of being

shaped by such affective assumptions, rather than by the participants' actual words, and may work to *maintain* marginalizing interpretations.

These reflections are situated in the discussion, rather than the analysis, as part of the methodological commitment to openness, withholding premature conclusions, and engaging with discussions of the role of researcher positioning in meaning-making. In line with the postmodern feminist foundations, it reflects an aim to present 'unfinished' or 'open ending' analyses of complex social interactions. This takes me to the following section, exploring exactly this: What are we searching for in critical qualitative research?

Paranoid or Reparative Readings?

Within studies of affect, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick argues that most Western critical enquiry operates from what she terms 'paranoid readings', aiming to expose hidden structures of violence, inequality, homophobia, etc. (Sedgwick 2003). Instead, she advocates for 'reparative readings', which include searching for new possibilities in the object of analysis. Her argument is that paranoid readings always find the same destructive structures, whereas reparative readings are open for surprise and new creative directions for life (Sedgwick 2003).

With this distinction in mind, Ahmed's (1999: 104) concept of 'collective politics', transforming politics of difference, becomes particularly relevant. She challenges discourses of diversity that affirm the collective 'we' of a nation or group by *incorporating* 'difference' without disrupting the very system that constructs it. Instead, she calls for visibility of the violence such systems produce and argues that such visibility can form a basis for resistance. This includes centering and affirming identities of marginalized groups not just in reaction to oppression but as positive presences in their own right.

Historically, individuals categorized as 'mentally ill' have been subjected to confinement, control, and various forms of mistreatment (Porter 2002). From early medical frameworks like those of Hippocrates, which included madness within broader models of sickness and health, to later developments in institutional psychiatry, 'mental difference' has often been cast as something in need of correction or containment. Porter (2002: 100) argues:

The [psychiatric] asylum was not instituted for the practice of psychiatry; psychiatry rather was the practice developed to manage its inmates.

It underlines how disciplinary systems have developed around the perceived need to regulate and "tame" those seen as deviant (Porter 2002: 100). Rather than dwelling on this long and violent history, it is invoked here to emphasize the continued need to center voices from this position—not to reproduce harm, but to resist it. In light of Ahmed's (1999) collective politics and Sedgwick's reparative orientation, the narratives highlighted in this thesis might be read as affirmative gestures: They are not only to be viewed as stories of overcoming, but of living out alternative trajectories to dominant ideals of productivity, normalcy, and constant forward motion.

For instance, despite experiences of bullying, exclusion, or loneliness, the participants remain open and curious toward community, intimacy, enjoyment, fairness, and forgiveness. In Ahmed's (1999) eyes, highlighting such stories of positive identity becomes a collective responsibility, rather than leaving individuals to navigate demands to re-align themselves with societal norms. In this light, the relevance of Brinkmann's call for stillness, reflection, and shared dialogue (Tulinius 2022) reappears, as it frames the participants' experiences of 'standing still' as positive oppositions to dominant imperatives of constant activity, forward motion, and self-improvement.

Various trends within literature and arts also represent ways to make 'mentally ill' people's identities visible in affirming and nuanced ways. A flourishing literary genre, seen with writers such as Asta Olivia Nordenhof, Sidsel Ana Welden, and Anna Juul, draw on personal experiences of mental health challenges and psychiatry in their expressions of everyday life (Andersen & Vindum 2023; Nielsen 2021; Lystbæk-Hansen 2023); not to pathologize or cure, but to inhabit and express these experiences as part of life itself. Their works embody Ahmed's (1999) proposal: Making visible what is often hidden and doing so on their own terms. These narratives are not exclusively about suffering, but center humor, fatigue, playfulness, desire; the full spectrum of life. This can be seen as both a reparative reading, a way of affirming 'alternative corporealities' (Mitchell & Snyder 2015), and rejecting narrow definitions of health or normalcy.

However, everyone may not feel able, safe, or interested in sharing personal experiences of mental health challenges. As the analysis shows, participants in this thesis do *not* center diagnoses in their narratives, and they express a desire to not be defined by them. For some, including Martin, it seems

preferable to inhabit another role entirely rather than risk being seen as ‘different’. Similarly, for Sune, his diagnosis functions as a testimony to him not being ‘normal’. While public discourse increasingly raises concerns about young people pathologizing themselves by talking about life challenges in psychiatric diagnostic terms (Bille 2025) or self-diagnosing through social media (Hansen 2023), these particular youths appear cautious, even reluctant, to speak in diagnostic terms. Instead, the difficulties they articulate in some instances seem somewhat universal, when keeping prominent research on youths’ struggles in mind (Görlich et al. 2024). Returning to Sune’s mention of his diagnosis, as both a mark of deviation from the norm *and* as a shield from potential stigma, this highlights the complex and sometimes contradictory ways young people navigate discourses of abnormality. Notably, the responsibility to manage such struggles is still largely individualized (Görlich et al. 2024). One could say that MeetUp was implemented as a way to counter this individualization, by offering a place to share these struggles (Anonymized municipality 2025), however, when asking Sune if they talk about mental health there he says:

Hmm, on rare occasions. It’s not something we like sit and talk a lot about, ehm. We just sit and talk normally. Ehm... Yes, it is not like a support group for mentally vulnerable people. (Interview 2: 9)

As such, a departure point might be to explore whether initiatives like these, would benefit from initiating such vulnerable conversations, keeping in mind that the attendants presumably share several struggles (Fieldnotes 06.11.2024), or whether they might provide a welcome break from such themes. Such studies could be part of strengthening alternative local communities that people who might otherwise be socially excluded take part in, as recommended by Larsen et al. (2012).

Spatial and Temporal Possibilities

Another analytical finding relevant to reparative readings, new possibilities, and collective responsibility, is that loneliness was found to not just be emotional, but spatial and temporal. This insight suggests an alternative entry point for addressing loneliness; one that shifts focus away from the individual and toward how society is spatially and temporally organized. In this way, the analysis underlines the thesis’ potential practical relevance, contributing to ongoing discussions about how specific forms of social organization might perpetuate isolation. As Bundgaard and Gammeltoft (2018: 28) note, research may aim to “[...] improve a certain practice, for example by contributing to

solutions of specific issues”. This opens up for further inquiry: If ‘home’ is, in some instances, experienced as an alienating space for some, could our ‘homes’ be reorganized instead of the people in it? And additionally, which common cultural trajectories, linked to temporality, might contribute to loneliness, and how could these be reframed? This is explored in the following.

Queer Spaces and Temporalities in a Mental Health Context

[...] as the cliché goes “there is a time and a place for everything”. (Harvey 1990 in Halberstam 2005: 21)

In “Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies”, Jack Halberstam explores how alternative logics of time and space can challenge normative cultural frameworks. While Halberstam (2005: 20) argues that postmodernism signals a crisis in stability, form, and meaning, similarly to Sedgwick (2003) they also suggest that this crisis can become an opportunity to rethink dominant practices, hierarchies, and power structures. Part of this work is to explore time and space as social constructs in order to deconstruct the naturalization of specific modes of temporality (Halberstam 2005).

Both Halberstam (2005) and Ahmed (2006) draw attention to how normalized life trajectories become hard to notice due to repetition. Similarly, Harvey (1990 in Halberstam 2005) argues that we often experience time as a ‘natural progression’, failing to recognize its ‘constructedness’ and the values embedded in it. Time, he suggests, is structured around the logic of capital accumulation. This becomes relevant in the context of the participants’ experiences of timely pressure to “work on themselves” in order to re-enter education or the labor market. For instance, this is highlighted in Sune’s reflections on the need to “train himself” for a job (Interview 1: 5), and obtain a job soon in order to

[...] have an income. Because well I am 26, so... Soon there is not much more financial support to be had. (interview 1: 6)

Halberstam (2005: 15) counters this logic by encouraging imagining futures in “rich, riotous” ways. Their goal is:

[...] to make queer time and queer space into useful terms for academic and nonacademic considerations of life, location, and transformation (Halberstam 2005: 17).

Matching the situated, descriptive approach of this thesis, Halberstam (2005: 17) calls for detailed attention to “practices and structures that both oppose and sustain conventional forms of association, belonging, and identification”. Queer time, they argue, can reveal how notions of respectability and normalcy are tied to a middle-class, reproductive temporality. As such they explore both the limiting qualities of temporality *and* new conceptions of time and space. Halberstam (2005: 18) argues that examples such as the temporality created during drug use challenges and exposes dominant constructions of time. Queer time thus also refers to models of living that step away from the temporal frames of “bourgeois reproduction and family, longevity, risk/safety, and inheritance” (Halberstam 2005: 20). Similarly, queer space refers to “place-making practices” forming new spatial understandings of belonging which queer (or other forms of ‘outsider’) people engage with (Halberstam 2005: 20).

In the context of living with mental health challenges, particularly outside education or the labor market, such rethinking of time and space might also be fruitful. What if ‘standing still’ or ‘being at home’ were not so ‘sticky’ with negative cultural associations? Could these be reimagined as parts of legitimate life trajectories?

In the novel *The Undying*, poet and essayist Anne Boyer (2019) reflects on illness, capitalism, and inequality while undergoing cancer treatment herself. In the chapter “The sickbed”, she writes:

When you are sick and horizontal, the sky or skyish air of what is above you spreads all over your body, the increased area of intersection leads to a crisis of excessive imagining. All that horizontality invites a massive projecting of cognitive forms. When you are so often lying down, you are also so often looking up. (Boyer 2019: 96)

This quote captures the embodied experience of stillness and enclosure: Being bound to one’s home, thinking, looking up. It echoes many of the themes explored here: Time, space, illness, and contemplation. It also touches upon direction: Lying down, means looking up. Following Ahmed (2010), rather than turning people to face in the ‘right direction’, perhaps we should ask these people *what they see from where they are looking?* And when thinking about loneliness, as socially and spatially shaped, perhaps the question becomes: *Should we move our beds closer together?*

Discussion of Methods, Theory and Limitations

While working on the thesis project it became clear that more data would have been fruitful. Returning to the fragmented and partial nature of the ethnographic study (Candea 2007; Haraway 1991) and the postmodern, feminist epistemological view that research is always somewhat incomplete, in this specific situation, I was surprised as to how few words the participants actually shared. I presume that more time at the field-sites to build rapport, observe and interview, could have contributed to a richer dataset, allowing for more nuanced and detailed descriptions and discussions of the participants' practices and experiences. However, it is important to note that no matter the amount of data, I would never be able to speak directly "from below" (Haraway 1991: 191), i.e. from a marginalized perspective, as no one can present research completely from others' viewpoints. As the epistemological foundations reflect, I see from my eyes and do not claim to "see from their positions" (Haraway 1991: 191).

In addition, studying in a field, where you as a researcher might have insider-perspectives, undeniably have implications for your findings. Just as any form of positioning would. Reflecting on the research process, the 'minoritizor/minoritized' viewpoint brings both pros and cons. Having pervasive experience with the area studied, made me able to ask different questions than someone who, for instance, has never been through the process of receiving a mental health diagnosis. It made me aware and sensitive of answers and details that others might find insignificant. At the same time, going through the transcribed interviews, I found that in some incidents it might have distracted me from asking more deep-diving follow-up questions, as I was momentarily caught up in my intuitive response to reassure or mirror the participants' experiences, due to my personal engagement with creating spaces where mental health issues, or struggles of unemployment, is not frowned upon or made out as odd or faulty. However, as Groes-Green (2002: 61) argue, the form of participation, which ethnography calls for, includes social engagement with the community studied. For informants to be personally engaged with your studies, you must authentically and personally engage with people, not just as a researcher collecting data, but as a participant with *commitment to the social context* (Groes-Green 2002).

Foucault has previously been critiqued for not fully engaging with the critical potential of his work, such as with social movements for the rights of homosexuals, as he did not explicitly reflect on his personal investments in the areas studied (Groes-Green 2002: 66-67). I argue, following Groes-Green

(2002), that by engaging with ethnographic participatory methods, the possibility, to separate researcher and citizen, is blurred, as the method relies on the researcher participating as a full person with social investments. As such I view the presented limitations as important insights and experiences that might compliment further critical studies. As Groes-Green (2002: 67) argues:

Indeed, the role of the social sciences is not that of the judge but of the analyst. However, with Foucault, it remains unresolved what should replace the, up until now, accepted truths. This complicates forming a critique of the exposed, analyzed social structures. (My translation)

The gambit of this thesis has been that a focus on Ahmed's developments of Foucault's thinking and her take on collective politics which centers marginalized voices – and Halberstam's (2005) perspective on queer temporalities and spaces – has provided tentative suggestions for directions that aim to *actively replace* dominant 'truths' about concepts such as mental health, work, and productivity. This also points to why Foucault was not in the foreground of the analytical work, as it centered theoretical viewpoints that *add to* or go even further than the classic Foucauldian forms of critique.

Conclusion

The themes of mental health issues, unemployment, and young adulthood are often discussed in terms of which tangible barriers and supporting elements are encountered on the path to labor market integration. It is considered a question of finding solutions for this group to be included in employment and education, in order to access community, gain independence and improved wellbeing. What I have touched upon in this thesis is how young adults with mental health challenges themselves phrase experiences of being outside work and employment, as well as how their narratives reflect broader cultural, discursive trends that center wage-labor, productivity and individual capabilities. In my analysis, I have suggested that these may also reflect a rather narrow idea of meaningful activity, which could play a role in fostering discomfort, exclusion or marginalization of some individuals. The findings bring forth an addition to current efforts of adjusting the labor-market in order to integrate vulnerable citizens, by asking whether efforts to support practices of value and meaning that happen outside a labor-context might be important to wellbeing.

Grounded in a feminist epistemology which centers situated, transparent accounts of the context studied, the ethnographic framework of the thesis entailed an approach which emphasizes my researcher position as both ‘minoritizor’ and ‘minoritized’. This allowed me both to embed the study in broader traditions of feminist methodology with a visible researcher-position, and to engage with relevant discussions of research in a field ‘close to home’, as well as the implications this might have and steps to accommodate potential consequences. This laid the foundation to include discussions on how one’s own embedment in dominant discursive contexts, as a researcher, might be relevant to tackle in studies addressing such structural, directional forces, which take part in attaching certain preconceptions to marginalized groups.

By applying an abductive approach, I found that the empirical data pointed towards the importance of exploring both the individual participants’ narratives, and elements of broader societal tendencies. Thus, a theoretical framework sensitive to implicit, directional forms of power was applied. This was considered fruitful in order to address cultural narratives, which give shape and meaning, not only to individual positioning, but to locations, temporalities and local practices. A key finding was that the social trend to focus on (the effort applied in) following certain life trajectories, containing achieving an education, a job, a family, and being socially skillful, was greatly mirrored in the individual

narratives. The informants' experiences that the process of acquiring these things in some instances were connected to discomfort, associated with 'bettering' oneself or performing unmotivating duties such as schoolwork, was seen in the context of Ahmed's (2006) term 'straightening devices'. It was found that larger cultural narratives direct individuals towards certain endpoints in life, offering ways for 'deviants' to re-align themselves, for example by becoming adaptable to environments where personality traits such as extroversion are favored. Here, the act of 're-aligning' oneself becomes 'sticky' with positive affective connotations centering individual accomplishment, recovery and success.

With regards to deviance, it was found that both participants had experiences of being different from their peers, especially with regards to the amount of time spent at home, and that of being more introverted than others, not enjoying partying, and drinking. As these activities were in some cases associated with attending upper secondary school, the thesis raises the question whether some (institutional) contexts might cater more to some types of personhoods than others. However, this also connects the experience of 'deviance' to that of leisure activities. The theme of leisure was not centered in the thesis, but it could suggest a further study of the connection between education/work, leisure activities and (struggles with) community and belonging amongst youths.

Future research might also elaborate on the findings that associate loneliness, location, spatiality, and temporality. The youths continually brought up experiences of difference in relation to being more at home than their peers. In addition to Ahmed's (2006) theory of orientation and straight lines, studies of queer temporalities and spaces, as seen with for example Halberstam (2005), might foster new perspectives in the area of stepping out of normative expectations of life trajectories, rather than realigning oneself. Additionally, it becomes relevant to further explore which locations are affectively connected with feelings of in- or exclusion. Through life there seems to be a dynamic experience of 'home' as an access point to positive and negative affective experiences, which might be fruitful to unfold further, zooming in on new conceptualizations of belonging and loneliness.

Adding to the experience of being different, it was found that some of the facilitators at MeetUp hold (and circulate) the belief that some youths at MeetUp are 'not like others'. Without adjudicating whether this judgement is justified or not, what I have emphasized is that facilitators play a part in constructing normalcy within everyday life at MeetUp, organizing what is positioned as common, neutral activities. Following a Foucauldian perspective, the attention to these activities and their status

as neutral does not necessarily indicate that these are harmful or dangerous, rather that spaces of ‘common-sense’ always call for attention to implicit power relations (Foucault 1994; Christensen & Hamre 2018). As such, the analysis casts light on the facilitators’ positioning, both as employed by Jobcenter (i.e. a part of the official employment system), and as viewed by the youths as important social relations, and factors implemented with practicing social and life skills. Future research could look further into these power dynamics in order to gain more knowledge as to how facilitators and other Jobcenter-employees influence which activities that are made to count as important or valuable, as well as the youths’ process of identity formation altogether. And additionally, how the facilitators at MeetUp navigate the contrasting position of on the one hand being part of a directive system, and on the other holding personal investment in helping youths, whichever way they might need to go. Here it is also relevant to note, that contrary to similar research the study found that participants did in fact *not* mention experiences of distrust or lack of recognition in the employment system, reflecting a nuance to the research presented in the introduction, positioning Jobcenter as a space of suspicion.

Thus, the overall findings of the thesis present a partial, situated perspective, which point to that of being a young adult without education or employment as a position of ambivalence. It is highlighted that it is important not to attach unwarranted sorrow or despair to this group, thus, not to form conclusions on whether they are generally happy or happy “enough”. The main insight has instead been the centrality of existential ambivalence: What makes their position precarious is not only financial concerns but rather that they live in a society where spaces of education and employment are situated as dominant bridges to meaning and belonging. In addition, youths are expected to arrive in these places in certain ways: Not too quiet, socially skillful, ready to party, and to be with many people at once, in order to progress and succeed in these institutional settings. A neutral framing of ‘everyday-places and activities’ is produced, in relation to which some forms of being stand out and disturb the social order.

Works cited

- AAA. (n.d.). *AAA Statement on Ethics: Principles of Professional Responsibility*. American Anthropological Association. <https://americananthro.org/about/policies/statement-on-ethics/>
- Aarhus Universitet. (n.d.). *Subjektive besvarelser (social desirability)*. Metodeguiden. <https://metodeguiden.au.dk/subjektive-besvarelser-social-desirability>
- Abell, J., Locke, A., Condor, S., Gibson, S., & Stevenson, C. (2006). Trying similarity, doing difference: the role of interviewer self-disclosure in interview talk with young people. *Qualitative Research*, 6(2), 221–244. DOI: 10.1177/1468794106062711
- Adler-Bolton, B. & Vierkant, A. (2022). *Health Communism*. Verso.
- Ahmed, S. (1999). ‘She’ll Wake Up One of These Days and Find She’s Turned into a Nigger’: Passing through Hybridity. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 16(2), 87–106. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02632769922050566>
- Ahmed, S. (2006). *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074>
- Ahmed, S. (2010). *The Promise of Happiness*. Duke University Press.
- Ahmed, S. (2014). Introduction: Feel Your Way. In S. Ahmed (Ed.), *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (1–19). Edinburgh University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780748691142-002>
- Akademiet for talentfulde unge. (n.d.). *Deduktion, induktion og abduktion – en note*. https://atumidt.dk/sites/default/files/aktiviteter/forskningsstrategier_mc.pdf
- Andersen, I. E., & Vindum, A. (2023). *Asta Olivia Nordenhof*. Forfatterweb. <https://forfatterweb.dk/oversigt/nordenhof-asta-olivia>

- Anderson, B. (2006). Introduction. In B. Anderson (Ed.), *Imagined Communities* [Revised edition] (12-15). Verso.
- Antoft, R. & Thomsen, T. L. (2005): Når livsfortællinger bliver en sociologisk metode. Introduktion til det biografisk narrative interview. In M. H. Jacobsen, S. Kristiansen & A. Prieur (Eds.), *Liv fortælling og tekst. Strejftog i kvalitativ sociologi* (157-176). Aalborg Universitetsforlag.
- Barnets Lov. (2024, LBK nr. 83 af 25/01/2024). *Barnets lov*.
<https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lta/2023/721>
- Bergenser, D. (2024). *3 ud af 4 tilkendegivelser af førtidspension til unge under 40 år skyldes psykisk lidelse*. Dansk Arbejdsgiverforening. <https://www.da.dk/politik-og-analyser/beskaeftigelse/2024/3-ud-af-4-tilkendelser-af-foertidspension-til-unge-under-40-aar-skyldes-psykisk-lidelse/>
- Berger, N. P., Aagaard, N., & Bank, H. (2021). *Inspiration til arbejdet med de meget udsatte borgere: Tilgange til borgere med misbrug, psykiske vanskeligheder og komplekse sociale problemer*. VIVE – Det Nationale Forsknings- og Analysecenter for Velfærd.
<https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/qz5kdrz8/5735044>
- Bille, M. (2025). *Forsker: Unge kæmper med livet, ikke nødvendigvis med en diagnose*. BUPL.
<https://bupl.dk/paedagogik-og-profession/forskningsunivers/forsker-unge-kaemper-med-livet-ikke-noedvendigvis-med-en>
- Bolvig, I., Jeppesen, T., Kleif, B. K., Østergaard, J., Iversen, A., Broch-Lips, N., Jensen, N. L., & Thodsen, N. (2019). *Unge uden job og uddannelse – hvor mange, hvorfra, hvorhen og hvorfor? En kortlægning af de udsatte unge i NEET-gruppen*. VIVE – Viden til Velfærd, Det Nationale Forsknings- og Analysecenter for Velfærd. <https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/rv711qxn/3641625>
- Bolvig, I. (2023). *Unge uden job og uddannelse – Definitioner, målgruppestørrelser og karakteristika*. VIVE – Viden til Velfærd, Det Nationale Forsknings- og Analysecenter for Velfærd.
<https://www.vive.dk/media/pure/jvn2o4vm/20891275>

- Bolvig, I., Jensen, V., Karm, P., Kreiner, C. T., Rosholm, M., & Søgaard, J. E. (2024). *Anbefalinger til fremtidens beskæftigelsesindsats*. Beskæftigelsesministeriet.
<https://fremtidensbeskæftigelsesindsats.dk/media/oiwfl12r3/anbefalinger-til-fremtidens-beskaeftigelsesindsats.pdf>
- Boyer, A. (2019). *The Undying*. Penguin Books Ltd.
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77-101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2020). Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I *not* use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1), 37-47. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12360>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2021). One size fits all? What counts as quality practice in (reflexive) thematic analysis? *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 18(3), 328-352.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2020.1769238>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). Conceptual and Design Thinking for Thematic Analysis. *Qualitative Psychology*, 9(1), 3-26. <https://doi.org/10.1037/qup0000196>
- Brinkmann, S., & Kvale, S. (2009). *Interview: Introduktion til et håndværk*. Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Bukdahl, D., & Vickery, R. (2022). *Virksomme ingredienser i ungeindsatser - En analyse af 12 indsatser til unge*. En Vej til Alle. https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/63cfcebc5195f4155b4397b5/63cfcebc5195f4ead143986b_Analyse%20af%20virksomme%20ingredienser%20i%20ungeindsatser.pdf
- Bundgaard, H., & Gammeltoft, T. (2018). Projektdesign: Fra idé til projekt. In H. Bundgaard, H. O. Mogensen, C. Rubow (Eds.), *Antropologiske projekter: En grundbog* (21-37). Samfundslitteratur.

- Børch, M., & Jacobsen, A. N. (2023). *VI HAR BRUG FOR EN CENTRAL KLAGEINSTANS PÅ KØBENHAVNS UNIVERSITET*. Uniavisen. <https://uniavisen.dk/vi-har-brug-for-en-central-klageinstans-paa-koebenhavns-universitet/>
- Caine, K. J., Davison, C. M., & Stewart, E. J. (2009). Preliminary field-work: methodological reflections from northern Canadian research. *Qualitative Research*, 9(4), 489–513. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794109337880>
- Caldera, A., Rizvi, S., Calderon-Berumen, F., & Lugo, M. (2020). When Researching the “Other” Intersects with the Self. *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, 9(1), 63-88. <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.1.63>
- Candea, M. (2007). Arbitrary locations: in defence of the bounded field-site. *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 13(1), 167–184. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9655.2007.00419.x>
- Cefu, Epinion, & Metrica. (2020). *Slutevaluering af RCT-forsøget Job-bro til Uddannelse*. Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering. <https://star.dk/media/17943/evalueringsrapport-jobbro-til-uddannelse-afrapportering.pdf>
- Christensen, A.-D., & Thomsen, T., L. (2016). Fortællinger om migration og skiftende betydninger af klasse, etnicitet og køn. In I. G. Bo, A.-D. Christensen & T. L. Thomsen (Eds.), *Narrativ forskning: Tilgange og metoder* (257-272). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Christensen, G., & Hamre, B. (2018). Analyse af subjektivering i en pædagogisk praksis. In G. Christensen, B. Hamre & Unge Pædagoger (Eds), *At tænke med Foucault* (112-137). UP- Unge Pædagoger.
- Conquergood, D. (2013). Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics. In D. Conquergood & E. P Johnson (Eds.), *Cultural Struggles* (81-103).
- Cornell University. (n.d.). *Sofia A. Villenas: Associate Professor*. Department of Anthropology. <https://anthropology.cornell.edu/sofia-villenas>

- Cranfield University Library Services. (n.d.). Snowballing and grey literature. In *Conducting your literature review*. Retrieved: July 16, 2025, from <https://library.cranfield.ac.uk/literature-review/grey-literature>
- Danneris, S. (2016). One Size Doesn't Fit All: Diversifying research on active labor market policies. *Social Work & Society*, 14(1), 1-22.
- Danneris, S. (2018). Ready to work (yet)? Unemployment trajectories among vulnerable welfare recipients. *Qualitative Social Work*, 17(3), 355–372. DOI: 10.1177/1473325016672916
- Danneris, S., & Herup Nielsen, M. (2018). Bringing the client back in: A comparison between political rationality and the experiences of the unemployed. *Social Policy & Administration*, 52(7), 1441–1454. <https://doi-org.zorac.aub.aau.dk/10.1111/spol.12386>
- Danmarks Statistik. (2024). *Unge uden job og uddannelse har dårligere mentalt helbred*. <https://www.dst.dk/da/Statistik/nyheder-analyser-publ/Analyser/54032-unge-uden-job-og-uddannelse-har-daarlignere-mentalt-helbred>
- Ekspertudvalget på socialområdet. (2024). *Anbefalinger til en bæredygtig faglig og økonomisk udvikling på socialområdet*. Social-, Bolig- og Ældreministeriet. https://www.sm.dk/Media/638477394132760480/Anbefalinger_til_en_bæredygtig_faglig_og_økonomisk_udvikling_på_socialområdet.pdf
- En Vej til Alle. (n.d.). *En Vej til Alles handlingsfællesskab*. <https://www.envejtilalle.dk/hvem-er-vi>
- Eriksen, T. H. (2015). *Small Places, Large Issues: An Introduction to Social and Cultural Anthropology*. Pluto Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p184>
- Eriksson, B. (2009). Socialiseret til individualisering, globaliseret til æstetisering: Om fællesskabsfølelser på aktuelle vilkår. In M. Bolt, & J. Lund (Eds.), *Fællesskabsfølelser* (83-99). Klim.

Fagbladet 3F. (n.d.). *FAGBLADET 3F – FØLG MED I DET VIGTIGSTE*. <https://fagbladet3f.dk/141219-2/>

Fjeldberg, A. (2016). *Studererambassadør: Studerende med handicap skal kende forskelsbehandlingsloven*. Uniavisen. <https://uniavisen.dk/studererambassadoer-studerende-med-handicap-skal-kende-forskelsbehandlings-loven/>

Foucault, M. (1994). *Viljen til viden: Seksualitetens historie 1* (S. G. Olesen, Trans.). Redaktionen filosofi: Det lille forlag.

Foss, A. (2015). Kildehåndtering, referenceteknik og typografi i akademiske tekster, version 1.6.

Frederiksen, M. (2020). Mixed methods-forskning. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative metoder: En grundbog* (257-278). Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Görlich, A., Katznelson, N., & Pless, M. (2024). Not well enough: acceleration, performance and psychologization in young people's lives. *Journal of Youth Studies*, 1-15.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2024.2388322>

Groes-Green, C. (2002). FELTARBEJDETS FORPLIGTELSE: Deltagelse og kritik blandt saterémawé-immigranter i Manaus, Brasilien. *Tidsskriftet Antropologi*, 45, 61-72.
<https://doi.org/10.7146/ta.v0i45.107375>

Groth, C. (2024). Karl Marx. In *Danmarks Nationalleksikon*. Retrieved August 1, 2025, from https://lex.dk/Karl_Marx

Halberg, E. (2017). *Roden til alt ondt*. Forlaget Nemo.

Halberstam, J. J. (2005). Queer Temporality and Postmodern Geographies. In J. J. Halberstam (Ed.), *In a Queer Time and Place* (12-43). New York University Press.

Hansen, S. (2023). *Ekspert advarer mod selvdiagnosticering på sociale medier*. TV2 Echo.

<https://echo.tv2.dk/2023-05-12-ekspert-advarer-mod-selvdiagnosticering-paa-sociale-medier>

Haraway, D. J. (1991). Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective. In D. J. Haraway (Ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women* (183–201). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203873106-13>

Hastrup, K. (2020). Feltarbejde. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative metoder: En grundbog* (65-95). Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Holm, C. (2023). *Et stigende antal unge får førtidspension, selvom reform skulle sætte en stopper for det*. Danmarks Radio. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/et-stigende-antal-unge-faar-foertidspension-selvom-reform-skulle-saette-en-stopper>

Holten, E. (2024). *Underskud: Om værdien af omsorg*. Politiken.

Hymes, D. (1996). *Ethnography, Linguistics, Narrative Inequality: Toward An Understanding Of Voice* (1st ed.). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203211816>

Jacobi, C. B., & Gahrn, J. K. (2019). *VIDENSNOTAT: Hvad betyder psykiske lidelser for beskæftigelsen, og hvordan kommer flere i job?* Professionshøjskolen Absalon.
<https://www.ucviden.dk/ws/portalfiles/portal/92789033/Vidensnotat.pdf>

Jeppesen, P., Obel, C., Lund, L., Madsen, K. B., Nielsen, L., & Nordentoft, M. (2020). *Mental sundhed og sygdom hos børn og unge i alderen 10-24 år*. Vidensråd for forebyggelse.
<https://vidensraad.dk/rapport/mental-sundhed-og-sygdom-hos-boern-og-unge-i-alderen-10-24-aar-forekomst-udvikling-og>

Katznelson, N., & Görlich, A. (2017). *Hvordan skaber man motivation for uddannelse blandt udsatte unge*. Cefu and Aalborg Universitet.
https://www.cefu.dk/media/599008/piece_cefu_17_for_web.pdf

- Katznelson, N., Görlich, A., & Christensen, L. (2019). Handlestrategier blandt udsatte unge på kanten af det danske samfund. *Dansk Sociologi*, 30(1), 33-51.
- Knudsen, B. T., & Stage, C. (2016). Affektteori. In B. Schiermer (Ed.), *Kulturteori og kultursociologi* (53–75). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Krogh Kjeldgaard, A., & Kirkegaard, T. (2021). PATOLOGISK DECELERATION: ET SKRIDT PÅ VEJEN MOD ET KOLLEKTIVT SPROG OG KULTURBEVIDST HÅNDTERING AF PSYKISK MISTRIVSEL I DET SENMODERNE SAMFUND. *Psyke & logos*, 42(1), 56–72.
<https://doi.org/10.7146/pl.v42i1.128766>
- Kusenbach, M. (2003). Street phenomenology: The go-along as ethnographic research tool. *Ethnography*, 4(3), 455–485. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146613810343007>
- Larsen, E.L., Andersen, P.T., & Bak, C.L. (2012). Fortællinger om et liv som arbejdsløs og socialt ekskluderet. *Tidsskrift for Forskning i Sygdom og Samfund*, 16, 83-103.
- Loughborough University. (2025). *Professor Karen O'Reilly*. Criminology, Sociology and Social Policy. <https://www.lboro.ac.uk/subjects/social-policy-studies/staff/honorary/karen-o-reilly/>
- Lov om en aktiv beskæftigelsesindsats. (2022, LBK nr. 701 af 22/05/2022). *Lov om en aktiv beskæftigelsesindsats*. <https://www.retsinformation.dk/eli/lt/2019/548>
- Lykke, N. (2008). *Kønsforskning – en guide til feministisk teori, metodologi og skrift*. Samfundslitteratur.
- Lystbæk-Hansen, J. (2023). *Anna Juul*. Forfatterweb. <https://forfatterweb.dk/juul-anna>
- Lægeforeningen. (2023). *Praktiserende læge og fagpolitisk fyrtårn fra Slagelse vinder Lægeforeningen Sjællands kollegialitetspris*. <https://laeger.dk/nyheder/praktiserende-laege-og-fagpolitisk-fyrtaarn-fra-slagelse-vinder-laegeforeningen-sjaellands-kollegialitetspris>

- Marcus, G. E. (1995). Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1), 95–117.
<https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523>
- Martin, H. M. (2021). Sårbarhed og sundhed: En perspektivering. *Tidsskrift for Forskning i Sygdom og Samfund*, 35, 23-31.
- Mau, S. (2018). Fra væsen til stofskifte - Marx' arbejdsbegreber. *Slagmark - Tidsskrift for idéhistorie*, (76), 95–111. <https://doi.org/10.7146/slagmark.v0i76.124161>
- Miles, M. B., Huberman, A. M., & Saldaña, J. (2017). *Qualitative data analysis : A methods sourcebook*. SAGE Publications, Inc.
- Minh-ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other : writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Indiana University Press.
- Mitchell, D. T., & Snyder, S. L. (2015). Introduction. In D. T. Mitchell & S. L. Snyder, *The Biopolitics of Disability* (1-32). University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.7331366>
- Mortensen, S., Questiaux, F., J.O.V.E.F., N., & Sekamane, A.-S. (2021). *Racisme på de danske universiteter skal ikke ignoreres*. Københavns Universitet.
<https://ifro.ku.dk/aktuelt/debatindlaeg/debatindlaeg-2021/racisme-paa-de-danske-universiteter/>
- Musaeus, P. (2012). Korttidsetnografi: hverken blitzkrig eller eksil. In M. Pedersen, J. Klitmøller & K. Nielsen (Eds.), *Deltagerobservation* (149-160). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Nielsen, B. S. (2021). *Sidsel Ana Welden skriver skønt forkælet om at have det skidt*. Information.
<https://www.information.dk/kultur/anmeldelse/2021/05/sidsel-ana-welden-skriver-skoent-forkaelet-skidt>

- Olesen, T., & Edelvang-Pejrup, M. (2021). *Mange af de 45.000 unge uden job og uddannelse har et handicap og får ikke nok hjælp*. Information. <https://www.information.dk/debat/2021/10/45000-unge-uden-job-uddannelse-handicap-faar-nok-hjaelp>
- Olesen, S. P., & Monrad, M. (2018). *Forskningsmetode i socialt arbejde*. Hans Reitzel. <https://forskningsmetodeisocialtarbejde.digi.hansreitzel.dk>
- O'Reilly, K. (2012). *Ethnographic methods*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203864722>
- Pedersen, M. L. (2024). *Fordobling på fire år: Flere går på tidlig pension for egen regning*. Danmarks Radio. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/fordobling-paa-fire-aar-flere-gaar-paa-tidlig-pension-egen-regning>
- Pihl, M. D., Jensen, T. L., & Weber, M. (2022). *Unge med handicap står oftere uden job og uddannelse*. Arbejderbevægelsens Erhvervsråd and Danske Handicaporganisationer. <https://handicap.dk/files/media/document/AE%202022%20-%20Unge%20med%20handicap%20står%20oftere%20uden%20job%20og%20uddannelse.pdf>
- Porter, R. (2002). *Madness: A Brief History*. Oxford University Press.
- Prakash, T., & Hall, O. (2024). *'Katastrofe': Næsten hver tiende unge er hverken i uddannelse eller job*. Danmarks Radio. <https://www.dr.dk/nyheder/indland/katastrofe-naesten-hver-tiende-unge-er-hverken-i-uddannelse-eller-job-0>
- Rambøll, & Væksthusets Forskningscenter. (2017). *Fra Udsat til Ansat – set fra et arbejdstagerperspektiv*. <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/yt4vm8eg/development/a413e49e0cd056e0fd00b0d77cdd6bc1dfa79abf.pdf>
- Rasmussen, A. H., & Brandt, S. H. (2019). *Arbejde for enhver pris?* [Thesis project]. Sociologisk Institut, Københavns Universitet and Væksthusets Forskningscenter. <https://cdn.sanity.io/files/yt4vm8eg/development/13973d17c0af5ebe5bcbf1faebde20d1f5e5bbbc.pdf>

Reestorff, C. M., & Stage, C. (2018). Medier og affektteori. In P. S. Lauridsen E. Svendsen (Eds.), *Medietheori* (314-331). Samfundslitteratur.

Regeringen, Socialistisk Folkeparti, Konservative Folkeparti, & Radikale Venstre. (2024). *Aftale om Ungeløftet – flere unge i arbejde og forpligtende fællesskaber*. Beskæftigelsesministeriet.
<https://bm.dk/media/r5zhpuzn/aftale-om-ungeloeftet.pdf>

Rubow, C., Fritsch, E., & Ahl, S. I. (2018). Feltnoter: Den foreløbige skrivnings håndværk. In H. Bundgaard, H. O. Mogensen, C. Rubow (Eds.), *Antropologiske projekter: En grundbog* (55-71). Samfundslitteratur.

Schofield, J. (2009). Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research. In R. Gomm, M. Hammersley, P. Foster (Eds.) *Increasing the generalizability of qualitative research* (69-97). SAGE Publications Ltd, <https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857024367.d8>

Sedgwick, E. K. (2003). Paranoid reading and reparative reading, or, you're so paranoid, you probably think this essay is about you. In E. K. Sedgwick (Eds.), *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (123-151). Duke University Press.

Sekretariatet for Ekspertudvalget på socialområdet. (2024). *Vidensnotat – Recovery-orienteret rehabilitering*. Social- og Boligministeriet.
https://www.sm.dk/Media/638537789768051005/Supplerende_bilagsmateriale_27._Vidensnotat_ve_dr._Recovery-orienteret_Rehabilitering_UA.pdf

Shelton, S. A., & Flint, M. A. (2019). The spacetime-mattering and Frankenstein-esque nature of interview transcriptions. *Qualitative Research Journal*, 19(3), 202–212.
<https://doi.org/10.1108/QRJ-03-2019-104>

SIND, & Psykiatrifonden. (2019). *Ny undersøgelse: Jobcentre gør sygemeldte mere syge*. SIND.
<https://sind.dk/nyheder/ny-undersogelse-jobcentre-goer-sygemeldte-mere-syge>

- Skovgaard, C. (2023). *Efter 100 klager: Racistisk vægmaleri fjernes fra fredagsbar på Frederiksberg Campus*. Uniavisen. <https://uniavisen.dk/efter-100-klager-racistisk-vaegmaleri-fjernes-fra-fredagsbar-paa-frederiksberg-campus/>
- Snekkerup, R. (2023). *LEDELSEN ER ENIG MED STUDERENDE: SÅDAN VIL VI STOPPE DISKRIMINATION OG KRÆNKELSER*. Uniavisen. <https://uniavisen.dk/ledelsen-er-enig-med-studerende-saadan-vil-vi-stoppe-diskrimination-og-kraenkelser/>
- Sokoler, A., & Olesen, H. K. (2017). *Jobcentre gør danskere psykisk syge*. Fagbladet 3F. <https://fagbladet3f.dk/jobcentre-goer-danskere-psykisk-syge/>
- Spradley, J. (1979). *The Ethnographic Interview*. Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Styrelsen for Arbejdsmarked og Rekruttering. (2025). *Ansvar for beskæftigelsesindsatsen*. <https://star.dk/om-styrelsen/ansvar-for-beskaeftigelsesindsatsen#:~:text=Jobcentrene%20løser%20kerneopgaverne%20i%20beskæftigelsesindsatsen,arbejdskraft%2C%20de%20har%20brug%20for.>
- Szulewicz, T. (2020). Deltagerobservation. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative metoder: En grundbog* (257-278). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Tanggaard, L., & Brinkmann, S. (2020). Interview. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard (Eds.), *Kvalitative metoder: En grundbog* (257-278). Hans Reitzels Forlag.
- Tulinus, B. (2022). *Svend Brinkmann: Vi lever i en tid, hvor eftertænksomheden – og dermed det gode liv – er truet*. Kristeligt Dagblad. <https://www.kristeligt-dagblad.dk/liv-og-sjael/svend-brinkmann-vi-lever-i-en-tid-hvor-eftertaenksomheden-og-dermed-det-gode-liv-er>
- Udbetaling Danmark. (2025). *Disability pension*. Life in Denmark. <https://lifeindenmark.borger.dk/pension/disability-pension>

- Vickery, R., Bukdahl, D., & Klie, A. (2023). *Flere og flere unge kommer på førtidspension. Er det de unges skyld eller systemets?* Mandagmorgen. <https://www.mm.dk/artikel/flere-og-flere-unge-kommer-paa-foertidspension-er-det-de-unges-skyld-eller-systemets>
- Villenas, S. (1996). The Colonizer/Colonized Chicana Ethnographer: Identity, Marginalization, and Co-optation in the Field. *Harvard Educational Review*, 66(4), 711–731.
<https://doi.org/10.17763/haer.66.4.3483672630865482>
- Watson, M., & Cornfeld, L., (2023). Donna Haraway. In *Oxford Bibliographies*. Retrieved November 2, 2024, from <https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/display/document/obo-9780199766567/obo-9780199766567-0284.xml#obo-9780199766567-0284-bibItem-0004>
- Work4Youth. (2015). *What does NEETs mean and why is the concept so easily misinterpreted?* International Labour Organization.
https://www.ilo.org/sites/default/files/wcmsp5/groups/public/%40dgreports/%40dcomm/documents/publication/wcms_343153.pdf