

Unveiling Nordic Youth's Aspirations: A Multi Methods Approach

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Abstract

This study investigates how different narrative interview methods capture young people's aspirations. Based on a theoretical conceptualization of aspirations, we argue that methods need to capture the young people's future and present selves, their moral meanings or normative significance of these selves, their lived experiences and social contexts, as well as the multidimensionality and dynamic aspects of their aspirations. The study is based on 75 individual interviews with 25 young people from Finland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark, conducted over three rounds. The findings reveal that young people shared varied aspects of their aspirations when using different interview approaches. While some methods (timeline interviews and future script interviews) were particularly useful for capturing the young people's present selves, lived experiences, and social contexts, other methods (inquiry-based interviews) succeeded in addressing students' future selves and their moral meanings and the normative significance of these selves, and finally, repeated motivational quantifications captured the multidimensionality and dynamic aspects of their aspirations. The study underscores the benefits of a multi-method approach and longitudinal design in capturing young people's aspirations and highlights how research collaboration is useful when striving towards consistency in cross-national studies and for continuously refining methods and approaches to optimize comprehensions.

Keywords

aspirations, longitudinal study, interview methods, narrative inquiry, Nordic contexts

Introduction

In the INSPECT project, we set out to investigate young people's aspirations. We have a particular interest in young people's educational and job aspirations and a more general interest in their aspirations concerning family, leisure, and so on, as we believe these aspirations are intertwined with their educational and job aspirations. The importance of young people's aspirations have been well documented, as desired future events is shown to direct and motivate effort in the present, and thereby increase young people's chances of succeeding, for example, in the education system (Lent et al., 1994; Quaglia & Cobb, 1996). Although the term "aspirations" is frequently used to refer to the goals young people set for themselves, there is no single and universally accepted definition or common agreement as to what the term means (Trebbels, 2014). However, it is commonly agreed that while the term "expectations" refers to outcomes an individual realistically expects to achieve (Haller, 1968; Hanson, 1994), having "aspirations" demonstrates a more idealistic nature, referring to a desired attainment level that one hopes and desires to achieve, not limited by constraints such as level of education, the family's financial resources, and so on (Hauser & Anderson, 1991; Khattab, 2015; Trebbels, 2014). Aspirations are described as the "ideal (or hoped-for) self" as opposed to the "actual self (or expected)" (Chen & Hesketh, 2021) and thus deal with notions of future identity. Just as there is no agreement on the concept of aspirations, there is no agreement on how to measure or capture it empirically (Trebbels, 2014). However, while we find the use of various methods, such as different survey and interview techniques (Zhou & Shirazi, 2025), we find that narrative inquiry is repeatedly used to determine young people's aspirations (e.g., Rogayan et al., 2024). Through this method, young people's experiences are inquired about narratively, molding understandings through reflexive and recursive procedures (Clandinin et al., 2009). The narrative inquiry methodology is relevant for exploring aspirations because it has been suggested that individuals construct their identities and find meaning in life through narratives that integrate their past, present, and future (McAdams, 2003). These personal narratives are shaped by experiences and interpretations, offering a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of their lives. Within the narrative methodology, there are various methods, and yet no one has examined their potential for studying important aspects of youth aspirations. The INSPECT project is well suited for this, because it involves a wide range of contexts and will thus gain knowledge of potential,

based on this variation. Thus, the aim of this study and the contribution of this article is to imply different narrative interview approaches to discuss how each of them captures important aspects of young people's aspirations. We will evaluate the advantages and limitations of each approach. The central research question guiding this study is: *How do various narrative interview approaches capture young people's aspirations?*

Theoretical and methodological framework

As described above, we understand aspirations as the “ideal (or hoped-for) self” (Chen & Hesketh, 2021) and thus, when investigating aspirations, we deal with notions of future identity. Hart (2016) further underlines the need to understand aspirations as a complex and dynamic concept. She states:

... aspirations are held concurrently and are relational, they are dynamic, often connected to other aspirations held by the individual as well as by others. Aspirations are multi-dimensional, varying in importance and timescale. Aspirations may be latent (unarticulated, evolving, abstract and uncertain) and can surface suddenly or emerge slowly. Aspirations may, for example, be institutional, political, legal and shared by family members. Aspirations may relate to home, school, work, national or international life. Whilst aspirations are future-oriented they may also pertain to the continuity of a present state of being. For example, “I want to stay young,” “keep fit,” “be with you forever ... (Hart, 2016, p. 326)

Qvortrup and Lykkegaard (2025) remind us of the importance of selecting methodologies and methods based on epistemological paradigms as logics of justification and frames of inquiry. To capture young people's aspirations, we thus need to employ methodological approaches that capture both the future-oriented (Hart, 2016) or “ideal (or hoped-for) self” (Chen & Hesketh, 2021) and the present state identity (Hart, 2016), in which more than one ideal self exists concurrently as well as the dynamic aspects of aspirations where aspirations change over time (Hart, 2016).

Hart's suggestion is that aspirations are multidimensional. On the one hand, they may *be* institutional, political, legal and *shared by* family members, but on the other hand, they may *relate to* home, school, work, national or international life. The International Labour Organization (2022) suggests that the determinants of aspirations can be divided into two main domains: “Lived experiences” and “social contexts”. Thus, we need to employ approaches that allow us to orient ourselves both towards the young people's personal, day-to-day practices and realities (lived experiences), and the broader cultural, and social environment in which they live (social contexts), for example, their family dynamics (International Labour Organization, 2022). Furthermore, based on systematic theoretical and empirical inquiries, Baker (2017) suggests that an adequate account of aspirations needs to do justice to the moral meaning that young people attach to them, with moral meaning referring to the normative significance people attach to their future plans. This includes their evaluative judgments, beliefs, and attitudes about what they ought to do and the sort of person they hope to become. According to Baker (2017), moral meanings are critical for making sense of the interviewees' goals for the future.

To summarize, the methodical approach must invite the young people to share stories about their:

- Future and present selves
- Moral meanings or normative significance of these selves
- Lived experiences and social contexts
- Multidimensionality and dynamic aspects of their aspirations

While there may be other suitable methodological approaches for capturing young people's aspirations, this article focuses on how various narrative interview approaches capture these important aspects of young people's aspirations. To do this, methodologically we chose a longitudinal design using approaches that "privileges the voices of participants and dissemination of lived experience through thick description and storytelling" McNamara (2013, p. 138). The thick descriptions emerge gradually, through repeated interactions concerning the young people's future and present selves and lived experiences and social contexts. The researchers and the young people slowly approach a common understanding of small and large changes and switches in these (the dynamic and multidimensional aspects of their aspirations), and the moral meanings or normative significance that young people attach to themselves. In our attempt to approach a common understanding between researchers and the young people, we aligned ourselves with the tradition of creating small stories, as described by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008, p. 279), aiming to "frame the micro analysis of small stories as a window into the micro-genetic processes of identities as 'in-the-making' or 'coming-into-being.'"

Methods

In this article, we have drawn on individual interviews with 25 Nordic young people interviewed three times, six months apart, resulting in 75 individual interviews. In each interview, the young people shared their current aspirations and linked them to their perceptions of their past, present, and future selves.

Participants

The study involved five young people from each of the five Nordic countries (Finland, Norway, Iceland, Sweden, and Denmark), aged 13–14 and attending 6th or 7th grade at the time of the first interview (spring 2023). The recruitment was carried out with a teacher as gatekeeper. Each teacher was asked to recruit students with various socioeconomic backgrounds (to the teacher's knowledge), different educational aspirations and values (to the teacher's knowledge), representing all genders, and who would be willing to share thoughts and ideas (as far as the teacher thought). The researchers had no prior connections with the young people.

Table 1 provides an overview of the participating young people from each country, broken down by gender, size of residence, school size, and interests.

Most of the young people are of Nordic origin, but some have one or both parents of a different ethnicity. Some of the young people come from small towns, with most from rural areas. In Norway and Denmark, the young people come from two different places and, consequently, two different schools. This is indicated in the table with 'a' and 'b'. In the other countries, the young people come from the same place and attended the same school.

Table 1. Overview of the 25 participating young people

	Finland	Norway	Iceland	Sweden	Denmark
Gender	3 boys 2 girls	3 boys 2 girls	4 boys 1 girl	2 boys 3 girls	2 boys 3 girls
Size of the city they live in	40,000 residents	1a: 1.000 residents 1b: 5,500 residents	20,000 residents	2,000 residents	2a: 6,000 residents 2b: 275
School size Primary school (PS) Lower secondary school (LS)	700 pupils (PS, LS)	1a: 100 pupils 1b: 320 pupils (PS) 1a: 450 pupils 1b: 220 pupils (LS)	475 pupils (PS, LS)	330 pupils (PS, LS)	2a: 620 pupils (PS, LS) 2b: 130 pupils (PS) and 620 (LS)
Interests	Football, gymnastics, sailing, frisbee-golf, track & field, floorball, athletics, paintball	Football, handball, floorball, cross country skiing, training dogs, riding horses	Football, animals, swimming, nature, family, hockey, art, painting, basketball, language	Football, floorball, history, gaming, acting, freestyle skiing, dance, gymnastics, music, painting, fishing, reading books	Friends, handball, politics, skating, basketball, dancing, go-cart, films, phone

1. Norway. a: two young people, b: three young people. 2. Denmark. a: three young people, b: two young people.

Beyond the information in the table, we also know from the interviews that 19 of the young people lived with both parents, while six had separated parents. Two of them lived with one parent and visited the other parent regularly, while four lived in two homes and had a step-parent in at least one of them. Only one of the participating young people is an only child; the others have one or more siblings. All the young people report having friends, but there is variation in the size of their friendship groups.

Ethical considerations

Since the young people were under the age of eighteen, written permission for the participation was requested from parents, additionally, the aim of the introduction to the interviews was to ensure that the objectives and progress of the research was clear to both the young people and their parents (Creswell, 2015). The handling of data and personal information was carefully explained, including underlining that results would be presented in a way that ensured anonymity, in accordance with the EU General Data Protection Regulation (EU, 2016), guaranteeing the protection of personal data and respecting fundamental rights and freedoms. We refer to the young people only by their nationality and gender (e.g., “a Norwegian boy”) and ensure that our findings are reported in a manner that does not disclose individual identities. This includes avoiding any mention of names of friends, family members, cities, and other identifying details (e.g., showing their handwriting).

The research team was aware of the potential emotional or psychological distress that could arise from participating in the study. To mitigate this, child-friendly methods were used: We maintained a relaxed and approachable tone, actively listened by paraphrasing and asking follow-up questions, and used encouraging language to validate the young people’s perspectives. Additionally, we allowed flexibility in response time, avoided

judgment, and concluded each interview by expressing appreciation and reinforcing the value of their contributions. Also, it was stated on the consent form and discussed before the interviews began that the young people had full freedom to refuse or withdraw from participation at any time, for any reason (Kristinsson, 2013).

In the collaborative construct of young people's aspirational small stories, as researchers, we have an ethical responsibility to represent the young people's lives respectfully. The research team was therefore particularly sensitive to power dynamics, as we explored the young people's narratives (Harnett, 2010). We believe, on the one hand, that the young people's stories could inform further research and drive important societal and educational changes. On the other hand, the inherent power difference between the researchers and the young people required careful handling during interviews and in our presentation of their stories. The principle of justice thus guided our research, ensuring respectful listening and responding to the young people's views to facilitate just presentations. This aligns with children's right to be listened to and taken seriously (NSPCC, 2024; UNICEF, 2024) and giving young people a voice in research that affects them (Crivello, 2017).

Interview methods

The interviews were conducted in Icelandic, Norwegian, Danish, Swedish (which was the first languages for the young people interviewed in Sweden and in Finland) or in English, in cases in which the young people were not fluent in the National language. The few young people who had not been living in the Nordic countries from birth could choose to be interviewed in a Nordic language or in English. Interview guides were created in English in collaboration between the participating researchers and were subsequently translated into the individual Nordic languages. Each interview lasted around 30 minutes. The interviews were recorded or otherwise documented and subsequently transcribed. Summaries for each interview were written and shared among the research team. Before and after each interview, the research team discussed the outcomes. During these discussions, we collaboratively devised new ways to capture the young people's aspirations in the interviews. Thus, the various methodical approaches were shaped through an ongoing collaborative process.

The young people were interviewed three times by the same interviewer. In the first interview, we employed the timeline method as suggested by Adriansen (2012). It has been suggested that this art-based approach can enhance participant engagement by allowing individuals to draw, write and construct their narratives, promoting a sense of ownership, and yielding rich data. The visual aspect of timelines is meant to organize life events chronologically and/or thematically, and reveal complex interrelations and contextual factors. Adriansen (2012) argues that the co-construction of narratives between interviewer and interviewee leads to deeper insights, as participants often discover connections they had not previously considered. This collaborative process might enhance the analytical depth of the research and situate individual stories within broader social, political, and environmental contexts (Adriansen, 2012; Goodson, 2001).

In our timeline approach, the young people were asked to draw a timeline of their lives from birth to the present day and identify significant events. We provided colored pens or crayons, inviting the young people to illustrate or color their timelines. Both the researchers and the young people contributed to the timelines. We also engaged the young people in discussions about how this timeline could continue, what might await them in the future, their plans and wishes for the future, and what was important to them from

a life perspective (see the interview guide in Table 2). The purpose of the timelines was to acquaint ourselves with the young people and gain an overview of their lives. Asking questions about their future also partially served to discuss what they saw as important in life, and what would guide their future aspirations.

Table 2. Timeline interview guide

First interview	Please start by telling me a little about yourself.
	Can you tell me about your past?
	How are you today, how are you feeling at the moment, what do you like to do?
	Draw a timeline and highlight important people and experiences.
	Please tell me about the considerations you have had about what to do after primary school/when you grow up.
Second interview	Remember you drew this timeline last time I talked to you?
	Looking at it again, is there anything missing? Anything surprising? Anything you want to add/change?

In the second interview, we asked the young people to reflect on the previously drawn timelines, giving them the opportunity to add new events, make changes, or comment on the points they had marked in the previous interview.

In the second interview, we additionally introduced the “future script.” This approach has been proposed for understanding personal narratives and future aspirations (McAdams, 2003). This approach encourages participants to reflect on key life events, turning points, and their aspirations in a structured yet flexible format. McAdams (2008) argues that future script interviews capture the richness of individual experiences by revealing how people make sense of their lives, including their values, beliefs, and ideologies. This narrative approach is thus suggested to offer a holistic understanding of participants’ subjective meanings and interpretations.

In our future script approach, the young people were encouraged to imagine writing a book about their lives. We asked them to reflect on the parts such a book might contain, such as the title of the subchapters (see the interview guide in Table 3). The young people described the content of their life chapters, key scenes, and future scripts (McAdams, 2008).

Table 3. Future script interview guide

Second interview	Looking back [at the timeline], is it possible to identify one (or two) key moments that stand out as turning points? (time/situation that made you go through a change...)
	What has happened since I last talked with you?
	If you now imagine that your life (as presented on the timeline) was a book: What would be the title of the main chapters?
	Tell me a little about what each chapter is about.
	How do you imagine your future? Please describe what you see to be the next ‘chapters’ in your life.
	What do you think will be important for you in 2, 5, 10, 20, 50... years?

In the third interview, inspired by philosophical inquiry (Waters, n.d.) and by the second-last question from the previous interview (Table 3), we introduced an inquiry-based

interview approach. According to Nishiyama (2018), this approach was another valuable approach for exploring personal narratives and future aspirations. This approach emphasizes reflective knowledge construction by “being curious and asking focused questions about how to live a rich, good, and fulfilling life of wisdom” (Waters, n.d.), allowing participants to delve deeply into their stories. Through open-ended questioning, participants reflect on their experiences and articulate future goals, providing researchers with insights into the interviewee’s evolving aspirations.

In our inquiry-based interview approach, we asked the young people to look into the future and imagine alternative aspects of their lives 20 years from now, such as their family formation, housing, occupation, diet, and clothing (see the interview guide in Table 4). After answering the open-ended questions, the young people were thus asked to explain their responses and, if possible, relate their responses to their aspirations.

Table 4. Inquiry-based interview guide

Third interview	How do you imagine yourself in 20 years?
	- What do you eat for dinner?
	- Where do you live?
	- Do you have kids?
	- Do you work outside/inside?
	- What do you wear to work?
	- Do you work with people/computers/animals/machines or...?

In all three interview rounds, the young people were asked follow-up questions, about their stories in the previous interviews and whether anything had changed regarding their future aspirations. All interviews included questions about what they wanted to study or work with in the future. Based on these answers and inspired by Lykkegaard & Ulriksen (2016, 2019), we incorporated motivational quantifications in each interview. Lykkegaard and Ulriksen suggest that incorporating quantification of young people’s aspirations during interviews allows for reflections other than purely quantitative or qualitative methods alone.

The young people were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 5, how motivated they were to pursue a particular study program or career they currently wished or planned to engage in for the future (see the interview guide in Table 5). We used the 1-5 scale to quantify how inclined or convinced the young people were about their aspirations, to ask follow-up questions, and to track changes across time.

Table 5. Repeated motivational quantification interview guide

First interview	Please tell me about the considerations you have had about what to do after primary school/when you grow up.
	NB: Note all educational programs/jobs the young people mention. Finish off by asking them to assess on a scale from 1-5 how motivated they are for each of them.
	Are there any other educational programs/jobs you have considered?
Second interview	The last time we talked, you told me that you were considering/aspiring to become/study XXX after primary school. Are these considerations still the same?

(Continued)

Table 5. (Continued)

	The last time you rated these (on a scale from 1 to 5) as follows XXX. How do you rate these possibilities now (on a scale from 1 to 5)?
	Are there any other educational programs/jobs you have considered?
	NB: Note all educational programs/jobs the young people mention. Finish off by asking them to assess on a scale from 1 to 5 how motivated they are for each of them.
Third interview	The last time we talked, you told me that you were considering/aspiring to become/study XXX after primary school. Are these considerations still the same?
	The last time you rated these (on a scale from 1 to 5) as follows XXX. How do you rate these possibilities now (on a scale from 1 to 5)?
	Are there any other educational programs/jobs you have considered?
	NB: Note all educational programs/jobs the young people mention. Finish off by asking them to assess on a scale from 1 to 5 how motivated they are for each of them.

Analytical framework

The four characteristics of aspirations, presented in the theoretical framework, guided our analytical framework. In the initial phase of analysis, we revisited all the interviews, either by re-reading transcripts or re-listening to recordings. The focus was on identifying moments when the young people shared aspects of their aspirations related to the future self and the present self (Hart, 2016), moral meanings or normative significance of these selves (Baker, 2017), lived experiences and social contexts (International Labour Organization, 2022), and/or multidimensionality and dynamic aspects (Hart, 2016). The analysis was first conducted for each of the 25 young people as single cases, exploring if—according to the research question—each approach succeeded or failed in capturing the young person’s aspirations. In a second phase of analysis, we conducted a cross-case comparison, exploring how the different interview approaches succeeded or failed in capturing the future self and the present self, the lived experiences and social contexts, and/or the multidimensionality and dynamic aspects of the young people’s aspirations across the five Nordic contexts, across the 25 young people, and across the three rounds of interviews. The next section presents a condensation of this cross-case analysis, as well as examples from individual cases.

How different interview approaches capture young people’s aspirations

In this section, we present our findings by exploring how each narrative interview approach captured the future self and present self, the moral meanings or normative significance of these selves, the lived experiences and social contexts, and the multidimensionality and the dynamic aspects (as presented in the theoretical framework) of the young people’s aspirations. The focus is on differences in successes and challenges, along with the researcher-group’s considerations regarding methodological choices. We present these methodical findings on the four individual approaches in the following subsections. After these findings, we discuss the overall design and how it contributes to capturing the young people’s aspirations.

Timeline interviews

We employed the timeline interview approach to start conversations with the young people. Based on Adriansen (2012), we hypothesized that engaging in the drawing of a lifeline might ease the young people into conversation, as opposed to the potentially intimidating setting of a formal interview with a previously unknown researcher.

Some of the young people were quick to put in events on the timeline; others were hesitant about drawing on the timeline themselves, prompting the researchers to offer to create it on their behalf while discussing notable events in the young people's lives. Others again did not seem particularly willing or able to draw or write things on the timeline; however, most of them were willing to talk. In this way, with or without drawings/writings on the timeline, the young people shared small stories about their *present selves, lived experiences* and *social contexts*.

We noticed that few of the young people wrote down unique events on the timeline, and many of them conveyed to the interviewer that they had yet to experience a significant event in their lives that warranted inclusion on the timeline. The young people's timelines, which spanned their 14 years of life at the time of the interview, typically encompassed no more than five relatively common social, societal or era-defining events: their birth, the commencement of formal education, the birth of siblings, a trip, relocation to a new residence, and the initiation or cessation of a leisure activity (see an example in Figure 1).

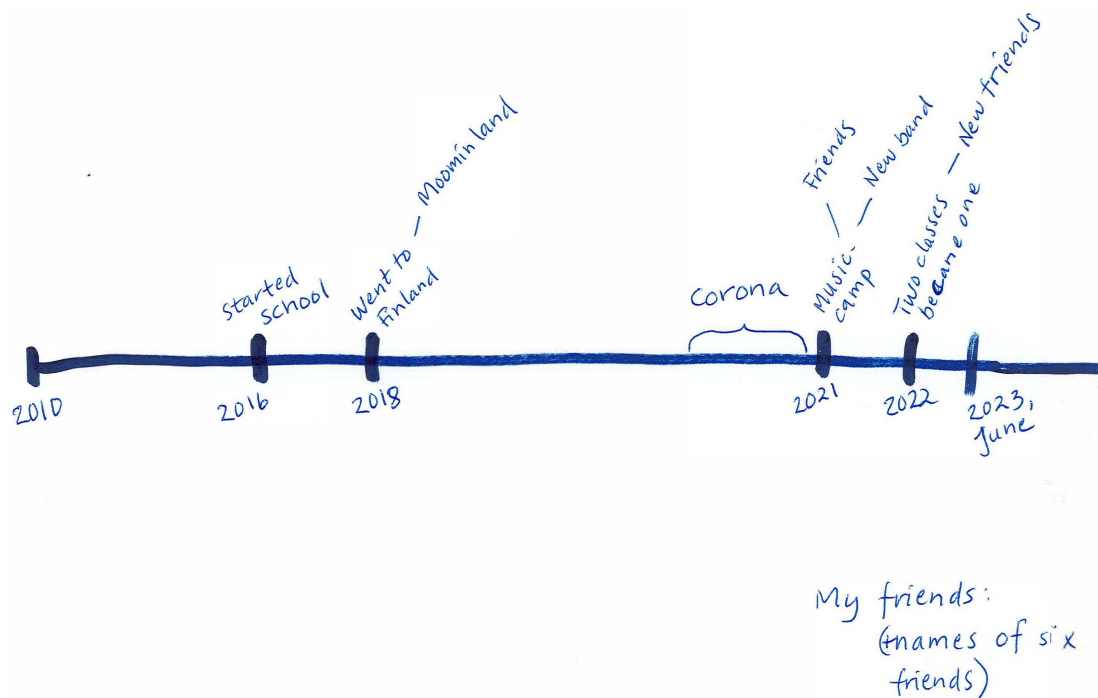


Figure 1. Translated timeline from a Swedish girl (Note that this is a replica made by the researcher who conducted the interview)

Just like the Swedish girl with the timeline in Figure 1, one of the Swedish boys expressed that his life was not particularly interesting, “nothing that had much of significance has occurred,” and that he would have liked something thrilling to happen, such as “breaking a leg or something like that.” This statement and the fact that the young people did not write much on the timelines, could be interpreted as if most of the young people's lives were uneventful or not unique. However, the limited number of events can also be interpreted

as suggesting that several of these youths had quite uncomplicated *lived experiences*. They have their big life events in front of them.

A Finnish girl was one of the exceptions. She revealed unique events like “brother got sick” (*social context*) and “developed eating disorder” (*lived experience*) as shown in Figure 2. As illustrated below, she marked several events/times as vertical lines on the horizontal timeline and explained several of them in writing (and verbally) during the interview. She wrote down personal events (developing an eating disorder, starting athletics), social events (e.g., meeting and getting separated from a best friend), era-defining events (starting school, changing to lower secondary school), and societal events (COVID-19). She underscored some significant events for her (COVID-19 and eating disorder), which helped us get a clearer picture of her *present self*.

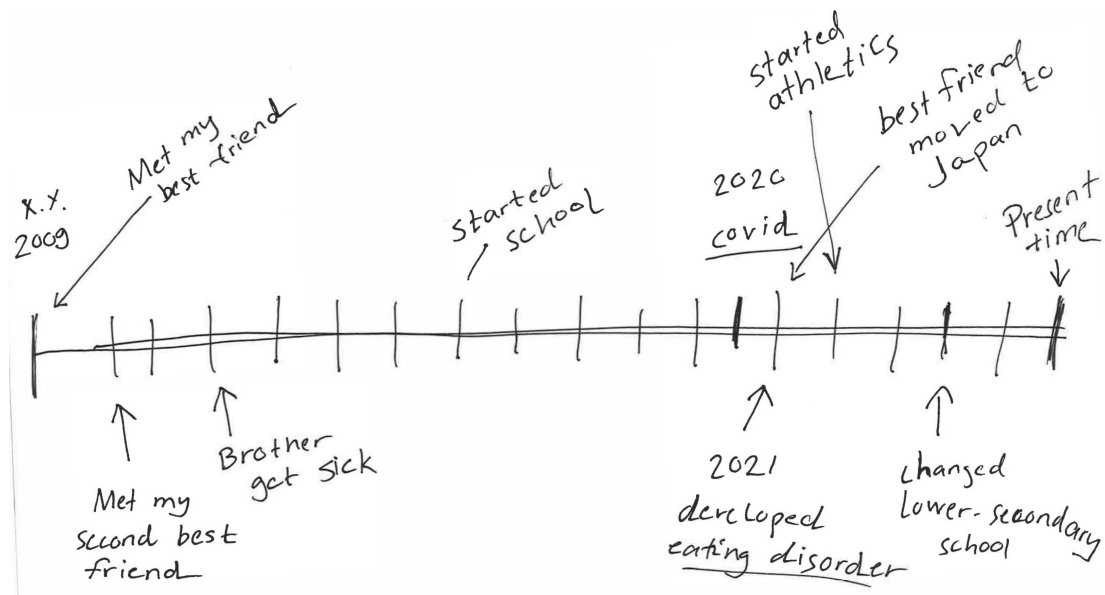


Figure 2. Translated timeline from a Finish girl (Note that this is a replica made by the researcher who conducted the interview)

In the second interview, the young people were asked to re-engage with the timeline. However, they had little to add or comment on, most of them noting “this is still fine” or similar. The research team decided in the subsequent discussion, due to our shared experiences of using the timeline approach, that we needed to find new ways to reach deeper understandings of what we now describe as the young people’s *future and present selves*, *moral meanings or normative significance of these selves*, and their *lived experiences* and *social contexts*.

Future script interviews

In the second interview, we employed the future script interview approach, encouraging the young people to articulate their visions of their *future and present selves* and outline some of the chapters of “the book of their life.” When the young people were introduced to the task of imagining the book and discussing what the titles of the various chapters could be, several initially seemed to find it an exciting assignment, although others seemed more evasive, like one of the Swedish girls who instantly exclaimed, “Oh, difficult!”

Overall, the responses were often brief, and the chapter titles mentioned largely reflected the points they had marked on the timeline in the chronological order found

there, illustrating some *lived experiences* and *social contexts*. However, for the Finnish girl whose timeline was presented in Figure 2, the questions triggered quite analytic reflections about her past and her *moral meanings or normative significance of present and future selves*. She first commented that “life is not a next chapter issue, it is more fluid, like a wave, full of different emotions, meaning it would be really hard to keep switching chapters all the time.” But after this, she suggested a division of chapters related not only to events on the timeline but also to feelings and emotions (*normative significance of present selves*), such as “the upper grades of primary school would be a separate chapter when my friend moved away, and I got kind of depressed and stuff. And then seventh grade, or halfway through seventh grade, would be a new chapter where I tried to fix myself and work on feeling better.” This illustrates not only her *lived experiences* and *social contexts* (International Labour Organization, 2022), but also some *moral meanings*, that, according to Baker (2017), are critical for making sense of the interviewees’ goals for the future.

When asked to describe chapters later in their lives, that is, events related to their *future selves*, this seemed to trigger some of the youths’ imaginations, while others expressed difficulty in envisioning the future. Their future “book chapters” were largely dominated by descriptions of graduating from lower secondary school and, in some cases, pursuing further education, like one Danish girl who describes the next chapter as “going to boarding school [non-compulsory grade 10] and upper secondary school.” This approach thus appeared to be somewhat abstract for most of the participating young people, and none of them provided detailed accounts of their *future selves*. Likewise, this method alone was not able to capture any *multidimensionality* or *dynamics* in their future aspirations.

Imagining life in the next 20 years came a bit easier for the young people, the Danish girl from above thus stated “having a family, a good job and money,” but reflecting on their *future selves* even further away (middle age and old age) was much more difficult for most. The Danish girl now stated, “I really don’t know what I want, I find it quite difficult with work and stuff like that,” and one of the Swedish girls, briefly answered that “the last chapter will somehow summarize my life.” However, she still was not giving this chapter a name.

Discussion within the research team, following the future script interviews, highlighted that both the number and type of aspects of the young people’s aspirations revealed by this approach varied. Some noted that the future scripts largely mirrored the timelines, giving insights into the young people’s *present self*, and for some, their *lived experiences* and *social contexts*. However, when it came to future aspirations, a general trend emerged of the young people generally delving deeper, and they could paint relatively clearer pictures of their *future selves* in the future script interviews than they had in the timeline interviews. The fact that the young people overall became more open and were able to provide relatively clear visions of how they envisioned their future 20 years ahead set the stage for the inclusion of the inquiry-based interviews.

Inquiry-based interviews

We noticed some variety in the responses to the inquiry-based interviews. A few young people answered the questions briefly and did not unfold their *future selves* by envisioning much. However, most of the young people engaged actively and talkatively in imaging their future. The detailed and open questions allowed them opportunities to develop their thoughts about their *future selves* and the *moral meanings or normative significance of these selves*. For example, one of the Finnish boys smoothly related the inquiry-based questions to his plans for future work and to his father (*lived experience* and *social context*). When asked whether he would work inside or outside, he answered:

Yeah, I'd probably work in a way in which I meet people. Whether it's outdoors or indoors, I'm pretty sure I'll be meeting people. Yeah, I'd want to have a job similar to what my dad has right now. He sells stuff, so he just meets people and tries to sell his products. Either he does it for big crowds, like a thousand-plus people in a big hall, or he takes some clients out golfing just to hang out and bond with them. So that would be nice. There's no limit to where that kind of job can take you.

Likewise, one of the Danish girls, when asked about what clothes she would wear for work, said, "One can be casual, but a bit neat; I would like to wear high heels," which led her to reflect on what kind of job and consequently what kind of study could lead to jobs in which she could dress like that.

Using this methodological approach, we received specific and clear pictures from most of the young people of how they envision their future self. We write this in singular, as this approach for most students prompted unidimensional, linear descriptions of their future, and although they captured the young people's *moral meanings or normative significance of this future self*, it was not capable of capturing any *multidimensional* or *dynamic* aspects of their aspirations. Some young people even referred to their future selves as if it were a matter of course more than a matter of uncertainties (*multidimensionality*) and choices (*dynamics*). For example, a Danish girl answered, "I would like to have children, a job, and a husband there [in 20 years]; I think that's normal."

One Icelandic boy, however, revealed both *dynamic* and *multidimensional* aspects of his aspirations. He had previously shared only his *present self* (e.g., an interest in nature), when he was asked to share what he would be working on in 20 years (*future selves*), he answered:

I have possibly changed my ideas a bit. I have been thinking about energy issues and such, I find it exciting, a lot of new things there. And possibly also, I had been considering learning carpentry, learning to build, but I don't really know if I want to work in that field, but I think it could be fun. There are a lot of new things happening and quite a lot at stake. I find it important, something about it.

Here, the Icelandic boy addressed not only his *future selves* (working as a carpenter or within the field of energy) and the *moral meanings or normative significance of these* (being fun or being important), but also the development in his aspirations (*dynamics*) and he envisions himself in relation to different (*multidimensional*) *future selves*.

The inquiry-based interviews and the focus on 20 years ahead generally proved successful in addressing the young people's *future selves* and their *moral meanings or normative significance of these selves*. We thus wonder if a linear way to a middle-aged *future self* might be easier to envision for some young people, than the nearer young-adult *future self*, full of educational choices (*multidimensionality and dynamics*) and responsibilities (*social contexts*).

Repeated motivational quantification interviews

The repeated motivational quantification interviews were another attempt to capture the young people's aspirations (*future selves*), especially the nuances (*multidimensionalities*) of and subtle changes (*dynamics*) in those aspirations.

The outcomes of the repeated motivational quantification interview varied between the young people. A few were very determined about their career choices from the first interview; most had vague plans or wishes, and some did not know at all what work they wanted to do. In any case, the young people tried to justify their thinking as a response to the repeated motivational quantification.

One of the Danish girls, for example, was certain throughout the interviews that she wanted to pursue upper secondary education (*future self*). However, she also mentioned that it was difficult for her to talk about education/job considerations because “I don’t want to feel trapped in anything” (*social context*). The use of the repeated quantifications facilitated her in articulating how her motivation shifted both in intensity (*multidimensionality*) and priority (*dynamics*); see Figure 3.

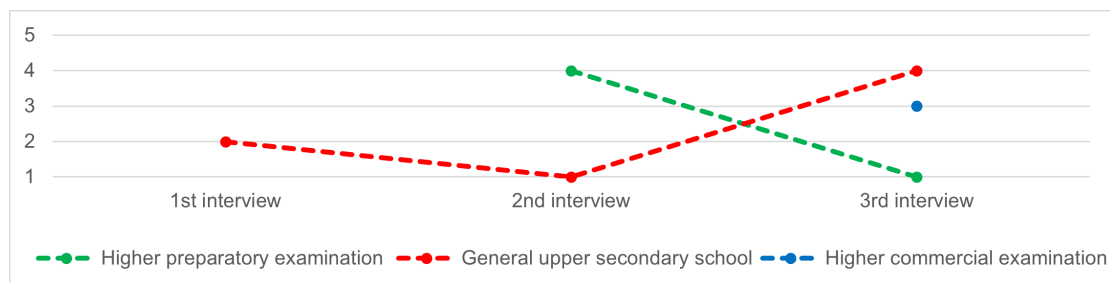


Figure 3. Motivational changes from low (1) to high (5) for one of the Danish girl participants across the three interviews

In the first interview, she said that she might attend a general upper secondary school (see Figure 3). In the next interview, she was considering a higher preparatory examination, while in the third interview, she was back to thinking about general upper secondary school “or possibly a higher commercial examination,” she added. Thus, she made quite significant changes from one interview to the next (*dynamics*). Some education paths were ruled out (*moral meanings or normative significance of future selves*), while others were brought in. The repeated motivational quantification method facilitated the young people in articulating (both verbally and numerically) these changes and to relate them to their *lived experiences*. The Danish girl explained the changes by addressing *normative significance*, “I think it’s just because we’ve all started talking about it now [the class].” In this sense, the repeated motivational quantification method might offer a way to open the discussion about future aspirations without making the young people feel trapped.

However, for other young people, the motivational quantification method was challenging, as they did not have a clear idea of their aspirations. For instance, a Norwegian boy said in the first interview: “I don’t know what kind of education or profession I want in the future, but I do know what I don’t want to do. I don’t want to become a doctor or a nurse, and I certainly don’t want to become a teacher!” (*future selves* and *moral meanings and normative significance of these selves*). In Figure 4, he rated the general education program at upper secondary level highly in all three interviews and explained that it would allow him to postpone the decision of an educational choice (*unsure future selves*). In the third interview, the boy revealed a dream of becoming a professional football player and attending an elite-sports track at upper secondary level. He realized that it was not likely for him to achieve this dream, and therefore he hesitated to mention it when the interviewer asked him to quantify his motivation: “it is just

a dream and perhaps not realistic, even though that is something I really dream of becoming” (*normative significance of this future self*). The motivational quantification did not capture this *dynamic* and somewhat *multidimensional* part of his aspiration numerically (see Figure 4), but the spoken part of the method did.

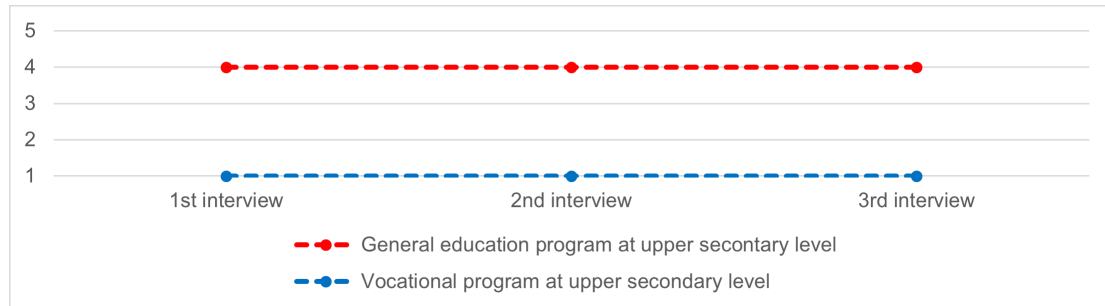


Figure 4. Motivational changes from low (1) to high (5) for one of the Norwegian participating boys across the three interviews

Discussion and conclusion

The central research question of this study was: How do various narrative interview approaches capture young people’s aspirations? The findings from our study reveal that young people shared varied aspects of their aspirations when using different interview approaches:

The “timeline interviews” provided a visual and chronological framework that helped some of the young people ease into the conversation and share *lived experiences* (e.g. developed eating disorder) and *social contexts* (e.g., birth of siblings or brother got sick) and *present self* (e.g., residence or leisure activity), though it did not always yield deep engagement or insights into the *future selves*, *moral meanings* or *normative significance of these selves* or *multidimensionality and dynamic aspects* of the young people’s aspirations. Besides addressing their *lived experiences*, *social contexts* and *present self* in the timeline interviews, the future script interviews encouraged the young people to reflect on their *future selves* (e.g., graduating from upper secondary school, pursuing further education or having a family), offering valuable additional insights into their aspirations. But the *future selves* were sometimes challenging for the young people to envision in detail, and again, this approach gave few insights into *multidimensionality and dynamic aspects* of their aspirations. Inquiry-based interviews allowed for imaginative and detailed exploration of *future selves* (e.g., a job where you would wear heels), proving particularly effective for addressing *moral meanings* or *normative significance of these selves* (e.g., the significance of meeting people, having fun or being important at a future job). However, the approach primarily prompted unidimensional, linear descriptions of the young people’s aspirations and was not capable of capturing many *multidimensional* or *dynamic* aspects of these. However, the repeated motivational quantification method facilitated the articulation of changes in aspirations over time, providing a structured way to track shifts in motivation (*dynamics*) and priorities (*multidimensionality*) but in itself, this approach revealed less about other aspects of the young people’s aspirations, for example, their *lived experiences*, *social contexts* or *present self*.

To study young people’s aspirations, we – based on our theoretical framework - need approaches that capture both the future-oriented (Hart, 2016) or “ideal (or hoped-for) self” (Chen & Hesketh, 2021) and the present-state identity (Hart, 2016), where more

than one ideal self exists concurrently, as well as the dynamic aspects of aspirations where aspirations change over time (Hart, 2016). From the above discussion, summarized in Table 6, we can thus conclude that no approach in itself captures all aspects of the aspirations, and that a multi-method approach is thus crucial for providing a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of young people’s future aspirations.

Table 6. The various narrative interview approaches’ capability to capture important factors of young people’s future aspirations

Interview method // Important aspects of aspirations	Timeline interviews	Future script interviews	Inquiry-based interviews	Repeated motivational quantification interviews
Present selves	X	X		
Future selves		X	X	X
Moral meanings or normative significance of these selves		(X)	X	(X)
Lived experiences	X	X		(X)
Social contexts	X	X		
Multidimensionality and dynamic aspects			(X)	X

Longitudinal data collections

By collecting data over extended periods, we were able to explore how the young people’s aspirations changed over time. The longitudinal approach thus allowed us to capture turning points and fluctuations in the young people’s aspirations, highlighting the *dynamic* and *multidirectional* aspects of their aspirations. However, the longitudinal design had another benefit. During the study, it became clear that the aspects of their aspirations that the young people shared in the interviews was not merely influenced by the different interview approaches, but also by our longitudinal return to previous interviews from time to time. Reflecting on previous interviews helped break the silence and sparked continuous or new conversation, especially with young people who were initially less talkative. The young people’s engagement was influenced by their relation to and connection with the researchers, which in all cases strengthened over time. Although, there was no change in how the young people discussed their lives in some cases, there was a general trend of the young people becoming increasingly open over time, a trend also described in, for example, Crivello (2017); Cuervo and Cook (2020); and Hermanowicz (2013). So, while obviously time consuming, the longitudinal approach helped build trust, and it enabled us to examine how young people evolve in their thoughts, behaviors, and experiences, and how their aspirations developed.

Collaborative comparative data collections

Besides highlighting the benefits of the multimethod approach and the longitudinal design, the study additionally highlights the variability in method effectiveness. Some methods worked well for some interviewees or for some researchers, but not for others. For example, while some young people found the timeline method engaging, others were

hesitant to draw or write, leading to superficial data. Similarly, the future script interviews, although insightful for some, were abstract and challenging for others. Based on this, an important point is that it is not only the case that some methods have certain strengths and weaknesses, and that understanding each approach's strengths and limitations is crucial for being able to capture young people's future aspirations (Coscioni et al., 2023; Huijsmans et al., 2021; Kelly et al., 2024), but also that the variability is a strength or necessity itself, as it allows for a richer, more nuanced understanding of the data and methods.

The collaborative efforts within the research team were crucial in our investigation of the variability in the methods' success in addressing the young people's aspirations. Regular meetings after each round of interviews, which took the form of a reflectorium (University of Edinburgh, 2022), allowed the team to discuss outcomes, share insights, and plan the next steps collectively. This collaborative and iterative process of sharing and refining methods ensured continuous improvement of the methods, and adaptation to suit the young people better, and helped ensure that the interviews were as productive as possible in capturing the various aspects of the young people's aspirations. The collaboration among the researchers did not—and will never—align our interview approaches, preferences, and competencies completely, but it enabled us to share experiences and methodological knowledge, refine our methods, and adapt them to suit the young people and the researchers better. As outlined in the research literature, research collaboration in cross-national studies offers several benefits (e.g., Dusdal & Powell, 2021; McAlpine et al., 2021). It allows for the pooling of diverse expertise and perspectives, which can enhance the quality and depth of the research (McAlpine et al., 2021). Collaborative efforts can lead to more comprehensive data collection and analysis, as researchers bring different strengths and skills to the table (Dusdal & Powell, 2021).

Limitations

No study is without limitations. For this research, we wish to address three. Firstly, the variability in the effectiveness of the various methods used in the interviews indicate that not all young people (and interviewers) engaged equally with the various approaches, which may have led to superficial data in some interviews. The young people might each have had difficulties understanding or engaging with the different interview approaches (e.g., preferences for free-form interviews or more structured interviews), and the different researchers' preferences and skills may have contributed to different experiences with the various interview methods. Thus, the findings from each method may not fully represent the breadth of the young people's aspirations, as some voices and experiences may have been overlooked or inadequately captured. This limitation highlights the difficulty in eliciting rich narratives about aspirations. However, we hypothesize that the multi-method approach takes this limitation into account.

Secondly, the collaborative nature of the Nordic research team, while useful for refining methods, may also have introduced biases in our methods and analysis. We cannot rule out that linguistic challenges may have contributed to differences in how the interviews were conducted, as the interview guides were collaboratively developed in English before being translated into the Nordic languages by different researchers. Additionally, the shared experiences and discussions among researchers could inadvertently have influenced how data was perceived and reported, potentially leading to a homogenization of findings that did not fully account for individual or national differences. These limitations,

however, are a concern for all cross-national and collaborative research and, the Nordic contexts are largely similar, which helps mitigate some of these concerns.

Lastly, the demographics of the participating young people come with some limitations in transferring the findings to non-Nordic contexts, as different cultural, social, and economic contexts can significantly shape young people's aspirations. Insights gained from this study may not be applicable to young people outside the Nordic countries. Additionally, although the Nordic countries in many cases are similar, there might be differences in young people's aspirations across the Nordic contexts, and we have not looked for such differences in our analysis. Finally, although the recruitment of young people was carried out with a teacher as gatekeeper in order to recruit students with different socioeconomic backgrounds and different educational aspirations, we do not know if the participating young people fully capture the diversity within the Nordic student population.

Concluding remarks and future research

The study highlights the importance of using multiple narrative interview approaches to capture the diverse aspects of young people's aspirations. Timeline interviews are particularly good at capturing young people's *present selves*, *lived experiences*, and *social contexts*. Future script interviews are effective in encouraging young people to reflect on their *future selves* and the *moral meanings* of these selves. Inquiry-based interviews provide detailed and imaginative descriptions of young people's *future selves* and their *normative significance*, while repeated motivational quantification interviews are useful for tracking changes in young people's *motivation* and *priorities* over time, capturing the *dynamic* and *multidimensional* aspects of their aspirations. Our study underscores the benefits of a multi-method and longitudinal design in providing a comprehensive understanding of young people's aspirations.

From an ethical point of view, we see that the various applied interview approaches minimize power imbalances by actively engaging young people in constructing their narratives through visual and storytelling methods. The approaches jointly promote agency and self-expression, reducing the risk of researcher-led interpretations, and foster critical reflection and personal meaning-making.

The implications for future research include a recommendation for using multiple narrative interview approaches to capture different important aspects of young people's aspirations or developing new methods capable of capturing both the future and the present self (Hart, 2016), moral meanings or normative significance of these selves (Baker, 2017), lived experiences and social contexts (International Labour Organization, 2022) and/or multidimensionality and dynamic aspects (Hart, 2016). Second, we recommend longitudinal designs for capturing development in young people's aspirations, and for leveraging the relationships with the young people and trust between researchers and participants. Finally, we encourage future research to be aware of how collaboration among researchers is on the one hand useful when there is continuous refinement of methods and approaches, and on the other hand, how striving towards the goal of achieving consistency in (cross-national) studies will not ever be possible.

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