



## Fears for the future among Finnish adolescents in 1983–2007: From global concerns to ill health and loneliness

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### A B S T R A C T

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We examined how Finnish adolescents' fears for their future changed over a quarter of a century and how these changes reflect transformations of the adolescents' key contexts from the late-modernist perspective. Nationally representative samples of 12-, 14-, 16-, and 18-year-olds in 1983, 1997, and 2007 were surveyed using mailed questionnaires regarding health behaviours ( $N = 17,750$ ). Over 1900 fears to open-ended questions were reported. Inductive content analysis was used to construct 19 fear categories. The percentage of adolescents reporting fears in each study year is presented for the entire study population and by age and sex with tests for statistical significance. Fears concerning global and societal issues declined from 1983 to 2007. The emphasis on future work remained stable, but uneasiness about making wrong decisions has increased. Fears regarding health, death, loneliness, and relationships gained importance. Our findings indicate that the perceptions of risks have become more individualized, thus providing strong support for the late-modernist theory.

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The world of adolescents has changed profoundly and rapidly in many ways over the past 30 years. In Europe, changes in political systems, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union and expansion of the European Union, the globalisation of economies, and economic recessions have remarkably affected people's lives. Further, the development of new information and communication technologies over the past decade has changed young people's lifestyles and social environments. Living 'online' offers new perspectives and options, but also creates new concerns. Information abounds about global adversities, including local wars and more recently, terrorist attacks, environmental issues, and climate change. Furlong (2009) argues that the present age of late modernity, which can be conceptualised as individualism, risk, and plurality of choice (see Bauman, 2001; Beck, 1990; Giddens, 1991), has significantly changed the key contexts of adolescents' lives and influenced the processes of life management and images of the world (Furlong & Cartmel, 2007; Helve, 1993; Rubin, 2000). The present study examined how Finnish adolescents' fears for their future have changed over a quarter of a century and how these changes reflect transformations of the adolescents' key contexts from the late-modernist perspective.

The ways in which people see their future in terms of goals, expectations, and concerns have been conceptualised as either future orientation or images of the future, and are widely used in empirical research as a means to highlight the crucial elements of adolescents' complex relationship with their future (e.g., Eckersley, Cahill, Wierenga, & Wyn, 2007; Holden, 2006; Nurmi, Poole, & Kalakoski, 1994; Nurmi, Poole, & Seginer, 1995; Rubin, 2000, 2002; Solantaus, 1987; Solantaus, Rimpelä, &

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Rahkonen, 1985; Solantaus, Rimpelä, & Taipale, 1984). Adolescents' images of the future emerge from perceptions and knowledge built on experiences of the past and present as well as from their age-related normative demands and developmental tasks (Nurmi, 1991; Rubin & Linturi, 2001). Images of the future direct adolescents' decision-making, choices, and behaviour, and influence how the future will unfold (Holden, 2006, 2007; Rubin, 2008; Rubin & Linturi, 2001). Orientation to the future and related decisions occur within a certain social, cultural, and historical context. The prerequisites and demands generated by diverse psychological, political, financial, societal, and cultural factors produce different images in different times and places (Rubin, 2008). On the other hand, some of the adolescents' goals, hopes, and fears are more 'universal', constituting an integral part of their developmental tasks, transitional stages, and life situations (Lahikainen, Taimalu, Korhonen, & Kraav, 2007; Massey, Gebhard, & Garnefski, 2008; Nurmi, 1991; Salmela-Aro, Aunola, & Nurmi, 2007). The images of the future can be considered a critical measure of a society's inner well-being: they act as a mirror of our times, reflecting the ideological and political values and ethos of society and its social and cultural norms, and thus may provide crucial knowledge about the possible directions in which the future society may be heading (Hicks, 2002).

### Previous studies of the images of the future

Adolescents' fears and hopes have been studied from different perspectives within several disciplines and with different methodologies, including cross-national comparisons. In 1987, a World Health Organization collaborative study of hopes and worries about the future among 11- to 15-year-olds was carried out in Austria, England, and Finland using a classroom questionnaire with open-ended questions about their hopes and worries concerning the future. The top hope expressed in each country (Austria 53%, England 79%, and Finland 60%) concerned work and employment. The chief fear among the Austrian respondents concerned school and studies (52%); among the English respondents, work and employment (59%), and for the Finns, war (78%) (Solantaus, 1987). Similar results concerning fears of war were obtained in the 1983 survey of the Adolescent Health and Lifestyle Survey in Finland, which is the first time point in the present study (Solantaus et al., 1984, 1985). The theme of war and peace also emerged strongly in adolescent concerns for the future in several international studies in the 1980s (Poole & Cooney, 1987). Nurmi et al. (1994) examined adolescents' future-oriented goals and concerns in Australia and Finland and found that the concerns in both countries were related to future occupation, education, and health. In the UK, Holden (2006) studied 11-year-old children in 1994 and 2004. Already at the age of 11, children were concerned about issues that were of immediate concern in society: in 1994, the children talked about the Irish Republican Army, and in 2004 the children were concerned about Bin Laden and 'terrorists'. In 1994, children mentioned 'pollution' as one of their concerns, whereas a decade later their focus was on climate change. In Finland, Rubin (2000) studied adolescents' images of the future in terms of the dynamics of late modern and late industrial transition. She found that the images of the future were fragmented and contradictory, and involved a clearly dichotomous view of the future. Views concerning respondents' personal future were bright and full of hope. Adolescents described their own future as a very stereotypical success story of a happy family life in a private suburban house with a successful career, economic prosperity, etc. The conclusion was that the preferences and attitudes that create, support, and characterise the images of the personal future were a specific product of modernity and industrialization. In contrast, respondents' images of the future of society and the world in general created a gloomy picture of a global "problematique" coming true. The future was mainly described as one of pollution, devastation associated with nuclear disasters, war, hunger, refugee problems, growing crime rates, drug use, and violence. These images and their underlying structure of conflict and fear were interpreted as reflecting the increased availability of information about global problems and late industrial transition of societies. A follow-up study of Finnish adolescents' values and worldviews (Helve, 2005) and a recent Finnish study of adolescents' values and images of the future (Seppänen, 2008) showed that the most valued issues were present and future family and employment. These results are consistent with many studies conducted in different countries and contexts – young people's personal future seems to be overwhelmingly optimistic and positive. Most adolescents are confident that they personally will get what they want out of life: a good job, a partner, and eventually children of their own (e.g., Eckersley et al., 2007).

The present study examined how self-reported fears for the future among 12- to 18-year-old Finnish adolescents have changed over the period from 1983 to 2007. The period of over two decades provides a unique opportunity to compare findings and to identify potential changes among identical age cohorts of 12-, 14-, 16-, and 18-year-old adolescents. We evaluated how the potential changes reflect the late-modernist perspective in terms of individualised risks, plurality of choice, and the significant transformations of the key contexts in which adolescents are living. Thus, our study can be framed as a test of post-modernist theory. This study contributes to studying adolescents' orientations for the future and how they reflect the process of social change, and thus adds to our understanding of the complexities and challenges of modern adolescence.

### Method

#### *Sampling and participants*

This study was based on the nationwide Adolescent Health and Lifestyle Survey (AHLS), a postal survey conducted biennially in Finland since 1977. Nationally representative samples of 12-, 14-, 16-, and 18-year-olds were obtained from The Population Register Centre. This study included the AHLS surveys of 1983, 1997, and 2007. The ethics committees of the

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