

**Counting and Meeting NEET Young People:
Methodology, perspective, and meaning in research on marginalized youth**

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Abstract

The concept of 'not in education, employment, or training' (NEET) has gained wide usage in youth research over the last two decades. This article reviews the concept's background and discusses how it is linked to population statistics. Drawing on literature within the fields of anthropology, sociology, and educational research, as well as field research conducted in Norway, the article discusses how, by meeting young people categorized as NEET for interviews and participant observation, researchers can address other aspects of their lives than have been counted. Researchers who meet young people find that the concept means different things in everyday speech than in published research. The article concludes by suggesting how research based on meeting young people categorized as NEET can contribute to a body of knowledge that has mainly been produced by counting NEET young people.

Key words

NEET, young people, marginalization, social exclusion, methodology, quantitative and qualitative, anonymous and authentic, situated knowledge

Introduction

This article is inspired by an apparent contradiction. Researchers have counted the number of young people who are not in education, employment, or training in Norway (NEET young people; Bø and Vigran, 2014; Grødem, Nielsen, and Strand, 2014). At the same time, my efforts to find and meet these young people to conduct interviews for a research project have proven nearly futile. Despite research and media discourses that suggest a number of young people in Norway can be categorized as NEET, these young people have proven largely invisible and uncontactable when I have tried to meet them. In this article, I suggest that

meeting NEET young people is problematic because the NEET concept has different meanings to different people and in different contexts. I address how qualitative research nevertheless can contribute to a body of knowledge that has mainly been produced by counting NEET young people. My discussion consists of two interlinked levels: a methodical one concerned with how to gain access to potential research participants and an epistemological one concerning the relationship between knowledge and the objects of the knowledge. Inspired by standpoint theory (esp. Haraway, 1988), the epistemological reflections in this article also consider the perspectives from which knowledge emerges.

I outline below how qualitative research has been bridging a gap between the experiences of NEET young people and knowledge about them produced through quantitative research in England. This article is based on the premise that the problems I faced when trying to meet NEET young people in Oslo indicate that there is a similar gap in Norway. Ethnographic methods are generally considered effective when doing qualitative research with hard-to-reach groups such as NEET young people because flexible designs and long-term engagements facilitate trust between the researcher and research participants (e.g. Simmons, Thompson, and Russell, 2014: 75-80). However, like other qualitative research, also ethnographic methods require researchers to meet research participants, and therefore to explain the research and samples to potential gatekeepers and participants (see Russell, 2013: 50). This can be challenging when sampling by categories that derive from policy thinking and quantitative research, as is the case for the NEET category, because the same concept can have different meanings in published research and in everyday speech (Follesø, 2015).

Overall, the discussion in this article relates to how the apparent contradiction outlined above is not really a contradiction at all, but a reflection of key differences between the forms of quantitative social research that I call 'counting' (Hacking, 1982) and the forms of qualitative social research that I call 'meeting'. The methodologies engage with fundamentally different aspects of people's lives. In his *Meta-sociological Essay*, Dag Østerberg (1976) distinguishes between 'the anonymous' and 'the authentic', where '[t]he anonymous is the repeated, the standardized, the indirect, as opposed to the authentic, which is the

characteristic, the original, the direct' (Østerberg, 1976: 38). Counting engages with anonymous aspects of people's lives that are shared by multitudes of people and can be turned into countable units. Counting can have obvious policy relevancies, such as keeping track of how many young people are outside of education, employment, and training. In fact, population statistics and the related technologies of probability and risk have been posited as prerequisites for modern forms of government (e.g. Burchell, Gordon, and Miller, 1991; Scott, 1998). However, counting cannot engage with authentic aspects of people's lives that are not repeated and cannot be turned into countable units.

Yet, what is authentic and what is anonymous is observer-relative. An action that one person understands as 'direct' may not be so to others who may see it as a repetition of what has occurred in the past (Østerberg, 1976: 37). While being in education, employment, or training, as well as being NEET, can be counted as anonymous facts, the experiences of each person cannot. Individual histories of becoming NEET and returning to education, employment, or training can be complex and lived in ways that counting cannot grasp. This means that the NEET concept used when counting may not resonate with the experiences of the people it concerns, and such differences in meaning can get in the way of meeting NEET young people or lead to partial sampling if the concept is not translated carefully enough to categories found in everyday speech. The article concludes by suggesting how this can be taken into account in qualitative research by bringing the lived lives and experiences of NEET young people into dialogue with quantitative research about them.

An account from the field

I experienced problems with finding and meeting NEET young people at first hand while I was conducting research for the Norwegian case study of Youth at the Margins (YOMA), a Nordic-South African research project on marginalized youth and faith-based organizations (Swart, 2013). The aim of the project was to study how faith-based organizations contribute to strengthening or weakening social cohesion in local communities through how they interact with marginalized young people. The project consisted of several case studies that all used similar methods. According to project plans developed in late 2014, we

would interview samples of NEET young people as the first phase of each case study, and these interviews would guide subsequent phases of research that would engage more closely with faith-based organizations. Starting our research with semi-structured interviews with NEET young people was intended to help us grasp the perspective of the target group and draw on this in later research phases. Researchers from the different countries agreed that the NEET concept was a descriptive and intuitive operationalization of the margins that would be comparable across the different case studies, although we also recognized that this target group could be hard to reach.

In Oslo, I needed to make contact with gatekeepers who could introduce me to potential research participants in the city district that had been designated for the Norwegian case study. I contacted public authorities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and religious organizations that operate in the city district, presenting the research project and asking representatives whether they were willing to meet me to talk generally about young people, and NEET young people in particular.¹ Although some individuals were unwilling to talk to me, I met representatives from a total of nine different public offices, NGOs, and religious organizations between March and October 2015. We talked about the situation of young people in the city district, as well as the situation of young people who were not in school and not working, and I asked whether they could introduce me to potential research participants. In all the meetings, I took care to describe in detail the purpose and target group of the research, keeping my options open by emphasizing that I was interested in hearing about and meeting any young person who they thought was 'not in school and not working'. In addition to meeting potential gatekeepers, I also carried out exploratory participant observation in one NGO and one religious organization that hosted youth activities to explore the prospects of recruiting research participants directly or through other young people.²

The representatives of public authorities that I met shared their thoughts and experiences of working in the city district. However, with the exception of one representative who referred me to a young person he knew about from a former job, they could not introduce me to potential research participants. Public authorities and individual welfare workers have legal and moral responsibilities

to protect their clients, and can often have legitimate reasons for not fulfilling researchers' requests. Some representatives explained to me that they were unable to introduce me to potential research participants because of strict privacy regulations and scarce time or resources, but others avoided the question by referring me to superiors who refused to talk to me, or by not answering the phone or replying to emails when I tried to follow up about appointments. A few representatives from NGOs and religious organizations that had youth activities told me that they did not know whether the young people who participate in their activities were in education or employment, and they consequently could not make introductions to potential research participants. More typically, however, they told me that the individuals I was looking for did not participate in their organization's activities. For example, the leader of a youth group in a religious organization told me that his group had not made much effort to include the individuals I was seeking. He noted apologetically that 'it is easier to be around persons who are more like yourself'. This implies that NEET young people are not just others, but different others who are unlike the youth group leader and his companions, and his comment summarizes many of the conversations I had with other organization representatives. I was mostly told that 'they', i.e. NEET young people, were to be found somewhere else.

However, most of the representatives I met talked about a few specific subgroups of NEET young people, mainly teenage boys engaged in youth gangs, petty crime, or drug usage, or who were considered at risk of becoming religiously or politically extreme; few mentioned girls or other subcategories, such as unemployed graduates. Yet, when I engaged in exploratory participant observation in an NGO and a religious organization, I met volunteers whom I was able to identify as NEET within a short time. Most of them were in their mid-twenties, had completed degrees at universities or university colleges, and had not yet found paid work. A large additional proportion of the volunteers I met were young people who worked part-time or in jobs that do not require formal qualifications; these young people were on the margins of the labour market, but not NEET when I talked to them. For different reasons, however, none of these young people saw themselves or were seen by others as being in my target group. My impression was that most of them had volunteered while they were

students, and continued to do so after they completed their studies, just as some also continued in their part-time jobs. They may still have been regarded as students rather than as young people 'not in school and not working'. Moreover, they did not fit the image of NEET young people as different others that emerged when I asked about 'persons who are not in school and not working' because they were active in local organizations.

The differences between two separate conversations I had with one board member from the religious organization where I conducted participant observation illustrates well how asking about NEET young people directly and talking informally with people in the field produces very different results. The first time I met with the board member, I told him about my research and outlined the target group. He told me that there were many young people active in the organization, but he was unsure of whether any would be in my target group. Although I probed, he would not be more specific about this.

I met the same board member again a few days later while we were both waiting for a talk by an international religious leader who had been invited by the organization's youth group. On this occasion we talked more informally. The board member told me about his personal life as an immigrant in Norway, and proceeded to talk about the hard labour market that young people face today. He told me how this was different from when he arrived in Norway in the 1970s, and he pointed towards a young man whom I knew was very active in the organization. 'Take this young man. He is educated now, but his job is to teach children here', the board member said. To confirm whether this was work or a voluntary engagement, I asked whether the young man was paid for teaching the children. The board member replied in the negative. From my perspective, this confirmed that the young man was not working and thus most likely in my target group. However, the board member did not seem to think that the young man was part of the target group I had outlined when we talked a few days earlier, perhaps because the young man had an education and responsibilities in the organization, or because he could be said to be working, even though he was not paid for what he did.

These examples illustrate how the NEET concept used in research, and which I had in mind, does not resonate with how the concept is understood by

those it concerns and those surrounding them, such as the youth group leader and the board member. This can create problems for researchers who want to meet NEET young people, as it makes it difficult to communicate precisely about our target groups. I will return to a discussion of the different meanings of the NEET concept and how we can work with them towards the end of the article, after I present the accounts of the emergence and adoption of the concept in English, international European, and Norwegian research. This history is important because it shows how the concept has changed over time and as it has been adopted in new contexts. It shows how the NEET concept has different and sometimes conflicting meanings, even in the published research literature.

The emergence of NEET in English research

The NEET concept emerged in English social work and educationalist research in the 1990s. It was related to the social exclusion concept and emerged within an Anglo-American tradition of research that tends to focus on the 'cumulative personal characteristics of excluded individuals' (Silver, 1994: 539). The *Bridging the Gap* report (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999), one of the earliest and most influential publications on NEET, drew on research that indicated correlations between having been outside of education, employment, and training immediately after compulsory education and other problems in later life, such as unemployment and poor health. Based on the 1970 British Birth Cohort Study, *Bridging the Gap* showed that individuals who were NEET for six months or more at 16 to 18 years old were not only more frequently unemployed or working part-time and lacking qualifications by the age of 21 years, but they were also more likely than their peers to be young parents and have physical and mental health problems (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 33-34; cf. Bynner and Parsons, 2002).

Bridging the Gap documented correlations, but it did not address questions of causation: whether time spent outside education, employment, and training was a cause of difficulties in later life, or whether there were other factors that both caused young people to spend time outside education, employment, and training after completing compulsory education, and other problems in later life (see Colley and Hodkinson, 2001). In other words, the

report did not establish whether being or having been NEET was a cause or an indicator of social exclusion in a wider sense, although Prime Minister Tony Blair's foreword suggested that there were causal relations:

The best defence against social exclusion is having a job, and the best way to get a job is to have a good education, with the right training and experience (Social Exclusion Unit, 1999: 6).

This line of thinking was important in making NEET young people a policy priority for Blair's New Labour governments, and one tangible outcome was Connexions, a youth support service that had been proposed elsewhere and was recommended in *Bridging the Gap*. Phased in starting from 2001, Connexions was targeted at reducing the proportion of 16 to 18 year olds who were out of education, employment, and training, effectively turning NEET into a statistical indicator and a means of targeting social benefits (Simmons and Thompson, 2011: 96-98; Russell, Simmons, and Thompson, 2010). Commenting on this, Scott Yates and Malcolm Payne (2006: 338) wrote that the NEET concept classifies young people by 'what they are not' rather than by what they are. It encompasses a heterogeneous mix of people, some more vulnerable than others, and excludes another heterogeneous mix, some of whom are also vulnerable. In this sense, the concept is too broad to measure the prevalence of social exclusion, yet too narrow to capture all those who are vulnerable to social exclusion (Furlong, 2006).

Nevertheless, the early English research on NEET young people outlined here concerned a mix of individuals who shared certain characteristics. Aged between 16 and 18 years, the NEET young people were in quite specific positions, being unskilled and not accumulating formal qualifications through post-compulsory education, training, or employment. Moreover, most of the authors cited here agree that changes in the labour market or the 'opportunity structures' (Roberts, 2009) have been a key explanatory factor for persistently high NEET rates in England. Qualitative research has documented the experiences of NEET young people in England and analyzed them in relation to structural changes (Russell, Simmons, and Thompson, 2011; Simmons,

Thompson, and Russell, 2014; Simmons, Russell, and Thompson, 2014; Thompson, Russell, and Simmons, 2013). This has contributed to bridging a gap between research concepts and the lived lives and experiences of the people they concern by seeing them in relation to each other.

Adoption of NEET in international European research

Despite the criticism that was levelled at the indicator in England, and sometimes against acknowledging it, NEET was adopted as a statistical indicator in several other European countries within a few years of its English adoption. The financial crisis of 2007-2008 and the ensuing economic recession then brought the concept to prominence in comparative European research. There was a sense that the established youth labour market indicators – rates of activity, inactivity, employment, and unemployment – did not adequately capture trends in the contemporaneous ‘flexible’ and ‘turbulent’ labour markets (European Commission, 2010; Eurofound, 2012), and within a few years institutions such as Eurofound (2012) and the Nordic Council of Ministers (Halvorsen, Hansen, and Tägström, 2012) published reports that featured statistics on NEET young people.³

However, the NEET concept that emerged in international European research differed from the English concept in several ways. First, the English indicator was initially restricted to people aged 16 to 18 years, while the international European indicators referred to broader age ranges, including people up to 30 years of age in some instances. The broader age ranges meant that the European indicator captured a more heterogeneous mix of people than the English indicator did. While many NEET young people are unskilled, many have also completed both vocational and academic educations by these ages, and larger proportions have work experience, a spouse, and children. The international European indicators thus reflect a broader set of trends than the English variant does, including the demand for skilled labour.

Second, whereas English research has drawn data from cohort studies and interviews with NEET young people, international European research tends to use data from standardized surveys such as the labour force survey. This facilitates comparison between countries, although differences between welfare

systems mean that this is still not straightforward, and the limited number of categories to which the data can be broken down limits the range of possible analyses, which I address below.

Third, NEET was brought out of educationalist and social work discourse and into economic discourse in the transition from English to international European research. While NEET has been understood mainly in relation to consequences for individuals in the English research outlined above, it tends to be understood in relation to abstractions such as labour markets, macroeconomic trends, and economic and societal costs in international European research. For example, in a report titled *NEETs – Young people not in employment, education or training*, Eurofound (2012) approaches NEET young people as problems to be quantified. An introductory chapter develops a taxonomy of five subcategories, recognizing that ‘NEET is a category that contains a variety of subgroups, some of whom are vulnerable and some are not, with very different experiences, characteristics and needs. Five main subgroups within the NEET population may be identified:

- the conventionally unemployed [...];
- the unavailable, which includes young carers, young people with family responsibilities and young people who are sick or disabled;
- the disengaged: those young people who are not seeking jobs or education and are not constrained from doing so by other obligations or incapacities, and takes in discouraged workers as well as other young people who are pursuing dangerous and asocial lifestyles;
- the opportunity-seekers [...];
- the voluntary NEETs: those young people who are travelling and those constructively engaged in other activities such as art, music and self-directed learning’ (Eurofound, 2012: 24).

The taxonomy is proposed in a passive voice without reference to empirical material or other sources from which the categories may be inferred. It also stands in an awkward relationship to the subsequent analyses in the report, which do not operationalize all of the subcategories. The subcategories and their

descriptions assume a relationship between reasons for being NEET and the types of activities that a person engages in when he or she is NEET. Their definitions shift between anonymous facts ('conventionally unemployed'), authentic aspects ('voluntary'), and normative judgements ('asocial'; 'constructive'), rendering the categories neither mutually exclusive nor exhaustive. It is not clear, for example, how discouraged workers who nevertheless seek constructive engagements should be classified. At the same time, a later chapter indicates that nearly half of the NEET young people in Europe who are not unemployed and not unavailable due to family responsibilities participate in some type of organization, a measure of social and civic participation (Eurofound, 2012: 101-102). This share is slightly higher than for 'non-NEETs', and the authors find the high rates of participation in 'outward organizations' in the Mediterranean countries by the NEET subcategory in question particularly remarkable (Eurofound, 2012: 101). By way of comparison, ethnographic work from northern Italy shows how precisely this type of engagement offers 'social belonging and public dignity' to people who are unemployed, underemployed, and otherwise inactive in the flexible labour market (Muehlebach, 2011: 74, 2012).

It is not surprising that such novel and creative responses to labour market marginality are interpreted with more nuances by researchers who have met the people it concerns than by researchers who have counted them. Østerberg (1976: 64-73) shows how new phenomena cannot be studied as anonymous facts because they are not repetitions of anything. They consequently cannot be counted precisely because they are new. Furthermore, normative judgements and their use of terms such as 'dangerous' and 'asocial' contribute to rendering their findings unexpected and remarkable to the authors of the Eurofound report. The terminology they employ is more reminiscent of mid-nineteenth century discourse on 'mobs' and 'dangerous classes' than of more recent discourse on people 'seeking social incorporation' (cf. Avis, 2014; Li, 2013). In this particular instance, in other words, aspects of NEET young peoples' lives and experiences are concealed through conceptual connotations as much as through limitations of research based on counting. One remedy for this

situation is more careful analysis of the processes of counting NEET young people and the different meanings of the NEET concept, as I return to below.

Beyond counting NEET young people in Norwegian research

Despite vibrant research on youth marginalization, the NEET concept was adopted relatively late in Norwegian research. The first publications about NEET young people in Norway specifically were reports that were commissioned by the Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs and published in 2014.⁴ These reports outlined demographic properties of Norwegian NEET young people as a population of intrinsic interest (Bø and Vigran, 2014) and referenced concerns over growth in welfare dependency (Grødem, Nielsen, and Strand, 2014). Tor Petter Bø and Åsne Vigran (2014) described a population of 70,000 to 105,000 NEET young people aged 15 to 29 years in Norway, noting that those with low levels of education, immigrants, and the children of immigrants were overrepresented in the category. Together, the reports indicate that the NEET rate for teenage boys is higher than that for teenage girls, and that the NEET rate for men in their mid- to late twenties is lower than for women in that age range. While the NEET rate for young women increases with age, the NEET rate for young men remains stable after secondary school leaving age (Bø and Vigran, 2014: 9; Grødem, Nielsen, and Strand, 2014: 56-57), implying that trajectories of becoming NEET and returning to education, employment, or training are gendered, at least to a certain extent.

Register data shows that between one half and two thirds of Norwegian NEET young people receive welfare benefits, allowing for slightly different cohorts and points of measurement (Bø and Vigran, 2014: 11; Grødem, Nielsen, and Strand, 2014: 51). Bø and Vigran (2014: 12) stated that a large portion of the NEET young people who did not receive welfare benefits have foreign country backgrounds⁵ and suggested that many may have worked in family businesses or as *au pairs*. They also noted that a large proportion of the women were married. Similarly, Anne Grødem, Roy Nielsen, and Anne Hege Strand (2014) hypothesized that those who did not receive welfare payments, were not registered as unemployed, and whose reported income was below a certain threshold were 'provided for' by other family members. These forms of provision

cannot be counted directly because they are not recorded in public registers and surveys, but they can be approached if researchers meet NEET young people. Qualitative research can provide insight into uncountable aspects of young people's lives, as implied by some of Grødem, Nielsen, and Strand's (2014: 96-101) suggestions for further research. However, in the case of the NEET category, this does not help us overcome the problem that finding and meeting NEET young people is difficult because the NEET concept does not mean the same in everyday speech as it does in research. I therefore move towards an understanding of how the NEET concept is defined in quantitative research and discuss the different meanings of the concept in the next sections. Based on this, I then suggest how qualitative research can engage with published research on NEET young people and with their lives and experiences in the conclusion.

Counting NEET young people

The above sections have outlined several shifts in the use and meaning of the NEET concept. Because these shifts have gone largely unremarked upon elsewhere, I address how the NEET concept has been defined and used in research in this section. Reflecting how standpoint theory suggests that objectivity requires acknowledgement of each observer's particular and embodied perspective (Haraway, 1988), I address what research on NEET young people has produced knowledge about and from what perspective.

Based on the previous sections, we may suggest that doing research on NEET young people has produced knowledge about 70,000 to 105,000 people in Norway and many more internationally. In much of the research outlined above, NEET young people are constructed as a population whose properties can be revealed by counting – a category of positive knowledge. Yet, some of the criticism to which I referred above suggests that we know more about what NEET young people are not than we know about what they are (esp. Yates and Payne, 2006): that the category may be better understood in terms of what it denotes a difference from, rather than what it positively denotes. There are two main categories in the often-implicit taxonomy of which NEET is a part. One denotes young people who are in education, employment, or training (EET), while the other denotes those who are not (NEET). While NEET is a residual

category that indicates certain shared absences, the two categories together constitute a binary that simplifies a continuity of possible labour market and educational statuses into mutually exclusive categories. This binary facilitates counting (cf. Hacking, 1982), makes certain questions possible and others irrelevant (Roberts, 2011; Thompson, 2011), and maps onto other binaries, such as included/excluded, to imbue its constituent categories with additional meaning. Furthermore, the accounts above illustrate how knowledge about NEET young people has been produced mainly by counting, and existing knowledge about NEET young people, especially in Norway, must therefore be understood in relation to counting as a mode of knowledge production.

Beyond mutually exclusive categories, counting presupposes transactions that mediate between the anonymous facts to be counted and inscriptions that can be counted (cf. Latour, 1986). In population statistics, these transactions take place in the encoding of particular aspects of particular lives in particular ways in the preparation of cohort studies, surveys, and registers. The basic categories of these datasets determine what will be countable and what will not. For example, in the labour force surveys from which the research outlined above draw heavily, phone interviews with a random sample of residents are encoded and inscribed to a number of predefined answers to each of a number of predefined questions. The transcripts are then organized and accessed in relation to people as individuals, turned into numbers by counting (in the arithmetic sense of the word), and the numbers are turned into knowledge through calculation, comparison, and consideration. Yet, the predefined questions and answers in the surveys determine what is inscribed and available for counting and what is not. The inscriptions that are counted, like the categories for counting, emanate from and embody the perspective of the mostly public agencies that produce them. This entails that the knowledge produced by counting will always be 'situated' (Haraway, 1988) – one of many possible accounts emerging from one of many possible perspectives.

What is countable and what is not is determined through the categories of the surveys and registers that provide the inscriptions that are counted. Some aspects of NEET young people's lives, although they may be anonymous, repeated, and countable in theory, are not recorded in this way and cannot be

counted. Meeting NEET young people can provide insight into some of the uncountable aspects of their lives. However, as the field account illustrates, the NEET concept means different things to those it concerns than it does in published research, making it difficult for researchers to find and meet the young people who are categorized as NEET. I therefore discuss the different meanings of the NEET concept in the next section.

Three levels of meaning

The field account at the beginning of this article illustrated how the concepts of education, employment, training, and NEET have different meanings to different people and in different contexts. For example, the NEET concept did not mean the same to the people I talked to in the field as it does in published research. In this section, I move towards a more precise understanding of this problem by distinguishing between three different types of meanings and discussing how they relate to different uses of the NEET concept.

First, the denotative precision of the NEET concept depends on a clear-cut distinction between being in education, employment, or training and being NEET. In empirical contexts, however, this distinction is often fuzzy. For many young people, being NEET is a dynamic and temporally bounded experience as they 'churn' between different labour market and educational statuses, including temporary and part-time employment (see Russell, Simmons, and Thompson, 2011; Simmons, Russell, and Thompson, 2014). Moreover, while statistical definitions tend to define employment and work in terms of being paid, individuals may understand work in other terms, for example, as an activity in a daily routine or as a moral category (Wadel, 1979). The conversation with the board member outlined in the field account above may infer that he saw the youth group leader as working even though he was not paid for the work he did. Recent ethnography from other parts of Europe (Muehlebach, 2012; Simmons, Thompson, and Russell, 2014) and the rest of the world (e.g. Prince and Brown, 2016) similarly shows how volunteering can be a way of attaining or maintaining moral and professional identities, and even belonging and dignity, in the face of labour market marginality. These issues mean that researchers can define the NEET concept precisely for purposes of counting, but that we cannot assume that

the concept will have the same meaning to the people we meet when doing qualitative research.

Second, the meaning of the NEET concept in any given context will hinge on its connotations. When I used it in the field, the concept conjured images of teenage boys who were engaged in petty crime, youth gangs, or drug usage, or considered at risk of becoming religiously or politically extreme. These images are in line with prevailing media discourses on dangerous youth and teenage criminals in eastern Oslo that render some presumed NEET young people highly visible in the mediated public and others almost completely invisible.

Furthermore, the Norwegian government's then recent *Action Plan against Radicalisation and Violent Extremism* with funds for preventive activities interested the representatives I met. These well-established and well-financed discourses were important contexts for the conversations that I had with organization representatives. Some of the representatives I talked to understood the NEET concept in relation to them, talking about teenage criminals and foreign fighters in response to very general questions. This illustrates how the NEET concept cannot be understood in everyday speech without reference to prevailing discourses, and researchers have to be sensitive to this. For example, NEET young women may be invisible in this context because the discourses that the NEET concept is understood in relation to mainly concern boys; additionally, owing to traditional and socially sanctioned roles for women as homemakers and carers, NEET young women do not constitute a violation of social aesthetics in the same way that NEET young men do. However, that they are not mentioned in interviews does not necessarily mean that they do not exist (Berg and Aaltonen, 2016).

Third, concepts such as NEET can contribute to social exclusion as well as refer to it. In a recent article in this journal, Reidun Follesø argues that 'risk' works as an 'exclusionary term': 'Researchers describe youth; youth describe each other – and most refer to youth at risk as “the others”' (Follesø, 2015: 245; see also Foster and Spencer, 2010; Wall and Olofsson, 2008). This implies that nobody identifies as 'at risk'. Similarly, while the people I met in the field were interested in talking about my target group, I was mostly told that 'they' were to be found somewhere else, even by individuals I later learned could be

categorized as NEET themselves. NEET young people proved largely invisible and uncontactable when I approached them as NEET young people, but when I approached individuals differently, for example, referring to them as volunteers in a religious organization or an NGO, I met people who I could easily identify as NEET through informal talk. As with at-risk youth, this may reflect a tendency to think of NEET young people as 'others', and often as immoral and dangerous others. Young people who can be categorized as NEET themselves and those around them are more likely to focus on what individuals do than what they do not do, and therefore may understand NEET as a category of others to be found somewhere else. This would entail that, in order to meet young people who can be categorized as NEET, researchers have to approach potential research participants as something other than NEET young people.

Conclusion

If meeting young people who can be categorized as NEET requires researchers to approach the concerned individuals not as NEET young people but as something else, a researcher bent on meeting as a mode of knowledge production may draw either of two conclusions. It may be understood as a methodical insight entailing that research designs will need to translate the NEET category into categories that resonate better with everyday speech, such as volunteers, young mothers (Russell, 2016), or cannabis dealers (Sandberg and Pedersen, 2011). By combining several such approaches and being open to further recruiting by 'snowballing', a researcher may be able to meet different individuals who can be categorized as NEET, sample a variety of experiences, and thus meet NEET young people in a more general sense (see Simmons, Thompson, and Russell, 2014: 75). However, such an approach must remain sensitive to the fact that NEET is a category of population statistics, not a sociological group, and avoid reifying the concept by providing a 'realist veneer to what is essentially a policy construct' (Thompson, 2011: 791). This would be more than an epistemological error; if meeting young people who can be categorized as NEET requires researchers to approach the concerned individuals not as NEET but as something else, constructing research participants as NEET young people can constitute a form of symbolic violence (cf. Foster and Spencer, 2010: 132).

This points towards the alternative interpretation that researchers bent on meeting as a mode of knowledge production may be better off abandoning the NEET concept. In addition to the epistemological and ethical considerations just mentioned, constructing research participants as NEET young people may be impractical because it introduces a level of connotative meanings that may be a hindrance when representing and analysing their lived lives and experiences. Nevertheless, qualitative researchers should not completely abandon the concept. This article has shown how the NEET concept has an objective existence in research in Norway and elsewhere. It can be adopted as an object of analysis rather than a theoretical concept (c.f. Merry, 2011: S85). Some of the research that has been cited in this article illustrates how meeting young people who are constructed as 'at risk' can provide a privileged point of departure for critical engagement with the categories and knowledge of published research. Similarly, research based on meeting people who are constructed as NEET can bring the lived lives and experiences of a category, constituted in part of marginal young people, into dialogue with research about them. Meeting young people who are categorized as NEET can thus provide new perspectives on the aspects of their lives that have been counted and insight into aspects of their lives that cannot be counted. By engaging with existing research as one of many possible accounts, meeting young people who are categorized as NEET can contribute by inspiring new understandings of the categories that are counted and perhaps even by suggesting new categories for counting.

Notes

¹ Because the term 'NEET' is not generally known in Norway, I did not use it, but talked instead about 'persons who are not in school and not working'. I resolved the ambiguities of the terms 'youth' and 'young people' by specifying that I was interested in those who were between sixteen and 'twenty-something' years old.

² I spent a total of about twenty hours at the NGO, divided between four afternoons, and approximately ten hours at the religious organization, divided between four events that were hosted for and by youth. I observed interactions

that took place and talked to as many different people as possible about my research, but I did not take notes in a systematic way or record any personal information.

³ The OECD has also published reports on and tracked NEET rates in member countries. Owing to space limitations, I do not engage with these documents in this article.

⁴ Other publications have counted NEET young people in Norway as one of a larger sample of countries. The concept has been used in comparative research on young people 'dropping out' of school (Bäckman, Jakobsen, Lorentzen, Österbacka, and Dahl, 2011; Sletten and Hyggen, 2013), on marginalization (Halvorsen, Hansen, and Tägström, 2012), and on youth unemployment (Albæk, Asplund, Barth, Lindahl, Simson, and Vanhala, 2015; Hyggen, 2013) in the Nordic countries. Christer Hyggen (2015) has summarized Nordic research on NEET young people. In addition, the concept has been referred to in Norwegian labour market research (Barth and von Simson, 2012) and Norwegian NEET rates have been reported in some OECD reports (see also note 3).

⁵ The term 'foreign country background' is used by Statistics Norway to denote immigrants as well as the children and grandchildren of immigrants.

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