Approaching the future

A study of Swedish school leavers’ information related activities

Frances Hultgren

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Frances Hultgren, 3rd May, 2009
1 Introduction

The school shall strive to ensure that all pupils (...) are consciously able to take a standpoint with regard to further studies and vocational orientation on the basis of their overall experience, knowledge and current information (Lpf 94, 2.41).

The quote above is one of the objectives formulated in the Swedish National Curriculum with regard to the study and occupational choices of young people. The responsibility for informing oneself and making wise decisions concerning choice of studies and occupations has been increasingly left to the individual for both ideological and practical reasons in the face of the growing multiplicity of choice both in education and working life. Young people are expected to choose studies and careers for themselves and to be aware that they are making their own choices in a society, often described as a risk society, where they can never be sure that what goes today will also go tomorrow. At the same time the proliferation of information occasioned by the development of information and communication technologies (ICT) together with rapidly changing scenarios on the labour market due to technical innovation and globalisation processes would seem to make reaching this objective an increasingly complex task for young people. This study, which is carried out within the research discipline of Library and Information Science, concerns the ways in which young people on the verge of leaving school approach information seeking with a view to making career and study decisions. The purpose of the thesis is, through a qualitative interview study of the information related activities of young people, to gain a better understanding of how they make study and career choices in an everyday life-world perspective.

The field of Library and Information Science is by no means autonomous but exists in its relations to other research fields. This means that it is the research problem itself rather than the limits of the discipline that guides the choice of theoretical perspectives. As this research project is concerned with the ways in which young people make sense of their career and study options it invites a cultural perspective where information seeking in relation to the material and symbolic dimensions of the everyday world is in focus. Information seeking in relation to study and occupational choice is not seen as an isolated phenomenon in the everyday flood of activities and experiences but as intertwined with them. This understanding makes it possible to examine information-seeking not only as the objective seeking and use of information provided by the formal career guidance

1 See also Appendix 1 for a full translation of the National Curriculum’s objectives in study and career choice
system but also as a culturally embedded practice intertwined with life-world perspectives and the shaping of identity.

The career guidance system is a major potential source of information for young people in this respect. There is no doubt that the amount of information directed at school leavers is considerable as there are many groups with an interest in their choices. The career guidance system has developed with the view to organising and structuring information and to support young people through counselling and other activities. In the thesis this system is defined as an information system that constitutes an arena within the public sphere where a number of actors meet and compete in attracting the attention of young people. Actors include the state via educational and labour market policies, the trade unions, Swedish trade and industry, individual universities and institutions of further education, commercial interests such as travel agencies and language schools abroad, as well as voluntary organisations both within Sweden and abroad. A cursory viewing of the system reveals a number of different discourses and related underlying ideologies creating a complexity which emphasises that making study and occupational choices is far from a straightforward process. Such complexity suggests that young people need to be capable of looking beneath the surfaces of the different messages directed at them and to critically evaluate their underlying agendas in relation to their own ambitions, interests and self-understandings.

The thesis is based on a qualitative interview study which investigates school leavers’ experiences of and approaches to information and information seeking in relation to study and career choice. These interviews are related to an understanding that career and study decisions are embedded within social contexts where information is socially and unevenly distributed and that access to it may require specialised skills and abilities; an information literacy. Andersen (2006) argues that the ability to seek information effectively today is on a par with literacy in reading and writing, meaning that as structures such as intranets and the Internet which systematise and organise knowledge in educational, work and everyday settings, are made available to ‘the man on the street’ expertise in seeking information is no longer the prerogative of information professionals. Literacy in the seeking, interpretation, critical evaluation and use of information is therefore understood as a set of abilities and skills that are learned and developed rather than intuitive; Andretta (2007) refers to it as a functional literacy for the 21st century.

In the attempt to understand how information takes on meaning for the individual the thesis takes a departure point in the idea of the life-world; the practical world that the individual acts in and “where meaning is created in a continuous activity” (Frykman & Gilje, 2003:36). The life-world is a private world formed by our individual experiences and the stock of our knowledge of it and is shared to a certain extent through the communication of our experiences and through interactions with others. The life-world is characterised by what Schutz (1975) calls ‘the natural attitude’, or our fundamental assumptions about the
validity of our experiences of the world and of our ability to act upon and within
the world. The idea of the life-world is combined with a phenomenological
narrative inquiry approach in the study and used as a means of gaining insight
through the stories people tell of their experiences of phenomena in the world such
as information seeking and use.

1.1 Relevance of the study
This topic has been chosen for the thesis because the study and occupational
choices of young people has been a subject of heated public debate. In a survey
commissioned by the National Agency for Higher Education, Furusten & Zune
(2004) found that the study and occupational choices made by young people were
not particularly related to analyses of the labour market’s long-term needs. This
implies that young people’s choices contribute to increasing unemployment, even
for those with qualifications from higher education. Based on the assumption that
people in general want to work for a living and that work is seen as a means of
taking a place within society and as an important aspect of identity development the
report implies that there is a mismatch between the choices made by young people
and the opportunities available on the labour market. Over 75,000 young people
leave upper secondary school in Sweden every year and many of them are not sure
about what they want to do with their lives or even what options are open to them.
They leave school optimistic and well-educated for the most part and yet with
surprisingly hazy pictures of conditions on the labour market, of different
occupations and career possibilities and of higher education (Furth et al, 2002;
Furusten & Zune, 2004; Statistics Sweden, 2005). Although the ability to seek and
use information in purposeful ways is only one of a number of aspects related to
career and study choices I mean that it is a significant aspect that has hitherto only
been investigated to a minor extent within both career research and Library and
Information Science. How young people make sense of the information and
expectations that are directed towards them at this turning point in their lives is
therefore of interest in any attempt to understand what Schneider and Stevenson
(1999) refer to in the title of their study as “The ambitious generation; motivated
but directionless”.

The theoretical relevance of the study is grounded in an understanding of
knowledge and information as socially constructed and mediated to us through
stories, myths, facts, norms, mores, traditions, beliefs etc. These may be
investigated in the development of a greater understanding for the ways in which
information takes on meaning for young people while in the process of making
career and study choices. Investigating the information related activities, whether
they are pragmatic or symbolic activities or both, of young people in this context
provides an empirical example through which aspects of the lifeworlds of the
participants in the study may be rendered visible and thereby better understood.
The study is of course also relevant to other research areas such as career research. As in most interdisciplinary research areas, the borderlines of career research are indistinct although its focus can be said to lie in career development in a lifetime perspective (Young & Borgen, 1990). This study however, builds more on qualitative Swedish research conducted within Library and Information Science in the area known as user studies and where information seeking and use have been studied within specific educational and work contexts (Limberg, 1998; Seldén, 1999; Sundin, 2003; Thórsteinsdóttir, 2005). This thesis builds further on this tradition by studying the seeking and use of information in everyday life and may be seen as a contribution to the development of research and education within the subject area in Sweden.

1.2 Setting the scene

The immediate background to the study lies in the lively debate in Swedish society concerning the value of higher education and the quality of its relation to working life. The situation on the labour market for young people in Sweden was precarious when this study was undertaken (Statistics Sweden, 2005a). The country had not yet recovered from the crisis of the 1990’s when one in ten jobs disappeared and a shrinking labour market had resulted in the reduced recruitment, in particular, of young people. In 2005 unemployment for 18-24 year olds had increased by 11% in a year, the numbers of young people with part-time jobs had doubled since 1990. The age of entry into full-time employment had increased from 25 years to 28 years between 2002 and 2005 (Olaison, 2005). While some argue that the ongoing expansion of higher education is a political strategy that deliberately disguises youth unemployment through absorption and “storage”, others argue for the necessity of a highly educated population as the driving force of a dynamic knowledge economy. In connection with this debate, it has also been shown that young university graduates are having greater difficulty in establishing themselves in working life than in previous generations. While on one hand it has been the government’s policy to encourage and invest in higher education, on the other hand, the influx of highly educated on the labour market makes it probable that investment in higher education is less profitable for the individual. In Sweden, a surplus of highly educated has led both to lower salaries in some professions and to the under-usage of qualifications (Kindenberg, 2005). The relation between higher education and the labour market is unclear, particularly in a time of ongoing structural change in working life that makes it increasingly difficult to forecast job opportunities and the nature of the competences required in a number of sectors (Furusten & Zune, 2004).

Explanations that are forwarded to account for rising unemployment include the accountability and responsibility of young people themselves, and it is implied that graduates are unaware of where they can be employed or how their knowledge can be applied, that they are unaware of what employers require and expect, and that
they lack knowledge of how to apply for jobs (Ekström, 2005). Such explanations reflect societal discourses concerning individual responsibility, the value of higher education and the nature of the labour market as well as raising questions concerning how the career guidance information system is used by young people. Although it is overly simple to suggest that employability is purely a question of the seeking, evaluating and use of relevant information it does seem to be an aspect that plays a role in a wider picture and therefore deserves some attention.

The career and study choices of young people in Sweden are contextualised by different descriptions or theories of social processes that offer different types of explanations of the ways in which, for instance, frameworks for study and occupational choice are constructed. It has been long-argued with empirical evidence that socio-economic background and gender influence the choices that young people make and thus sustain social reproduction. Access to and use of information in this school of thought is therefore seen as determined by demographic traits, social status and economic resources (e.g. Willis, 1977; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Statistics Sweden, 2005). However, Beck (1992) and Giddens (1991), argue that in modern society individualisation and globalisation processes are impacting on the structural factors that steer educational and occupational choice. Beck suggests furthermore that the effects of the growing multiplicity and fragmentation of choice on all fronts contribute to the shaping of “unique biographies” and which contain both negative and positive consequences for how people view and shape their lives. These effects also make it difficult to pinpoint or predict how everyday lives and professional fields are being transformed. Beck’s view of things opens a vista of potential for social change although it is not clear which direction it may take or if there is a real possibility for human agency. While on one hand, researchers may use Bourdieu’s theories concerning the powerful effects of habitus to account for continued social reproduction in education and work but also for the ability of the individual to overcome its constraints, Giddens (1991) and Beck (1992) argue that traditional, structural elements can be more effectively challenged by the power latent within processes of individualisation if harnessed to the idea of ‘reflexive modernisation’; as I understand it, individualisation imbued with a collective sense of responsibility for the risks facing modern society. If the effects of social structures are weakening with regard to the choices that young people are making it should be possible to discern evidence of these changes in the information related activities and experiences of young people at a turning point in their lives such as leaving school.

At the same time, it must be remembered that educational and occupational choices are seldom made in isolation. Young people are subject to other influences stemming from the social and cultural groups to which they belong and which are mediated through social interaction. Conflicting perspectives, information and pressure from relatives, personal and family friends, peers, teachers and careers

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2 Habitus refers to the ways in which the individual’s upbringing and social environment create dispositions to act, interpret experiences and think in certain ways.
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counsellors as well as the career guidance information system may have to be resolved while young people try to hold on to personal preferences and inclinations. Although leaving school is a significant turning point the making of career and study choices is only one aspect of a young person’s life and occurs in a generally turbulent period with the loosening of family ties, the development of leisure interests, the changing patterns of social relations, with group constellations perhaps giving way to partners, and with preparations for leaving home and school.

In the following sections the Swedish education system and career guidance at upper secondary level are briefly described within the national setting in order to paint the backdrop of the study. The chapter is completed with the research questions that guide the study.

1.2.1 The national setting
The Swedish education system has undergone considerable change in a relatively short period and today all young people are expected to attend school from the age of 6/7 to 19 years of age. The government at this time had an educational vision with the goal that 50% of every age group would continue into higher education before the age of 25 and after completing an upper secondary three year programme (SOU 2002:120). The main objective of Swedish education policy is to develop Sweden as a leading knowledge nation with the most highly educated working population in the world. It is believed that this can be achieved through various means: the internationalisation of education on all levels, by encouraging enterprise and entrepreneurship, and by emphasising equality of opportunity and thereby counteracting gender-based study choices (Finansdepartementet, 2004:35-36). A cause of concern in the Swedish economy is rising unemployment, particularly for young people without qualifications from higher education (Nylund, 2005) and, according to the head of the National Institute of Economic Research, Ingemar Hansson, it is therefore essential that young people both educate themselves and enter the labour market earlier than is the rule at present (Schück, 2005). However, the fact that Swedish young people enter the labour market later and later in life has not only to do with lack of employment opportunities. This phenomenon is also partly explained through structural factors, for instance, it is common to work part-time while studying in order to make ends meet but thereby extending the length of time in studies. Alternatively, many work for a period between or before studies in order to finance a gap year for travelling abroad simply because they want to.

The idea of the knowledge economy permeates Swedish educational policy and is defined by Powell and Snellman as follows:

Production and services based on knowledge intensive activities that contribute to an accelerated pace of technological and scientific advance as well as equally rapid obsolescence.
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The key components of a knowledge economy include a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources, combined with efforts to integrate improvements in every stage of the production process, from the R&D lab to the factory floor to the interface with customers. (Powell & Snellman, 2004:201)

In their article Powell and Snellman point out that very little research has been carried out on the skills needed in a knowledge intensive economy and they argue that even if less-skilled workers, minorities and older workers are disadvantaged by technological advances this does not automatically mean that they cannot acquire the necessary skills by other means than through higher education. They conclude that the outcomes of the knowledge economy cannot, as yet, be reflected accurately thus implying that predictions about future labour market requirements are based on little more than speculation (Powell and Snellman, 2004:200). So while political directives are aimed at strengthening Sweden’s economic competitiveness in a global market by promoting the educational attainments of its people it has been difficult to specify in which areas and in what ways. Arguments for and against the idea of the knowledge society can thus be seen as part and parcel of the discourses which influence career and study choice.

Although the notion of the knowledge economy is more or less unchallenged within Swedish education policy it does have its critics and critical views are not seldom expressed through the media, for example, the following excerpt from *Dagens Nyheter*, one of Sweden’s leading daily nationals, casts a shadow over the value of higher education and illustrates the conflicting messages young people are typically exposed to:

ONLY ONE OF FIVE GOT THE JOB THEY STUDIED FOR

Only 22%- about one in five who studied systems science at Stockholm’s University got the job they studied for. In a check-up carried out by *Dagens Nyheter* it was found that the rest were unemployed, studied something else or worked with something they were not educated for. “I think people believe too much in education as a solver of all problems” says Åsa Granlund, one of the students who now works in a menswear shop. (Lindberg, 2005:1, my translation)

The drastic reference to the menswear shop emphasises the worthlessness and irrelevance of what must have been a long and expensive education (even though the reader is not informed if Åsa intends to keep her job or what the work actually involves). From the point of view of the participants in this study the picture of the labour market may be expected to be highly ambivalent, with a call on the one hand to “get an education” and on the other, media statements that imply that graduates
from higher education are failing to get jobs. The perception of risk, claims Beck, impacts on how we think and what we do, and he maintains that “the discourse of risk begins where trust in our security and belief in progress end” (Beck, 2000:213). The fear that the advance of technological innovation will reduce the number of jobs available is persistent although the connection between new technology and employment is far from clear.

A range of national and international studies show that socioeconomic background, gender, and ethnicity continue to influence the individual’s choice of education and work. At the same time there is an ongoing discussion concerning increasing tendencies in modern society for individuals to individualise and to specialise. European researchers like Beck (1992; 1994; 2000; 2002a) and Giddens (1994; 2002) define and describe individualisation processes which they argue underlie the detraditionalising of western society. They point out that it is increasingly difficult to envisage what the future holds in the way of work and how the labour market will be affected by societal change. A traditional and relatively predictable society is, according to Beck, becoming transformed into “The Risk Society”, which is characterised by new global challenges, not least environmental problems. The risk society generates wider and more opportunities giving individuals more scope to shape their own futures and opening up occupational choice and opportunities. Individualised lifestyles are more or less forced into being as people reflexively construct their own careers, and this they attempt to accomplish on the basis of increasingly abstract descriptions of work processes and content.

While Beck focuses much of his attention on the consequences of environmental risks in his characterisation of the risk society and their possible effects on the organisation of society, Giddens (1991:28) describes risk as an orientation in western society which acknowledges that all our activities are open to contingencies and that no aspects of our activities follow predestined courses. This orientation towards the idea of risk is manifested in a greater societal emphasis on the need for young people to make well-considered and strategic choices of education and occupation and to take individual responsibility for those choices. Giddens is also concerned with the effects of the development of abstract systems of specialised expertise; he uses the example of the growth of alternative systems of health information. Codified, systematised knowledge, he maintains, was in pre-postmodern times available only to those that were experts or literate. Now, such knowledge is available to anyone in theory; if they have the time, resources and energy to acquire it. However, in practice, the consequences of the increasing number of abstract systems and the different types of skills required to access them, means that they become opaque to the majority of people. Access to a superabundance of information can thus be seen to limit real access, or allow its potential value to drown if the individual lacks the means, inclination or the education to critically analyse and evaluate it in relation to their own objectives, interests and orientations. Expertise itself, is also becoming more narrowly
specialised and this has the effect of blurring both the surrounding areas of knowledge and a broader understanding of the implications or consequences of such expertise (Giddens, 1991). From a careers point of view Giddens’ description suggests that choice of profession and choice of specialisations within professions becomes a more complex and risky affair, particularly for young people with little experience or knowledge of the labour market which, for example, Furusten & Zune (2004) assert. In addition, it means that it is more difficult to assess the value of occupational or professional training as these practices might suddenly become obsolete or thoroughly transformed; ‘suddenly’ in terms of the difficulties for individuals to assess the value of occupational skills in relation to whatever else is going on in the labour market and in technological development. Giddens aptly refers to the effects of the specialised nature of modern expertise as contributing to “the erratic, runaway character of modernity” (1991:30).

Discourses connected with the knowledge economy, the risk society and individualisation processes permeate Swedish political documents and the mass media. They may contradict each other and together they present a view of an unpredictable and rather insecure labour market where individuals are required to be constantly on the move and alert to signals concerning the state of the labour market and its implications for educational and occupational choice. It is from this background that this study on the information related activities of young people has grown. How young people seek information in times of change and at a specific turning point in their own lives may give a strong indication of how they are coping with the challenges of modern society and, in turn, where they might need support.

1.2.2 The Swedish education system at upper secondary level

At the beginning of the 1900’s 1.5% of every age group continued to upper secondary level. By the 1970’s the percentage had increased to 70%. Before the last upper secondary school reform at the beginning of the 1990’s, between 87-90% of Sweden’s young people started upper secondary programmes and today more than 98% continue to upper secondary level, with a further 1% starting a year later. From a historical viewpoint it is a new situation and the growth of the educational sector has been unprecedented; upper secondary education has grown in the course of a few decades from being selective to an institution, which is in principle, attended by just about every 16-19 year old. It can be compared with the average figures for the OECD countries which reveal that nearly 70% of each age group start at upper secondary level (The National Agency for Education, 2004a).

The upper secondary level of education was reformed in the 1990’s and saw the introduction of 16 national programmes and an individualised programme which caters for those who fail to qualify for the national programmes. All programmes are three years long and two of the most important motives for renewal were to strengthen the vocational programmes and to make pupils on all the programmes generally eligible for higher education. Up until the 1970’s theoretical and
vocational programmes were in principle separated but after 1968 they were integrated in a common upper secondary level of education. The latest reform (1994) has meant a prolongation from two to three years for vocational programmes as well as an increase in the time devoted to core subjects such as Swedish, English, mathematics and social studies in the vocational programmes. Otherwise the programmes are distinguished from each other by their profiles, such as specialisations in arts subjects, natural sciences, healthcare, building, etc. The idea was to raise the status and ambition level for vocational programmes and give all pupils the possibility of continuing into higher education (SOU 1997:107, 1997). In practice, young people can choose between the 16 national programmes which are usually further characterised by a host of local specialisations, for example, a programme in the social sciences might specialise in business economy in a local variant. Thirteen of the national programmes are mainly vocational and include at least 15 weeks work practice. A long term objective was to recruit 50% of every batch of school leavers to higher education by the time they are 25 years old. In 2004 60% of university students were women, a situation reflected in most European countries. The number of students from working class homes had doubled in the previous 10 years and universities were encouraged to actively broaden recruitment (Finansdepartementet, 2004/2005:41). The proportion of students with a working class background was slightly less than 30%. There was also some concern not only over continuing gender-based study choices but also over the prolonged transition from school to university. Nearly half of Swedish students were over 25 years old when they began their studies whereas in most other countries students were about 20 years old when they started university. The diagrams below illustrate the structure of the education system and the transitions between educational levels in Sweden.
Fig. 1 The Swedish Education System, 2004
(Finansdepartementet, 2004)

**Higher education**
- Ca 60 universities and educational institutions
- Graduate programme 2-4 years
- Undergraduate 2-5 years

**Qualified vocational programmes**

**Upper secondary school**
- 17 national programmes – 3 years. Ca 700 schools

**Swedish schools abroad**

**Primary and secondary schools**
- Ca 5100 schools

**Ethnic minority schools for Laplander people**

**Pre-school classes**
- Nursery schools and leisure time care

**Ph.D.**

**Adult education**
- Municipal adult education
- Schools for disabled adults
- Swedish for immigrants
- Complementary education

**Liberal adult education**
- 147
- Folk high schools
- 10 educational associations

**Special schools for pupils with development disabilities**
- Obligatory special school 9/10 years
- Special upper secondary school 4 years

**Special schools for the deaf and people with hearing disabilities**
- 10 years

-5 years
The long term goal of educational policy to strive towards the development of a knowledge society is clearly reflected in the structure of upper secondary school programmes where 42% continue to higher education by the age of 25.

1.2.3 Career guidance at upper secondary level in Sweden

The significance of exercising the power of informed choice is emphasised in Swedish schools today as a means for the individual to negotiate the complexity and uncertainty of an increasingly globalised labour market that is subject to rapid technological innovation. The Swedish National Agency for Education sees career guidance as building on a:

- democratic approach and is a pedagogical method that aims to provide individuals with the support they need in order to independently examine, formulate and develop their interests and by these means make their own well-informed choices of education or occupation. (Ekholm & Loberg, 2001:6, My translation)

From this perspective career guidance has “great significance” (Lpf 94:16) for enabling the individual to make rational and appropriate decisions supported by a
pedagogical methodology. This methodology is not described but a reasonable interpretation suggests that support in developing an awareness of appropriate information sources and ways of using them effectively, is seen as a part of this learning process. Particularly, as it is continually emphasised that young people should prepare themselves for new types of jobs, new types of work tasks and dynamic development with, as yet, unseen, rather abstract consequences. This suggests that neither traditional pathways nor traditional information sources will work as well as they may have done in the past.

One of the overriding goals of the National Curriculum (Lpf 94, see App1) also stresses the importance of young people’s ability to deal with information:

Pupils shall also be able to keep their bearings in a complex reality involving vast flows of information and a rapid rate of change. Their ability to find, acquire and use new knowledge thus becomes important. Pupils shall train themselves to think critically, to examine facts and their relationships and to see the consequences of different alternatives. In such ways students will come closer to scientific ways of thinking and working. (Lpf 94:5)

The metaphor of the fast flow of information from which the individual will search for and retrieve bits for further use is somewhat problematical as it envisages learning as collecting information for transformation into a knowledge capital rather than as the active individual learning in the process of shaping their own lives. However, the operative wording in this objective is perhaps “to think critically”; critical thinking is expected to help pupils to envisage the consequences of a number of alternatives. In relation to study and career choice, this objective places high demands on the reasoning skills or “scientific ways of thinking” of relatively inexperienced young people in an area which is painted as rather unpredictable.

With specific regard to orientation to working life and further education The National Curriculum makes provision for support in its goals. They promote self-reliance and rational planning and constitute educational and occupational choice processes as logical and rational with a number of interlocking goals that schools are required to help pupils strive towards. The goals in themselves constitute a view of the labour market that is risk-filled, dynamic and subject to change because of technological development, social development, the effects of change in working conditions and the effects of international cooperation and competition and are as follows:

Pupils are encouraged to strive towards:

- developing self-understanding and the ability to individually plan their studies
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- consciously developing a point of view on future studies and occupations on the basis of collected experiences, knowledge and current information
- increasing their ability to analyse different options and evaluate the consequences they can have
- becoming familiar with the conditions of working life, particularly for work related to their areas of studies, with educational alternatives, and with opportunities for work practice etc. in Sweden and abroad
- becoming aware that occupations change in pace with technological development, changes in social and working life and with international cooperation. The pupil must therefore understand the need for continual personal development throughout working life (Lpf 94:2.4, my translation).

The implementation of the above goals is expected to take place through the support of the guidelines for school staff laid down in the National Curriculum (see App 1) generally, and through the support of the career guidance system specifically. The guidelines are formulated on a general level and school staff are basically encouraged to counteract the constraints of social, gender-based and cultural factors on occupational choice, to make use of pupil’s work experiences in teaching and to promote contact with working life.

Embedded in the goals is the idea that young people will be able to choose among options and they reflect a strongly individualistic approach in which structural inequalities, for example, of class, ethnicity, gender, disability or geographical location are rendered invisible. However, the goals also reflect an ambition to empower the individual although such an ambition must be set in relation to the resources made available and the methods employed for implementing them, for example, by generating information of high quality and facilitating universal access and qualified career guidance. The goals reflect an idealised learning process in career decision-making in the best of possible worlds where options exist and where young people have previously made choices that have suited them. The counsellor’s function in this approach would therefore be to assist young people in making further choices by clarifying their options and helping them develop ways of seeking and evaluating information about the educational and labour markets in relation to their own abilities and interests.

The first goal concerns self-understanding and self-efficacy; the ability to individually plan one’s studies in accordance with one’s sense of who one is and what one is capable of achieving. If one looks at the numerous tests available on web-sites for career guidance it can be deduced that self-understanding is understood as an awareness of aptitudes, interests, skills, prior knowledge, personality, values and beliefs. Research into self understanding, however, reveals it as a complex concept having also to do with notions of how we are seen by others or would like to be seen by others and with our ideas of who we would like to become, and concerns issues of identity and self-esteem (Holland, 1985).

3 See, for example, http://www.syoguiden.com/category2.asp?BenID=8 for different tests.
Self understanding is related to the second goal which concerns developing a personal point of view. A prerequisite for developing a personal point of view involves, as I see it, the ability to formulate study and occupational ambitions in relation to personal preferences and interests thus determining a direction in which to go, or a focus on which to base further activity. This goal implies that a personal point of view can be achieved when one has the whole picture; it entails making sense of one’s own experiences and knowledge in relation to current information on the available opportunities. It implies that all the information is available and accessible and that it is possible to make decisions that are rational from both a personal and a labour market perspective. In practice, however, given the dynamism of both modern society and human beings, such a scientific approach to options may prove unnecessarily tedious and time-consuming to follow through and is highly dependent on the existence of a well-defined goal for individual effort, as well as on individual persistence and single-mindedness and, not least, on time. From the perspective of information science Patrick Wilson contends that people in general will not go to great lengths to become well-informed particularly in cases when information proliferates. A superabundance of information becomes a burden and people make their decisions on partial information and intuition (Wilson, 1995; Hodkinson, 1995).

The third goal requires the ability to evaluate options and to foresee the consequences of different choices and implies the young person already has a focus as a departure point for evaluative activities. It requires the overview and selection of relevant information and it implies that pupils will be objective in their analyses as well as having access to the information they require. However, the future labour market is usually depicted as largely unpredictable, characterised, as it is, by increasing specialisation and differentiation, so the benefit of higher education might first be apparent after ten years or more. There is plenty of information about universities and vocational training courses in guides, in the press and on the Internet. Side by side with the market for free higher education in Sweden there is also a market for education that is not free of cost. This makes the border between information and advertising unclear and it is difficult to ascertain the contents of education or its outcomes in terms of qualifications or job opportunities. As the career researchers, Foskett & Helmsley-Brown point out with reference to young people:

Their own knowledge of the interaction of education and labour markets may be insufficient to facilitate an informed choice – indeed it is from the education process they are yet to undertake that such knowledge may eventually derive. (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2004:30)

Swedish statistics on the long-term value of higher education are often cited to encourage school leavers to engage in university education, in line with the goal of
educational policy to raise the level of education in the country (see *Studenthandboken*, 2003). However, the value of higher education has also been questioned, not least in the media, with rising unemployment among academics in some disciplines and with employment that fails to make use of academics’ qualifications (Furusten & Zune, 2004; Kindenberg, 2005). The current situation on the labour market does have a marked effect on the university programmes that students choose even though the demand for their qualifications may well have decreased considerably by the time they complete their studies (Furusten & Zune, 2004). It is also the case that in the competition for students, universities have dimensioned courses and programmes more to popular and current demand than on long-term labour market prognoses. This all means that young people are likely to face considerable difficulties in evaluating their options and foreseeing the consequences of different choices. This is not to say that it is impossible to evaluate options in this context, but that it perhaps requires a specific educational input to support young people in developing skills and perspectives in this particular domain.

The fourth goal is based on the pupil’s own studies as a departure point for orientation in the educational and labour markets and assumes that the individual has already made a wise choice at upper secondary level as well as having had realistic opportunities to become acquainted with working life and its conditions during the period. The final goal, understanding the need for continual personal development throughout working life, represents a view of learning on two levels; on an immediate level as an ongoing process leading to ever-widening perspectives where the individual is expected to learn new skills and competencies and, on a meta-level, requiring the individual’s awareness of the need to continue to develop knowledge throughout life in a career perspective.

Although the goals suggest an ideal although complex learning process this does not mean that the process delineated in the goals is related to how people actually make career related decisions. The goals of the National Curriculum can be seen as an endeavour to increase equity by initiating a learning process that will provide young people with a way of thinking about career that will help them plan their futures where the intended outcome is to develop pupils’ ability to make rational and well-informed decisions with a starting point in their own experiences and preferences and in a life-long perspective. However, a number of national surveys indicate that the choices made by school leavers are problematic, they seem neither particularly rational nor well-informed, at least not from a labour market perspective, and the mass media coverage on the subject tends to ironise over the numbers of young people that seem to want to be celebrities or open cafés (Trondman, 2003). At the same time young people are inundated by a flora of different messages from different actors concerning the labour market and the personalities, qualifications and competencies young people are required to have in order to succeed (Hultgren, 2006). It is also part of educational policy to encourage the various actors; schools, institutions of higher education, trade and industry, the
trade unions, and job centres to supply young people with information (see App. I). This in turn requires a sophisticated ability to discern and critically evaluate information from a range of sources in relation to their own aspirations, goals and interests. It would seem that despite the amount of information on study and career choice, the goals of the National Curriculum and the support provided by the career guidance system young people are failing to make informed choices, or are not making choices actively.

Active information seeking tends to be an aspect of personal agency that is hidden or embedded within other activities; it is seldom carried out for its own sake but is always about something else and enacted for certain purposes beyond itself (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005). Yet the ability to seek and use information in self-reliant ways is an accomplishment that young people are expected to master in postmodern society as can be seen in the goals of the Curriculum. Investigations into the activities and resources of career guidance in upper secondary schools indicate the extent to which it has the means to facilitate the development of an information literacy for careers and study decision-making in this area and the findings and implications of these investigations are described briefly below.

**Evaluations of career guidance**

Career guidance at upper secondary level in Sweden is usually administered and under the control of a municipal school board. In 2005 The National Agency for Education (2005a) evaluated career guidance in Swedish schools. One of their objectives was to investigate its status at the municipal level. It was found that only 40% of the municipalities mentioned career guidance in their annual school plans, 31% included its activities in their quality assurance plans and 31% mentioned it in school development plans. In other words, interest in career guidance can be described as weak on a municipal level. The report revealed that resources for activities had decreased in the municipalities and that about half of the counsellors had an education relevant to their activities. Differences were found between and within municipalities with regard to resources but, in general, one counsellor at upper secondary level served an average of 479 pupils (compared to about 300 pupils per counsellor a few years before). A survey carried out by The National Agency for Education (2004b) found that less than half of the pupils had consulted a careers counsellor individually. So, although there was a documented ambition to provide support through career guidance, resources either were inadequate to the challenge or career guidance was ignored for some reason by a large number of pupils.

A further investigation into the quality of career guidance (The National Agency of Education, 2007) found that in most cases development had been left entirely in the hands of the schools’ guidance counsellors themselves. None of the municipalities in the inquiry had systematically worked with the evaluation of career guidance. Few headmasters seemed to have taken into account that goals, follow-ups and evaluations are required in order to develop career guidance. The
only changes that had been carried out had more to do with organisational change than with the goals and methods for guidance. Even though pupils interviewed in the inquiry maintained that consideration of their options for studies and occupations was something that concerned them, occupied their thoughts and that they consequently felt a need for more individual counselling, none of the headmasters in the investigation had inquired after pupils’ needs or thoughts about career guidance. The interviewed pupils experienced that the link between school and work was weak and that teachers seldom linked the world outside school to their teaching or made use of pupil’s experiences of work as departure points for schoolwork.

Most upper secondary schools have one counsellor with the school headmaster as principle employer. Their activities include individual counselling, group discussions, lectures, organising group meetings between pupils and representatives from different occupations, organising work practice for vocational programmes, and organising and systematising information on the labour and education markets and making it physically accessible in both printed and electronic forms. Personal interviews occupy the bulk of the counsellor’s time although only just over half of upper secondary pupils consult a counsellor (The National Agency of Education, 2004c). As resources in general are poor in relation to the set goals, activities such as individual interviews tend to be concentrated to pupils’ final year of schooling. This suggests, despite an increasing political ambition to create career guidance systems that can support the individual in a life-long perspective, that activities will be directed at short term measures catering for the period immediately after leaving school.

A growing problem was also discerned in the National Agency’s evaluation (2005a). As the numbers of pupils with foreign backgrounds are increasing in Swedish schools new demands are being placed on career guidance. Information in several languages is required as well as an increased awareness of the different ways in which young people relate to the future. Occupations are, according to the report, valued differently in different cultures and the Swedish practice of assuming that young people decide their own futures is not self-evident in all cultures. The researchers found that counsellors experienced problems in reaching out to parents in immigrant families with information concerning their children’s options.

In a study from 2003, Dresch and Lovén found that not only pupils but also counsellors had difficulties in discerning the difference between information and marketing. Competition between schools and between universities clouded issues making it difficult for counsellors to be objective. According to the counsellors in the study young people seemed to be more disinclined than in previous years to seek information themselves despite access to modern ICT tools and currently updated specially designed web-sites. It is possible that it is not lack of access or skills in accessing information that hinders use, but how its relevance to their lives is perceived by young people.
It would seem, therefore, that the ambitions embedded in the goals of the National Curriculum are not equalled by the resources provided to support young people in planning their futures neither in terms of the number of career guidance counsellors available nor in terms of their qualifications. Why young people seem to be disinclined to make use of resources gathered in electronic form is not investigated in the evaluations but that both pupils and counsellors seem to have difficulties in discerning the differences between advertising and information is significant; it concerns issues of empowerment and also of education. In view of the OECD (2004) resolution to develop methods to help young people to develop their ability to take responsibility for their own career planning and development, the above reports suggest that a lack of interest at the municipal level has resulted in a lack of resources that would make this possible.

The background painted suggests a scenario where it would seem that making study and career choices is a difficult process with less than optimal support from schools and which is further complicated by the alleged ongoing transformation of the labour market. How young people experience this situation has not been, as far as I know, investigated from the perspectives of young people themselves to any great extent. They have indeed taken part in surveys (Furth et al, 2002; Furusten & Zune, 2004; Statistics Sweden, 2005) but these generally take their departure points in pre-set questions geared to associating responses with class, gender and ethnicity. Understanding how young people view their situations and make sense of information in life-world perspectives may therefore contribute to a deepened understanding. The research questions are presented below.

1.3 Research questions

The objective of the thesis is to study school leavers’ relation to study and career information as well as their information related activities with a view to understanding their approaches to the future. ‘Approach’ is used here in two senses; as the act of drawing closer to something as well as the means adopted in tackling a problem or a task. Approach in the first sense encompasses strategies (long-term plans) and tactics (activities engaged in to achieve short-term goals). In the second sense, it refers to the methods or practices used to reach goals. De Certeau (1984) makes a useful distinction between strategies and tactics, maintaining that strategies are informed by power and have starting points and destinations that are in keeping with prevailing discourses. Tactics, on the other hand, are suggestive of the absence of power and tend to be shaped by constraint rather than possibility. This does not necessarily mean that tactics are uncreative or unreflectively engaged in but can also function as the tools of the powerless or as ways of operating that resist an imposed order. De Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics suggests a way in which the information related activities of the participants in the study can be understood and may in turn indicate how they cope with the times they live in.
“All phenomenal worlds”, argues Giddens (1992:188) “are active accomplishments”; we select and interpret information on our own terms as a means of preserving a coherent narrative of self-identity. Giddens’ point becomes doubly interesting in light of the fact that the participants in this study where at a point in life where their social identities as school pupils could not be upheld for much longer. Stories of information seeking may therefore give insight into how young people living in late modernity face its tensions and dilemmas in terms of the development of new social identities as well as in their efforts to construct coherent narratives of self-identity. Focus is therefore not on whether participants successfully negotiate the transition from school to higher education or work but on their accounts of their activities from an information seeking perspective. The following research questions have been posed:

- What strategies and/or tactics do school leavers account for in their approaches to study and careers related information?
- How do participants position themselves in terms of identity in their accounts of study and career related information seeking?
- How can participants’ stories of information seeking be understood against the background of discourses concerning education and work in Swedish society?

In the thesis, information seeking is understood as an activity that is multi-faceted. It encompasses gathering facts about issues of relevance to the seeker, as the process of informing oneself through involvement in life’s activities (Solomon, 2002) and as practices or models of ways of solving problems in particular social settings (Chatman, 2000). Information seeking can be seen as an interaction between ourselves and the social communities of which we are a part and the study is focused on the characteristics of this interaction. As a tool, information seeking provides us with a means of orienting in the world and of defining our own position within it. This raises other questions concerning the relation between the everyday context in which information seeking is practised and individual experiences of information seeking in terms of self-identity, social location and access to information resources.

The research questions are investigated through a phenomenological narrative analysis of accounts of information seeking based on interviews with twenty one young people in the final year of upper secondary school in Sweden. The purpose of the analysis is to make visible the ways in which young people interact with information sources in the specific issue of study and career choice and at the same time to make visible and understand differences and similarities in their experiences of information seeking. Participants’ accounts are seen as embedded in a Swedish sociohistoric and cultural context, which must be understood in order to gain a rich understanding of processes of information seeking in the life-world. This approach focuses attention on the relation of information related
activities to the experiences and future aspirations of the participants.
This chapter focuses on earlier research in career and study choice. Findings from this research area have informed my understanding of the ways in which study and career choice can be investigated, as well as of concepts that are useful in the analysis of data. Research on study and career choice usually falls within the wider area of transition research. Transition research refers to research that focuses on young people’s transition from school to work, its characteristics, the processes experienced by young people, and the implications of different types of transitions for society. It overlaps to a certain degree with research on youth culture and on youth in general and is carried out within a variety of disciplines, for example, educational science, psychology, sociology, and political studies. It also overlaps with career research, which covers the study of career over whole life spans although entry into the labour market draws particular attention. Career research tends to be conducted with departure points in the research needs of professionals within career guidance and career education and is much concerned with the professional knowledge base and the professional development of practitioners within its domain. How people interact with information resources is seldom explicitly investigated in transition or career research. However, as information seeking is the prime focus of user studies, a research area within Library and Information Science, this suggests that both disciplines can provide insights and concepts that may be mutually fruitful in a study concerned with how young people interact with information resources in school to work contexts. The chapter begins with a discussion of views on the concept of career and goes on to take up findings from different types of research approaches in this research area. This research has contributed to my understanding of different aspects of study and career choice and helps to shed some light on the phenomenon of information seeking in this context.

2.1 Perspectives on the concept of career, pathways and transition

The meaning accorded to the concept of career varies in the literature. Law (1996) reasons that the word ‘career’, in the sense of an advancement through a specific and specialised occupation, no longer holds any meaning in this objective sense. For although some may climb a traditional career ladder within organisations, for others career is simply a succession of jobs. Killeen argues that the conventional
Earlier research on study and career choice

idea of an objective career may constitute an obstruction in career guidance because it implies that people who are not willing, or not able, to enter occupations and to climb career ladders, are in some way unstable or immature, despite this type of career structure being only a part of an overall picture (Killeen, 1996a). Young people today have to deal with more and different types of work than earlier generations have done, as the world of work becomes more diversified and specialised, changeable and difficult to predict. In addition they also have to deal with the fragmentation of education with increased opportunities for making choices throughout. There is an increasing expectation from some quarters that people will work for a while within one sphere, increase and expand their skills and competences and move on to another sphere either within or outside the areas in which they are educated, moving from project to project, perhaps interspersed with periods of unemployment (Savickas, 2005). The concept ought therefore to encompass career not only as a succession of jobs along a hierarchical dimension, but not necessarily within the same occupation, and as a succession of different jobs.

A pathway metaphor is often used to describe transitions to an objective career and suggests development; a linear process where education plays a key part and specific goals are in sight. This idea is expressed, for example, in the Swedish equivalent of the term careers counsellor - “Path guider” (vägledare). However, if career may no longer be considered as a clearly defined objective entity, it may no longer be useful to envisage young people in the act of following pre-existing pathways into working life. Dwyer & Wyn (2001) argue that the pathway model of transition had a predictive value in the industrial era when dominant social structures such as family, schools, the labour market and career structures were relatively stable and together formed pathways into careers. Further, they suggest that the existence of predictable male and female roles in society made it easier to prepare and socialise young people for what was generally expected of them with regard to the development of skills and the acquisition of qualifications to fill those roles. In relation to this idea Dwyer and Wyn (2001:172) also reflect on the role of the researcher who may be in danger of using his or her own life experiences as a norm or standard from which to analyse and evaluate the experiences of young people today – after all, we may think, we have all been there and we may assume that the young people in our research studies will be having experiences similar to our own, despite the evidence of the changing structure of labour and educational markets. From their own research as well as from an overview of transition research Dwyer and Wyn conceptualised career as “life patterns” which they felt more adequately described people’s life-paths. The five typified life patterns which they derive from their data describe the transition experience as characterised by the following perspectives: gaining qualifications, getting a job, prioritising a chosen ‘life’ context, altering plans and ambitions contingently and, finding a

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4 Some would argue that this is not real choice but an artefact of the fragmentation of education, (Pollock, 2002a). However, whether real or not, choices still have to be made.
Earlier research on study and career choice

balance between other commitments and interests and work. Where the focus for activities lies depends on the individual perspective. The school to work transition in other words, is embedded in a life-span and negotiable. Life patterns are negotiable in the sense that postmodern society is characterised by ‘choice’ biographies rather than the ‘normal’ biographies of the post-war period in the developed countries. Choice biography relates to the ways in which young people balance new life-contexts for themselves in modern society by negotiating social change in individualised ways through choice-making in all aspects of life (whether they want to or not) (Beck, 1992).

Dwyer and Wyn (2001) point out that from a research perspective one should be aware that the normative model of transition constitutes a discourse built on the experiences of a past generation that can even colour young people’s own understanding of themselves and their aspirations. Their stories need therefore to be seen as emerging from specific social and cultural contexts in order to understand their wider implications. Career can therefore both be viewed as a socially embedded as well as a subjective experience. A purely subjective view of career as an individually constructed process, however, creates an impression of the more or less empowered individual as the creator of his/her own career and thereby disguises the continued power of social structures on the choices made by young people. Any interpretation of the career concept should therefore avoid the pitfalls of a purely psychological or purely sociological understanding where individuals are positioned as either independent or as at the mercy of structural power.

Career pathways are in the thesis neither seen as pre-existing nor as entirely carved out by the individual. Career is understood as the outcome of choices and decisions made within the social and cultural perspectives of the individual in interaction with opportunity structures and serendipitous events. It includes elements of lifestyle and identity development; i.e. that people strive to choose occupations that are in alignment with their sense of who they are; an idea derived from Bourdieu’s concept of habitus. Career in this interpretation makes it possible to examine information-seeking not only as the objective seeking and use of information provided by the formal career guidance system but also as a culturally embedded practice that has implications for how information is constructed and understood and also as an activity that, in turn, manifests something of the individual’s perspectives.

2.2 Structural approaches to study and occupational choice

Research on the effects of structural factors on career choice as well as on information seeking focuses on variables in the environment such as social class, gender, ethnicity, school achievements or geographical location (often in combination) as a basis from which to examine educational and occupational choice particularly in times of change (See Fransson & Lindh, 2004 for a detailed overview of the research). Findings generally reveal that location in social structure...
provide young people with a set of advantages or disadvantages which affect the outcomes of the move from school to employment. Some structural approaches challenge the idea that success is determined by individual merit and effort, and work from the assumption that people are socialised through their backgrounds into accepting what they perceive the labour market can offer. The power of the agent can therefore be seen as eclipsed by the power of social structures even to the extent that individuals unwittingly “act out the consequences of their own socialisation” (Killeen, 1996b:25). I find this quite an extreme position as it deprives the actor of the power of agency and renders those lacking in social advantages helpless.

Some Swedish studies focus on the values of young people in relation to social class and to the labour market (Valdemarsson, 1985; Dryler, 1998). In a questionnaire (Geiger & Thunström, 2004), distributed and collected from 4000 young Swedes between the ages of 15 and 25, it was found that parents’ educational background determined the inclination of young people to go into higher education or not. Young people from academic homes expressed their desire to continue their studies in positive terms: “It will help me to get an interesting job with interesting work tasks”, “I enjoy studying, it’s interesting”, “I’m looking forward to student life”; while young people with working class backgrounds tended to see studies as hard work: “It’s difficult to get a job – so I might as well study”, “It will help me get a higher salary”, “I have to do it, it’s required for the job I’m aiming for”. The majority (80%) held the view that the key to the labour market lay in attaining qualifications from higher education even though about 56% of every batch of school leavers at the time of the study did not choose to proceed to higher education. Twice as many young people from academic homes choose to continue to higher education compared with young people from the working class. There seems to be some incongruity between a certain overconfidence in the market value of higher education and at the same time a disinclination to study. This suggests that some young people consciously, perhaps willingly, discriminate themselves from parts of the labour market. The main reasons given for not continuing into higher education were: that they were tired of school (60%), that they wanted to earn some money and that they did not think their grades would meet the entry requirements for the courses or programmes they wished to study.

Realistic models for circumventing the power of social structures are seldom offered in these research studies although the structural approach emphasises the value of career guidance, which may help learners at least to recognise alternative courses of action and to identify the competencies needed to take advantage of opportunities in the labour market. However, the role of career guidance in educating young people in career planning seems to have been seldom researched. Models for guidance have been proposed (e.g., Law, 1996; 1999) yet the impact of such interventions have seldom been reported. In one of the few studies to date, Gillies, McMahon and Carroll (1998) reported that Australian school children became more aware of sources of information about occupations, more interest in
career information and a better perception of the relationship of school to work as a result of career guidance activities.

Theoretical explanations of the persistent effect of structure on study and occupational choice, on the other hand, are offered in these studies that help to illuminate why social structures have such power. They tend to rely heavily on Bourdieu’s theories of social and cultural capital and of the effects of habitus (e.g. Lehmann 2004; Baumann, 1999; Furlong & Cartmel, 1997; Bates and Riseborough, 1993). Bourdieu and Passeron 1977) maintain that the social groups in which families are located mediate social and cultural capital, creating dispositions for professions and occupations and providing members with the keys to closed networks within which information is exchanged and norms and values are appropriated and reproduced; and such patterns, they found, are resilient to change.

2.3 Personal factors approaches

In approaches that focus primarily on personal factors as significant to study and career choice the individual is understood as more or less free from structural influences and more or less empowered to pursue their ambitions on the basis of personality, intelligence, personal capacity and motivation, self-understanding, and personal values and attitudes.

Research focuses on the differences between individuals on the bases of abilities, preferences and styles and often results in models that focus attention on personality and on matching personality with occupation or working environment (sometimes called peg-in-the-hole theory or trait and factor theory). Implications from this type of approach have resulted, for example, in models that are applied in computer-guided questionnaires or in structured interviews in order to establish people’s affinities for occupations. Research has also provided evidence that occupational choices are to some degree consistent with personality types (Evans & Furlong, 1997). Research interest may also be focused on the individual’s early experiences in developing explanatory models for the motives that make people act in the ways they do. Holland contended that the reasons people are attracted to certain types of work depend on biological heredity, life history and the individual’s experiences of what constitutes enjoyable and satisfactory types of work (Holland, 1985).

Some theorists have attended to the idea of self-concept as the driver of study and career choice. The idea of self-concept has to do with pictures of how we are seen by others or would like to be seen by others. Holland (1985) found that people compare themselves with the stereotyped notions they have formed of occupations and of the people who perform them. In an extensive research project concerning the interrelationship between careers and identity formation Banks et al. (1992) found that two thirds of the participants in their study were concerned about the impression they created on others, in particular on friends and family. Their actions were guided to a certain extent by the anticipated responses of others, and entailed
seeking information that would help them convince others that they have made the right choices. Identity or self-concept would therefore seem to be relational and negotiated. Although approaches that address personality, style and self-concepts in career theory have been criticised for being over concerned with psychology and too little concerned with social structures, Killeen maintains that:

some sort of ‘self idea’ seems necessary to any theory of careers which assumes conscious attempts to identify occupations that will be within one’s capacities, and more, rather than less, rewarding. (Killeen, 1996b:26)

Important to research with a departure point in self-concepts is thus the recognition that self-image changes and develops throughout life and this is partly brought into effect by experiences of working life and the development of interests both within and outside the working environment. In this sense research with departure points in theories of self-concepts is more accommodating than theory based on the idea of stable personality characteristics and thus more useful to the work at hand. Self-efficacy, for instance, understood here as confidence in one’s ability to understand, learn, choose and make decisions emerges in the research as an aspect that contributes to an understanding of career and study choice in a life-world perspective. According to Bandura (1994), people’s beliefs about their efficacy are grounded in four main types of social interaction: 1) through experiencing success in our own endeavours. 2) Through seeing people similar to oneself succeed through sustained effort. This raises observers’ beliefs that they too possess the capabilities to master comparable activities. 3) Through social persuasion which strengthens people’s beliefs that they have what it takes to succeed; people who are persuaded by others that they possess the capabilities to master given activities are likely to mobilise greater effort than if they harbour self-doubts and dwell on personal deficiencies when problems arise. 4) That structures exist which facilitate success. In the light of the structural approaches taken up previously it does not seem unlikely that self-efficacy is related to some extent to social class; that is, it might be expected that feelings of self-efficacy in career choice will be strengthened by the awareness that others, with similar backgrounds and values, have succeeded in following through choices that are similar to one’s own.

In personal factors approaches the environment is often seen as sets of external influences on decision-making and is conceptualised as the range of factors that support or hinder individual action and with which the individual negotiates more or less successfully. This type of approach characterises much American research where psychologists have led research projects. Watts (1996a) argues that the dominance of psychological approaches in career guidance research seem to be linked to the individualism on which American culture is based. In earlier studies, the sociocultural environment was usually ignored as the agency of the individual was in central focus. At the same time such approaches allow specific factors to emerge and become visible and from the perspective of the thesis ideas of the self
Earlier research on study and career choice and of self-efficacy emerge as particularly interesting in relation to information related activities.

### 2.4 Social and cultural approaches

Dissatisfaction with the validity of purely structural or purely psychological explanations of career has led to theoretical developments that focus on the interaction between individual agency and context (Rudd, 1997). In an article from 2002 Pollock calls for an updating of the transition discourse meaning that there has been an over-reliance on the explanatory power of class-based and gender-based differences in predicting study and career choice. He considers that it would be more productive to "work towards a better understanding of the ways in which the social environment and individuals interact through various levels of cooperating and antagonising spheres of influence" (Pollock, 2002:69). Social and cultural approaches emphasise the sociology of career choice and focus on the interplay of agency and structure in study and career choice where the environment is viewed as dynamic and interactive. For instance, Young et al. (2002) argue that breaking the environment down into variables would be to ‘unravel the tapestry’ and render it meaningless. Below, four studies have been selected that I have found of particular relevance for the work at hand because of their theoretical departure points and also because they offer descriptions of the contexts in which information seeking is embedded as an interactive activity, even though information seeking as such is not explicitly taken up.

In a Swedish context, Lindström-Nilsson (1998) using Beck’s (1992) concept of ‘choice biography’ examined young women’s interpretations of freedom of choice in relation to traditional and non-traditional educational choice and their dispositions to break with tradition. Choice biography, as mentioned previously, relates to the individual’s situation in modern society and the increasing requirements on individuals to negotiate social change in individualised ways by making choices in all aspects of life: “Decisions on education, profession, job, place of residence, number of children and so forth, with all the secondary decisions implied no longer can be, but must be made” (Beck, 1992:135). Through the exercise of choice people are expected to deal with a different type of society than that of earlier generations. Lindström-Nilsson found that the young women in her study did not consider life in terms of an individual project even though she found evidence of an orientation towards the idea of risk, which was manifested in the anxiety the young women felt towards the uncertainty of the future. However, she concluded that the women’s narratives said more about how the interaction between pupils and teachers reproduced social distinctions between people of different sex and different socio-economic, and ethnic backgrounds and how this interaction circumscribed the pupils’ actual room for choice even though some of the participants succeeded in stretching constrictive structural limits. In her analysis of interview transcripts she reached the conclusion that the concept of habitus formulated by Bourdieu, was more helpful in accounting for the actions of the
young women in her study because from her viewpoint the traditional structures in society, such as class, gender and ethnicity are largely maintained through the social interplay that takes place in schools.

Hodkinson concluded from the evidence of a research study conducted by Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) of young people involved in British training schemes that the ways in which decisions were arrived at were:

partly tacit or intuitive and partly discursive, partly rational and, above all they were pragmatic, making use of information, advice and opportunities perceived to be available and relevant at the time. (Hodkinson, 1998:558)

Although they acknowledge the significance of structural and personal factors in study and career choice, by using a more holistic approach Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) found discrepancies between how young people actually ‘choose’ and the type of logical stage by stage decision-making implied in developmental models (an example might be the model outlined in the National Curriculum) and the personal trait models often used in career guidance contexts. Also using Bourdieu’s theory of habitus they developed a theory of “careership” that involves three interrelated dimensions. Firstly, that decision-making is “pragmatically rational” and located in the habitus of the person in the process of making career decisions; i.e. that career decisions are derived from the individual dispositions that arise through ongoing life experiences and social interactions with others.

Secondly, decision-making is described as bounded by the person’s horizons for action, which Hodkinson and Sparkes define as the arena in which action can be taken and which is made up of habitus combined with labour market structures and the person’s perceptions of what is available and/or suitable. What an individual views as possible and available derives from what they know of the labour market and also from their own pre-dispositions, experiences and how they envision themselves in the future. Horizons for action, they conclude, “both limit and enable our view of the world and the choices we can make within it” (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:33). This may mean, for example, that information from universities can be viewed as irrelevant to a young person who cannot envisage themselves in a university milieu.

Thirdly, career and study decisions are based on partial information, decisions are context-based, opportunistic and cannot be separated from family background, culture and the individual’s own life history. People make decisions when they feel able to do so and when they can take advantage of fortuitous contacts and experiences. Decision making usually means accepting one option rather than choosing among many.

The careership model enables Hodkinson and Sparkes to describe the interconnections between the macro sociocultural context and the pragmatically rational career decisions people make within their culturally derived horizons for action, at turning points in their lives (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997:39). They
Earlier research on study and career choice define turning points as self-initiated, structural or foreseen; leaving school or choosing an upper secondary programme are both examples of foreseen structural turning points; the actions of others, an accident or compulsory redundancy, for example, constitute unpredictable turning points and lead to modifications and/or changes of plan or ambitions.

The model is based on British research on how young people in highly structured government-supported training schemes in a time of extremely high youth unemployment coped with their situation and made career decisions mostly on the basis of their experiences in the schemes, so choice among wide-ranging options was not a part of the picture. It is therefore possible that their finding that young people accepted one available option rather than choosing among many would not apply in different labour market circumstances or in other countries with different labour market and educational policies, as in Sweden. The model does not reflect linear career decision processes, but renders ‘career’ as a socioculturally embedded process that takes account of the activity of the agent without ignoring the effects of structure.

Hodkinson and Sparkes also observed that when young people chose a training scheme a period followed when they came to terms with the consequences of their choices and which in turn influenced habitus and could thereby alter the individual’s horizons for action. They describe the ‘five routines’ they observed for coming to terms with choices as follows:

- **Confirmatory routines:** choices are positively reinforced and the individual’s sense of personal identity develops broadly in the ways they expected they would.
- **Contradictory routines:** experiences undermine the choices made and they are regretted. The individual deems his/her choice as disappointing or personally inappropriate.
- **Socialising routines:** the chosen training scheme confers a sense of occupational identity that was not really desired and the individual reluctantly accepts his/her lot.
- **Dislocating routines:** participants are uncomfortable about the identity they experience is foisted on them by participation in a training scheme which they have not enjoyed. They have not been socialised into accepting the identity conferred nor felt able to transform it. Negative experiences distance them from their initial aspirations or visions of who they would like to become.
- **Evolutionary routines:** the individual gradually develops new perspectives, outgrowing earlier aspirations in ways that are not particularly painful or contradictory. (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997)

Training schemes in Sweden are not structured in the same ways as in Britain and do not have a great deal in common and neither is unemployment so severe, however, the theoretical underpinnings of the study makes the model generalisable.
to foreseen turning points such as, in a Swedish context, choice of upper secondary programmes. As the theoretical departure points of this thesis are similar the model forms a useful point of comparison, although Hodkinson and Sparkes did not focus on the seeking and use of information in their study. The description of the ‘routines’ for coming to terms with previous choices can be compared for example with how Swedish young people describe their experiences of upper secondary programmes.

Another British study (Foskett & Hemsley-Brown, 2001) made use of Hodkinson and Sparkes’ careership model in their analysis of young people’s perceptions of careers. This study paid more attention to the role of information in study and career choice. The researchers found, with regard to information related activities, that family members took on different roles; for example, mothers supported their children by searching for information and “refining” it; that is; sorting the relevant from the irrelevant (in their view) before presenting it to their children, while fathers were turned to for confirming choices. The researchers found that the information related activities of young people with middle–class backgrounds were directed by their parents’ notions of economic advancement and social status while for those with working class backgrounds there was a greater focus on young people’s own preferences as well as on parents’ desire to preserve social acceptability. Foskett and Hemsley-Brown (2001) examine how career choices are influenced not only by social structures but also through the interaction of personal experience, individual and family histories, lifestyles, self concept and through young people’s understandings of education and careers. Although they do not identify information seeking as a specific activity, they emphasise goals of actions rather than their causes because actions are seen as embodying the individual’s responses to his or her world view.

Evans (2001) and Evans et al. (2001) strove to understand the interaction of personal, social and institutional support for young people in transitions from school to work by taking into account and comparing the social and educational networks in which their activities were embedded in both England and in Germany. In both countries they found that structural influences interfused with individual action often frustrating attempts by young people to break free from traditional expectations mediated by school and parents. In explaining this phenomenon Evans uses the concept of bounded agency to describe a sense of agency that is nevertheless constrained by economic, social and cultural characteristics of different countries. The comparison allowed the effects of different cultures and political programmes on career outcomes to emerge more clearly. The individual is seen as active and more or less constrained in his/her choices but in different ways depending on the different constraints that different socio-political cultures give rise to. The “bounded” nature of agency was illustrated, among other things, through an analysis of how the different national contexts reinforced, encouraged or discouraged certain types of activities (Evans & Heinz, 1994).

All of the above studies have implications for how information seeking can be understood in a life-world approach; that is, as a socially embedded activity in
interaction with the social, economic and cultural characteristics and conditions of a given society. Although Hodkinson and Sparkes’ three-dimensional model of pragmatically rational decision-making is derived from a British context its theoretical underpinnings make it interesting for the study at hand. As in the Hodkinson and Sparkes’ study, Foskett & Hemsley-Brown’s study is also set in a British context where family ties are claimed to be stronger than in the Scandinavian countries and where class differences are more pronounced (Svallfors, 2007). It can therefore not be assumed that the findings described in these studies are directly applicable to a Swedish context. However, their emphasis in taking social interaction into account when attempting to understand how study and career decisions are made is illuminating for the study at hand.

In their overview of the research on study and occupational choice in Sweden, Fransson and Lindh (2004) point out the dichotomy between, on the one hand, the insistent call to individualised action, and on the other, the underlying effects of structure and its reinforcement by the media:

> Individual projects, individual choice and individual expression are a characteristic feature of our time. Boys and girls have to deal with this expected independence in their orientation to the future. Collectives, friends, individual considerations and dreams meet the available opportunities and create a tableau of possible futures, where, not least, the media in many respects, mediate male and female stereotypes in society and in working life. (Fransson & Lindh, 2004:49, my translation)

### 2.5 Information related activities in study and careers choice perspectives

The research studies reviewed here offer perspectives and concepts that reflect different aspects of how we can understand the meaning of the school to work transition for young people in modern society. Transition understood as an integral part of different ‘life patterns’ focuses attention on how different perspectives on what is important in life to the school leaver at this turning point in their lives shapes their perceptions of possible options. Taken together the studies create a framework in which information related activities can be positioned in this study. The idea of ‘careership’ with its components of pragmatically rational decision-making, turning points, and the significance of interaction with the social and cultural environment allows the researcher to escape the restrictiveness of the idea of career development as a linear logical process or as the outcome of the effects of either social structures or individual attributes. The careership model relates more to how people actually ‘choose’ than how they ought to choose. The concept of ‘bounded agency’ permits the individual to emerge as active and more or less able to negotiate the boundaries of their social and cultural worlds while at the same time recognising their existence.
Earlier research on study and career choice

The role of information seeking in study and occupational choice is seldom focused on in transition research as a purposeful activity or as an embedded practice that demonstrates how we experience the world. It does, however, make fleeting appearances that are nonetheless significant. In the social and cultural approaches described here information is understood as contingent, as existing in individual perception at particular points in time and in particular situations. These studies suggest that the ways in which information is sought are to some extent related to experiences of different social and cultural worlds and are therefore associated with elements of lifestyle and identity as well as being related to the conditions and characteristics of a given society.
This chapter begins with a brief and general description of the information seeking research field and proceeds with an examination of some of the concepts developed within it together with a selection of empirically based research that has been useful in building my understanding of the phenomenon of information seeking and that have contributed to illuminating the data material.

Research in the field of user studies, a sub-field of Library and Information Science (LIS) research, deals primarily with how people seek, organise and use information, and it also involves related activities such as an interest in how people verify, supplement, corroborate and evaluate information in relation to the endeavours they engage in. The history of the research field, its development and interdisciplinary nature have been well documented, for example, by Wilson (1994; 1999; 2000) and Case (2002; 2007). User-centred research was invigorated in the late 1980’s by a significant article in ARIST by Dervin & Nilan, (1986) calling for research that paid attention to the emotions and concerns of information seekers in specific situations and contexts and how they interact in sense-making processes. Talja and Hartel (2007), in tracing the evolution of user research after this point, argue that an unnecessary dichotomy was created between user-centred research and research that took its departure point in information systems and how they are used. The consequences of such a dichotomy are, according to the authors, potentially harmful for LIS research, because it isolates what are essentially interactive phenomena: people, technologies, literatures, and documents, into separate domains of research. While fully acknowledging their point, the study at hand can be described as a user-centred study in that it is primarily user-sensitive and interested in the nature of interaction between users and information sources in the social world.

Although there are several models that attempt to describe patterns and processes of information seeking there is no single general model that covers the information behaviour\(^5\) exhibited by people in different types of settings. After an

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\(^5\) The term ‘information behaviour’ has been contested. Marcia Bates, for instance, prefers the term ‘information related behaviour’ on the grounds that information does not “behave” (see discussion on JESSE listserv http://listserv.utk.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A1=ind9912&L=jesse). Talja et al (1999) point out the ease of association between the term ‘behaviour’ and the behaviourist paradigm and its consequences for ways of thinking about information
analysis of models that address a number of different issues in information seeking research Wilson (1999) related the various levels of information behaviour research in a nested model which serves here as a general framework in which to present and discuss some of the LIS concepts central to the thesis.

![Fig. 3 A nested model of the information seeking research areas (Wilson, 1999:263)](image)

In the figure the outer field *Information behaviour* refers to the general research area defined succinctly by Case as encompassing “information seeking as well as the totality of other unintentional or passive behaviour (such as glimpsing or encountering information), as well as purposive behaviour that do not involve seeking, such as actively avoiding information” (Case, 2002:5).

The *information-seeking behaviour* field in the figure refers to consciously and actively sought information and is “concerned with the variety of methods people employ to discover, and gain access to information resources” (Wilson, 1999:263). It includes an understanding of information seeking as a series of related searches concerning some purpose or goal. The inner field refers to research on specific interactions between the user and computer-based information systems such as databases, digital archives, online library catalogues etc. The thesis is primarily concerned with the two outer fields rather than with specific instances of information searching.

With a departure point in Wilson’s model above, McKenzie (2003a) questions the idea of activity inherent in the term ‘information seeking’ and from a discursive perspective lifts forward the idea of ‘information practices’ to emphasise the routine, everyday social interactions through which information is sought, offered and generated in conversation. Information practices in this sense, where people seeking. However, as the term behaviour has wide acceptance within LIS and as it encompasses both passive and active information seeking I use it interchangeably with the term information related activities.
use different discursive strategies to get to know about things that are of specific interest to them in everyday interactions differs slightly from the way in which the term is used by Savolainen (1995) in his study of everyday life information seeking (ELIS). He draws attention to the regularised and socially structured ways in which people monitor the world or keep an eye on things while being alert to events and situations where action might need to be taken; for instance, through their choice of newspaper. The concept of information practices can be used to identify and define sets of information related activities and procedures that are created collectively. They can be described as socially sanctioned and structured tools which social groups use to monitor their worlds either to become informed or to keep them up-to-date on matters of interest on a regular basis. The concept is useful in the work at hand as a way of distinguishing between purposeful and individual information seeking activities, which may involve discerning and appropriating the information practices of a specific group, and the characteristics of the information practices themselves.

Information avoidance can also be understood in the thesis both as a purposeful activity in itself and as an information practice. Chatman (1992; 1996; 1999) for example, has shown that there are situations and contexts where use of potentially useful information sources are ignored or resisted for a number of reasons, such as fear of exposing personal vulnerability or in compliance with normative views of the social appropriateness of using specific sources.

From a sociocultural and discourse orientated perspective, Sundin (2003) examined how nurses related to occupational information. He uses the term ‘information strategies’ to define “those strategies where occupational information, or stories about occupational information, are used as tools for influencing relations of power and occupational identities by resisting or pursuing professional interests” (Sundin, 2003:21, my translation). Information use thus comes to the fore as an observable phenomenon on a discursive level where accounts of use are used to articulate dimensions of professional identity. In everyday settings, other researchers (for example, McKenzie 2003b; Tuominnen, 2004) demonstrate how people put previously sought or received information to use in dialogue or text, for example, to make claims about themselves or present versions of themselves that are ‘worthy’ in the situation at hand. Taylor’s definition of information use as "what information does to or for the recipient and for his or her problem or situation” (1991:221) is, in the light of these types of studies, expanded in this study to include discursive perspectives on information use.

In the sections immediately following, conceptual aspects of information seeking such as information seeking viewed as a social practice, information literacy, relevance and evaluation, and cognitive authority are taken up together with research studies that illuminate the ways in which they are used and which have relevance for the study at hand. These include studies on information seeking in everyday life and studies that focus on the information related practices of young people. Although there is a relatively large body of research within Library and
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Information science on the information related activities of schoolchildren and students in educational contexts there is not a great deal that is specifically focused on the information related activities of young people in everyday life. However, there is a certain consistency in the findings of existing studies that together with studies from educational and work contexts contribute to creating a picture of the relation between information seeking and young people. I have found only one study within the discipline that specifically investigates the information related activities of school leavers in connection with study and occupational choice (Julien, 1997; 1999; 2004). This study is taken up in greater detail in the final section of this chapter together with findings on information seeking from the field of study and career choice.

3.1 Information

The ways in which information is conceptualised vary in the research literature depending on theoretical and disciplinary approaches (see Buckland, 1991; Capurro & Hjørland, 2003) and I have striven to identify ways of understanding the term that are useful for this study. From an individual perspective, information in relation to knowledge building or knowledge transformation, emerges as a phenomenon characterised by its novelty and relevance to a particular situation and can be understood as that which makes a difference to what the information seeker knows or which influences his or her actions. This suggests a selective and intentional information user interacting with and interpreting information as subjectively understood entities in order to learn and/or progress towards the attainment of goals. In the thesis it encompasses the idea of information as any facts, perspectives, opinions, advice, experiences and ideas understood by the individual as relevant to study and occupational choice-making, irrespective of the format and the type of source. Information resources therefore include factual knowledge, stories, myths, morals, values, norms, etc. However, although this view foregrounds the individual perspective it tends to detach information from the contexts in which it is sought and to downplay the significance of interaction with others in the negotiation of the meaning and relevance of information to a particular situation or problem. This is a point which Dervin (1983) brought into prominent view in her criticism of individual centred research approaches. Interest in the embeddedness of information related activities in the contexts that give rise to them resulted in the biannual Information Seeking in Context (ISIC) conferences that got underway in 1996 and to which numerous information scientists have contributed with research investigating the interdependence of context and information seeking. Solomon, in addressing the issue, refers to the ‘discovery of information in context’, thus underlining a process view of information as an interaction “constructed through involvement in life’s activities, problems, tasks, and sociological and technological structures” (2002:229). Information is thus seen to ‘become’ and to gain meaning as people interact with each other and with their environment. The discovery view of information also permits questions concerning
the use, or lack of use, of information systems because it allows the researcher to focus on the differences between:

what information professionals label as information (...) and what becomes information as people move through life and interact socially as they discover what they need to know to function. (Solomon, 2002:230)

In the thesis information is conceptualised as something that does not speak for itself or exist independently of people but is seen as a contextualised phenomenon created and given meaning by people in interaction with each other in specific historically, socially and culturally determined environments including that of the life-world.

3.2 Information seeking in everyday life

After reviewing the development of research in information seeking and uses over fifty years Wilson was struck by the fact that much earlier research is today irrelevant because it focused on how now obsolete information systems were used. He drew the conclusion that:

All information-seeking behaviour is learnt, nothing is innate; even the ways in which informal communication networks are used to get information must be learnt through the normal interaction by which we all learn to function in a community. (Wilson, T., 1994:42)

Here, Wilson draws attention to the fact that interaction with others in seeking information is not entirely an intuitive process to be taken for granted. A series of ethnographic studies on the information behaviour of marginalised groups in society conducted by Elfreda Chatman, however, reveals the complexity of “normal interaction” and what it means to function in a community. Chatman (2000) suggests that information seeking could usefully be studied as constructs or models of ways to solve problems within particular social settings; that is as practices or patterns of behaviour that people in general take for granted as normal procedure. Information seeking as an everyday practice has been researched both empirically and theoretically although not extensively and in the following sections some of these studies are taken up in order to view how such practices can be described and how they might work in everyday life.

Chatman (1992; 1996; 1999; 2000) found that people’s information related activities often appear as self evident and habitualised patterns of behaviour which

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6 This suggests that education can support people in developing adequate and appropriate ways and means of seeking information. The work of Carol Kuhlthau (1993), for example, in developing the information seeking process model focuses precisely on this issue.
are considered appropriate and normative by members of specific social and cultural worlds, “small worlds”, and which are sufficient for the demands of a normal, expected course of events in the everyday world. However, situations may arise where normative patterns of information seeking are not adequate, for example, for addressing critical events such as illness or unexpected changes in one’s environment. Chatman’s study of the information seeking activities of women prisoners reveals how these women adapted their information seeking practices to fit in better with the “small world” of prison life. She observed how newly interned women faced the challenge of this uprooting and extreme change in their lives by attempting to ascertain reliable sources of information and appropriate ways of connecting with such sources and concluded:

…information seeking is really a performance. It carries a specific narrative that is easily adaptable to the expectations and needs of members of a small world. It also has a certain form. In this situation the form is interpersonal, and for the most part is being used by insiders to illustrate ways of assimilating one’s personal world to the world of prison life. (Chatman, 1999:208)

Chatman observed that information seeking in these circumstances was a highly contextualised, interactive and symbolic process enacted to allow the individual to discern appropriate information sources and through interaction with them to understand and adapt to the norms and values that govern such a world; that is, construct a new and more appropriate model of behaviour. Furthermore, information seeking assisted new prisoners in the construction of an appropriate “self” in a community of others; so they can get by in a world governed by a system of related values and norms that are unlike those of the worlds the women were used to before incarceration. Information seeking is thus seen as a performance enacted to establish or maintain a position as a “normal” person within a particular “small world” with its own social hierarchy and socially approved sources of information. Chatman advocates that research focus on the critical issues of life and how they are negotiated, because it is in these instances that normative patterns of information behaviour may prove inadequate, where reliable sources of information are difficult to discern and approach, and where people most need support. Research that increases awareness of ways of seeking and using information in critical issues, or in the case of this study, transitions from school to further studies or working life, can thus prove an alternative or complementary means of finding ways and methods to support individual information seeking.

In the excerpt above, Chatman describes information seeking as a process embedded in interpersonal communication and which can be used to establish one’s position or belonging in specific social settings (or small worlds) or to illustrate that one acts, or wishes to act, in accordance with established norms of behaviour. In effect, information seeking has a symbolic value that demonstrates
the actor’s concern to understand either the context in which he/she finds himself, or the context where others are situated. Information seeking from this standpoint can be seen as a sense-making social activity enacted within social groups where the meaning and relevance of information is negotiated between members. Information seeking can thus involve coming to terms with the implicit knowledge that is built into a community’s culture, conventions, systems, ways of doing things, artefacts, vocabulary, and style. Information seeking is therefore not viewed primarily as a quest for truth or certainty in any issue or situation but as a test of the usefulness of information for particular purposes and if it will give the individual or group a fair chance of achieving their aims (Schutz, 1964a; Sundin & Johannisson, 2005).

Chatman’s findings were based on her studies of marginalised groups in society, which were characterised by their suspicion of public authorities and their information systems. Savolainen (1995) compared the information seeking practices of workers and teachers. Building on empirical evidence and using Bourdieu’s theory of habitus and the concepts of social and cultural capital, he developed a model of everyday life information seeking (ELIS). In his study he observed that source preferences and information seeking practices were generally, although not solely, guided by factors such as social class which provide basic models for typical ways of approaching everyday problems. Savolainen argues that these information seeking practices were used as a means of either maintaining and demonstrating “a way of life” or for gaining “mastery of life,” i.e. striving to keep one’s life in order. ‘Mastery of life’ includes the routine monitoring of events in the life-world that might affect personal interests and require the individual’s attention and/or response. Savolainen found that differences in the styles of approach to information seeking in everyday life also depended to a certain extent on the nature and complexity of the problem tackled. However, he concluded that social class was a major determinant of the information related practices people develop in everyday life; i.e. which newspapers one reads to keep up to date, which ‘social types’ of people one consults on an everyday basis. Using level of education as a determinant of social class he found that the well-educated are more active in seeking information, had greater access to and made more determined use of experts and professionals and used more varied sources, generally. However, he concluded that social class was not the sole determinant of information seeking behaviour and he advocated the development of more holistic research frameworks that take account of the interaction of social and cultural factors together with situational and personal factors. His study suggests that the same patterns of information related activities will emerge for young people from different socioeconomic classes as for adults in everyday contexts. He also emphasises that information seeking in everyday life cannot be totally separated from information seeking in other contexts, such as working life; they tend to overlap, for example, in most circumstances the choice of information sources is steered by the principle of least effort. The different spheres of the social world intersect naturally in a life-world perspective and young people in the process of making choices about their
futures can be viewed as standing in the intersections between everyday life, school and working life, a position which may have implications for their approaches to information seeking.

3.2.1 Information seeking practices

Of course not all information seeking can be described as culturally symbolic activities and Savolainen (1995) describes two major dimensions of everyday information seeking; practical information seeking for finding answers to specific questions or solutions for more complex problems, and seeking orienting information that concerns keeping an eye on current events and happenings in the world around. In the latter respect, he found that people will use the information sources and channels that they are familiar with and that have worked for them in similar situations and that seem self-evident to them. Researchers within Library and Information Science are not alone in drawing attention to the regularised ways in which people select and take in information. Festinger (1964) and Giddens (1991) for example, both describe how individuals establish an order that guides their choice of information and sources, not only in order to avoid potentially disturbing information but also to create a kind of ‘ontological security’ (Giddens, 1991:188) by regularising their contact with mediated information. Giddens refers to such practices as an active accomplishment in the phenomenal world. The degree to which people are open to knowledge dissonance and new forms of knowledge varies, of course, with individuals. The information practices that people develop also facilitate active information seeking and, as Williamson (1998) for example found in the case of elderly citizens, serve both as a routine means of monitoring their worlds as well as a way of discovering information that they were not always aware that they had needed. Perusal of daily newspapers as well as conversations with family and friends are examples of information related activities that combine the maintenance of order in the individual’s life and a means of active information seeking on specific issues.

Another information related practice is to allow oneself to be identified as an information seeker, for example, by visiting likely ‘information grounds’ (Pettigrew, 1999; Fisher & Naumer, 2006). These are places such as hospital waiting rooms, online forums, school common-rooms and classrooms and other types of meeting places, where information can be sought and shared in both spontaneous and planned ways. The people who meet in information grounds tend to belong to different social categories i.e.; the case that Pettigrew (1999) takes up is a foot clinic where there are nurses and experts, as well as patients, both seniors and newcomers. A characteristic of information grounds is that they are places where people meet not with the primary intention of seeking information but where conversations and dialogues generate information in the course of activities. Solomon (2002) conceptualises the information seeker as a social navigator or discoverer active within a given social framework in a given time, encountering and discovering information as he or she learns and makes sense of the world. This
means that information is seldom truly ‘discovered’ as an objective thing but is related to a personal system of relevance and is generated in interaction with others; such an interaction would, of course, be facilitated through the access to information grounds. Several researchers have also observed that people often encounter information that they understand might be useful to others and to which they alert them (eg. Williamson, 1998; Ross, 1999; Erdelez & Rioux, 2000; McKenzie, 2003a).

People can also actively avoid seeking information. Chatman’s studies (1992; 1996; 2000) reveal that in some situations people can feel threatened, not by information as such but in making connections with it. In one study (1992) she found, for example, that the elderly residents of a retirement home were afraid of asking for medical advice because their questions might reveal that they were unable to cope with life without assistance, which was one of the requirements for living in the home. Seeking information may, in fact, reveal one’s vulnerability and have negative consequences that for the individual outweigh its potential value. This suggests that in sensitive situations the exchange or generation of information is to some extent dependent on trustful relationships. Sundin and Johannisson discuss the consequences of regarding information seeking as a process of social interaction for the way in which we view the seeker and reach the following conclusion:

In this way the image of the independent and rational information seeker is problematized and instead the user emerges, active in a social and cultural situation, although partly steered by the norms, values and expectations of that situation. (Sundin & Johannisson, 2005:37-8)

Information practices have also been studied in work settings (Sundin, 2003), as well as in the transition from higher education to work (Hedman & Moring, 2007). In these studies it was found that norms, values and practices developed within occupations tend to guide action and that the information systems in use are usually well established together with the routines built around their use. However, it is not always easy for novices to discern a profession’s norms, values or to understand its practices. As Sundin (2003) found in his study of nurses’ information strategies, the norms and values embedded in an occupation’s ways of doing things are complex and may even be conflict with each other. Furthermore, Sundin found that nurses use accounts of information seeking symbolically to establish and define their occupational identity, their own positions within the nursing profession, for example as academically or practically oriented, as well as to define their own profession in relation to that of physicians. Sundin’s study is of interest to the study at hand for two main reasons; one is its examination of information related activities as a practice used to define occupational identity and the other is its view of the context–bound nature of information seeking.
3.2.2 Information seeking and self concepts

A number of research studies on young people refer to further dimensions of information seeking beyond topic interest and source preferences. Furie and Kruger (1995), for example, point to the affective, cognitive and physiological aspects of information seeking meaning that young people seek information to support self actualisation, self esteem, and personal security. Agosto and Hughes-Hassell, building on developmental theory, conclude that everyday information seeking by young people is used to help them understand their own positions in the world as well as “helping them to understand themselves now and to contemplate who they aspire to be in the future” (2006a:1399).

In her study of young people’s participation in a Swedish virtual community from an information seeking perspective, Södergård (2007) found that effective participation depended to some extent on how participants presented themselves and established their identities. What is interesting about this study is that it reveals the type of social interaction that Chatman describes in the case of new women prisoners (see section 3.2) but in a virtual environment. Södergård found that the construction of personal presentations was carried out in conformity with the criteria for acceptable presentations established by the community, which involved a certain amount of evaluative information seeking, for example, by reading and assessing other presentations before composing one’s own. Members also engaged in keeping track of one another and defining their own position in relation to others through their information related activities. This included keeping track of people they knew and checking on people whom they did not know by monitoring the social networks they participated in as well as monitoring their contributions to the community. Information could be verified through the friends themselves in real life and through corroboration with other friends in the community. Checking on unknown contributors proved more demanding although it was sometimes possible to check on newcomers through mutual acquaintances made visible though the social networks described in the community by its members. By joining or being excluded from the unofficial clubs facilitated by the community the participants were not only saying something about whom they would like to be friends with but were also informed if their own claims were acceptable or not to other club members. The community worked, in other words, as an arena where identity claims were integral. Claims could be confirmed or rejected and through them members could position themselves in relation to others. This was enacted through three major questions; “Who am I?” “Who are they?” and “What is our relationship?” Södergård accords information seeking a fundamental role within the community as a means of strengthening self-concept, of establishing and confirming identity and as a means of defining social relations with others.

These studies reveal seeking information as a complex form of social interaction and they suggest that accounts of information seeking have much to say about the lifeworld of the individual. Accounts of information seeking derive in part from the internalisation and reinterpretation of collective cultural schemes
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where the actor is seen as a carrier of a variety of patterns or models for action\(^7\). On the verge of leaving school it is likely that the information seeking activities young people engage in, as well as their accounts of such activities, will be intertwined to some extent with their notions of who they are, how they would like to be seen and who they would like to become as they prepare to meet new challenges and create a new position for themselves in the social world.

### 3.2.3 Information seeking as discursive constructive action

The studies taken up so far reveal how regularised, normative approaches to everyday information seeking are part of the ways in which social worlds are held together. Discursive approaches to information seeking penetrate deeper into the dialogic processes involved in everyday information seeking. Research based on investigations of personal accounts of information seeking reveal both the range of information practices, including non-active information seeking, that people engage in as well as demonstrating how individuals use their information seeking activities to make claims about themselves in relation to spheres of interest and to others. Such accounts have been investigated within LIS as discursive constructive action (Given, 2002; McKenzie 2002; Talja, 1997; Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997; Tuominen, 2004). Focus in this approach is on the public and social use of information rather than its cognitive use, because of, as several LIS researchers point out, the difficulties for the researcher in investigating the private and subjective use of information (Hjørland and Albrechtsen, 1995; Tuominen & Savolainen, 1997; Wilson & Walsh, 1996). Tuominen & Savolainen (1997) conceptualise information use, in part, as the dialogic construction of information in conversations and personal accounts where phenomena or activities are described in particular ways in order to fulfil certain purposes. When people dialogically construct versions of reality in conversations the researcher can observe information being put to use, for instance, in the ways in which arguments are constructed, modified or demolished and where the authority and evaluation of sources are used and questioned in order to provide evidence of the legitimacy of one’s stance in an issue (McKenzie, 2002; Tuominen, 2004). Using a discourse approach Tuominen shows, for instance, how a heart patient accounted for his use of information sources, such as medical textbooks, to signal the authenticity of his knowledge of heart surgery and also to position himself as a person capable of understanding complicated literature designed for experts by experts. Similarly, McKenzie (2003b) reveals how expectant mothers use accounts of their information seeking efforts to establish themselves as responsible, alert and responsive to appropriate types of information and information sources concerning

\(^7\) A concrete example is provided by the American politician Barack Obama’s account of his efforts to take on the identity of a young black American by searching TV, film, and the radio for cultural characteristics to appropriate; “Pop culture was colour-coded, after all, an arcade of images from which you could cop a walk, a talk, a step, a style. I couldn’t croon like Marvin Gaye, but I could learn to dance all the *Soul Train* steps. I couldn’t pack a gun like Shaft or Superfly, but I could sure enough curse like Richard Pryor (Obama, 2007).
pregnancy. Her study reveals how the authority of, for example, health information can be questioned on a discursive level in order to justify participants’ own activities.

McKenzie (2003a) developed a two dimensional model of everyday-life information practices, a term she uses to cover different modes of information seeking such as the active seeking, active scanning, and non-directed monitoring of information including being identified by others as an information seeker. The model depicts how people in everyday life connect and interact with information sources. In her study accounts of making connections cover descriptions of the barriers met by women pregnant with twins or the specific practices involved while trying to identify and make contact with potentially interesting sources (or being identified by others as potentially interested). These include accounts of attempts, successful or otherwise, to make connections with experts. Accounts of interacting with sources describe practices and barriers involved during actual encounters with information sources. As Moring (2006) points out, the model describes information seeking as participation in a specific ‘community of practice’ where a mutual engagement concerning issues of pregnancy forms the nodal point around which the meaning of information is negotiated and through the use of which pregnant women prepare themselves for assuming the identity of worthy mothers of twins and where common perspectives of what it means to be pregnant with twins are developed.

Everyday information seeking can be described as an umbrella term that covers the regularised practices developed within social groups for scanning, actively seeking, and avoiding information, and for being identified as an information seeker. Such activities are socially and culturally embedded, they are learned through interaction with others and they are used not only to generate information relevant to the actor’s situation but also as a means of orienting in the world, gaining control over one’s life and to demonstrate one’s position in the world. The studies taken up above were not based on investigations of the information related activities of young people although I make the assumption that the concepts developed through them are equally applicable to their activities. The participants in this study are 18-19 years of age; that is, they are adults although still at school. Relevant research on the information related activities of both young people and adults are therefore intertwined in the following sections together with discussions on concepts such as relevance, cognitive authority and information literacy in relation to young people’s information seeking.

3.3 Relevance assessment and the evaluation of information

Given that the amount of formal information intended to support young people in career planning is considerable, and is also in some cases, aggressively marketed by a number of providers an issue central to the thesis is that of relevance – how do people select from and navigate through the available information, what criteria do
they use when assigning value or interest to information? Studies with departure points in the information needs of young people have resulted in a number of general topic categories that young people seek information about (Poston-Anderson & Edwards, 1993; Latrobe & Havener, 1997; Shenton & Dixon, 2003; Agosto & Hughes-Hassell, 2006a). Categories include consumer information, health information, information for schoolwork and leisure interests as well as information regarding life concerns, such as interpersonal relations and existential issues. Future planning involving seeking study and occupation related information is common to all the typologies arrived at in the above studies. It can therefore be assumed that it is a topic of at least general interest to most young people. The relevance of study and career information to young people at this level can be described as pre-constituted and imposed on the individual by an expectant society. Schutz (1964b:254) argues that although the individual will find it difficult to ignore what a society has deemed relevant to a particular groups’ interests, he/she can choose for himself the degree to which he can live up to societal expectations and can establish “his own private order of relevances”. How young people rank the of relevance of study and careers information on a subjective level is closely intertwined with how they define their own situations in a life-world where they are members of many social groups and of which “school-leavers” is only one.

Issues of relevance have been central to Library and Information Science research, a fact to which Saracevic’s (1975) and Mizzarro’s (1997) reviews of the literature bear witness. Relevance assessment is intrinsically intertwined with information seeking and the evaluation of information, so much so that it is difficult to separate the concepts. Mizzarro distinguishes between approaches to the concept of relevance as it is used in information system development as a measure of system effectiveness, and as it is used in approaches that define the concept as a subjective evaluation made by the user in specific contexts. It is in this latter sense that the idea is taken up here. Schutz (1962:227) argues that in a particular moment of space and time we are not equally interested in all the aspects of an issue but only in those aspects that we think have the potential to influence the results of our actions, or bring to bear on prognoses we have made, or which will help us realize our projects. Relevant information is that which is useful to our purposes in a particular project and its assessment is a human, ongoing everyday practice. It can be described as a dynamic process of subjective judgements made by the individual and which relates to previous experience and to his or her intentions and goals while seeking information.

This approach to relevance as an individual and subjective assessment has been used by several researchers within the field; for example, Kuhlthau (1993) uses this interpretation of the concept in a constructivist framework to reveal the dynamic nature of the information-seeking process where relevance assessments change as the seeker gradually builds up a greater understanding of a school assignment. Anderson (2005) discusses relevance as a process in itself that “unfolds in the doing of research” where “trigger words” built up during the research process and connected not only to topicality but to authors, journals, ideas, or recommendations.
by colleagues, alert the researcher to potentially useful texts where relevance assessments are not only subjectively individual but mediated through participation in collegial research practices. Anderson refers to relevance assessments as an aspect of a focused learning process, which concerns not only the “aboutness” of information but also the degree to which it is socially acknowledged, approved and verified. In discussing the criteria by which people judge the relevance of information in an everyday setting Chatman found that: “It [information] means nothing at all if it is not part of a system of related ideas, expectations, standards, and values” (Chatman, 1999:215). These views emphasise that relevance assessments are part of complex processes of information seeking and use that are embedded in a stratified social world.

Ross Todd (1999), using a constructive cognitive approach, found that young people related the relevance of information on heroin use to their personal experiences and interests thus using information not only to increase their understanding of the dangers of drug abuse but also to define their own position in a wider picture of drug use. In their study of young people’s use of other people as sources of information, Shenton and Dixon (2003) refer not only to primary assessments of the aboutness of information but also to an almost simultaneous process involving other people in the reinterpretation, verification and supplementation of information. In addition, they found that in interacting with others in evaluating information the young people in their study were also seeking encouragement and given advice in ways that supported both self and world understanding. This finding is corroborated in the case of adults by Julien and Mitchels, (2000) who found that in cases where people needed insight into complex or ill-defined issues they inquired into the experiences of others and preferred to have those experiences mediated in an affectively comforting manner. The studies taken up above indicate that the assessment of the relevance of information is a complex social practice whose outcome is the result of interactive, interpersonal processes. Taken together the relevance of information to human endeavour can be described as dynamic and contextual, and the value of its ‘aboutness’ is determined through social interaction; that is, through where it comes from and the degree to which significant others approve it.

3.3.1 Assessing literature and web-sites

So far the use of sources of information other than people has been mentioned only briefly in connection with the information related practices that people develop in order to monitor their worlds and maintain order in their lives. As Case (2002: 289) points out in his research overview the use of print and electronic sources and rationalised searches, “reflect only one side of human information behaviour”. However, much of the study and occupational information in the Swedish system has been gathered and organised in various web-sites and web-portals and made accessible through school web-sites. Study and occupational literature is also available in schools and large quantities of brochures are sent home to school
leavers in their final year of school, primarily from institutions of further and higher education. Research that investigates the role of these types of sources and how their relevance is evaluated is therefore of interest.

In 2005 over 80% of people in Sweden between the ages of 16-24 had access to the Internet in their homes (Statistics Sweden, 2006). It might be assumed that it is regarded as an important source of information although it has been found that it does not replace face-to-face meetings with people as a primary source of information (Savolainen, 1999; Savolainen & Kari, 2004). On the other hand, given that many young people value written texts as means of gaining private access to information (Pinsent, 1996) it seems reasonable to assume that the Internet is a primary source of information on matters which people find difficult to broach in face-to-face encounters. This is also indicated by the popularity of health information on the Internet (Wikgren, 2002; Marshall & Williams, 2006). However, Marshall and Williams found that their participants lacked confidence in their own ability to evaluate health information and relied on pre-selection by authoritative sources such as health professionals and libraries. This finding suggests that young people might be inclined to trust in study and career information collected for them in websites by acknowledged professionals, but at the same time other studies indicate people’s preferences for seeking information directly through interaction with other people. Savolainen found in a study from 2001 that discussion groups on consumer issues contained a large percentage of factual and advisory information based on the personal experience and knowledge of individual subscribers. However, he also found that subscribers received conflicting information and advice, that many discussions were never resolved and that participants seldom entered into constructive dialogues around the information offered. Why people do not take this kind of opportunity for dialogue was not explored but it is certainly an interesting issue with implications for how we value and use Internet forums.

There is not a great deal of research concerning young people’s information seeking activities outside of school-work although some of this research includes information seeking for leisure interests and in everyday life. Watson (1999), Enochsson (2000) and Bergman (1998), for example, found that many of the young people in their studies, particularly boys, exhibited great self confidence in their use of computers, they seldom asked for help and believed that they could find what they were looking for. However, the researchers also found that there was no relation between self confidence in computer use and success in information seeking as far as school-work was concerned. Also Fidel et al. (1999) found that upper secondary pupils tended to be convinced that they had found, or could find, all they required for school-work on the World Wide Web. If they could not find what they were looking for, they assumed it did not exist. Problems young people had in seeking information via the Internet were connected with a lack of prior knowledge of the topic they were investigating, which meant in practice, that they were unaware of appropriate search terms.
Agosto (2002) found that the teenage girls in her study evaluated the information they found on websites differently depending on how the information was to be used; for school-work or leisure interests. The respondents did not discuss aspects of the authority of information for either school-work or leisure interests, a finding corroborated in Shenton & Dixon’s (2004) more extensive study as well as in a recent British study (CIBER, 2008). The primary evaluation criterion in most studies was the topicality of content, a criterion which applies equally to printed resources. Agosto (2002) found that the limited life experiences of her young respondents restricted their ability to comprehend ideas embedded within informational works. An advantage that several respondents referred to was the physical accessibility of the Internet, both that it could be accessed from a number of locations and in the sense that information could be collected in one space for later use. Findings from a number of studies also indicate that many young people are unfamiliar with IT tools and terminology (Bilal, 2000; Kafai & Bates, 1997; Schacter et al. 1998; Watson, 1998; Alexandersson & Limberg, 2004; Shenton & Dixon, 2004, CIBER, 2008).

Young people seem to more successful in seeking current information on topics that interest them personally, not only because they have prior knowledge that assists them in selecting appropriate search terms but also because, as Shenton and Dixon (2004) point out, they develop habits and routines in accessing information from sources they know will be of help to them. They found that participants consulted few but favoured sources, such as specific websites or new issues of electronic magazines in order to keep up to date in topics that interested them. In relation to these observations Agosto (2002) found that the young participants in her study preferred not to follow links in websites but to use selected sets of favourite sites or to rely on the recommendations and referrals of others on issues that interested them. This is perhaps a sensible course of action in view of the technical hitches often associated with attempts to follow links. On the other hand, this type of regularising of information seeking activities reveals how information practices develop and to a certain extent imply that once “favourite” sources have been established there might also be a tendency to accept their contents unreflectively. In the main, these studies add further emphasis to the idea of information seeking as habitualised patterns of dealing with mediated information developed within different types of social groups (Savolainen, 1995) and suggest that the routines and practices people develop for seeking information are grounded early in life.

3.3.2 Information overload

The ways in which people deal with an abundance or overload of information have also been considered in the research and there is little support that decision-makers base their decisions on a thorough evaluation of all the available information. In his overview of the research on information overload Case concludes: “As the number of information items increase – or as the amount of available time decreases –
people resort to simpler and less reliable rules for making choices to shorten their search time (Case, 2002:82). Wilson indeed asks “for who or what says that all relevant information must be simultaneously considered at every point on the way toward a conclusion? Cannot one have preliminary views based on partial information?” (Wilson, 1995:49). Simon contends that when alternatives and their attributes are multiple we “satisfice by looking at alternatives in such a way that we can generally find an acceptable one after only a moderate search” (Simon, 1996:139). Wilson (1995) found that people do not aim at being particularly efficient in the sense that their decisions will reflect all the available information. In cases of overload we adjust, we redefine situations so that less information is required, we change our understanding of what is relevant and settle for using what we have at hand and what we have time to search for – providing we know where to search. We may find relevant information too late in order to be able to do anything about it or to allow it to make a difference, or information is found relevant but put aside to an indeterminate time in the future when we imagine we will have time to deal with it. To be effective in work or research situations Wilson (1995) concludes that a policy of deliberate and selective information seeking is, in fact, to be recommended.

Wilson (1995) also observed that the relevance of information may go unseen because individuals hold assumptions that prevent them from becoming aware of whole categories of potentially useful information. Assumptions in the context of this study, for example, might concern notions of different professions or trends that popularise some occupations at the expense of others. Assumptions may even be deliberately adopted in order to make headway in choosing between options by eliminating some of them. Wilson discusses the effects of information overload on relevance judgements in complex work assignments – that the individual may choose to redefine the situation thus effectively reducing the quantity of information required to resolve a work task. Information may be discovered too late in a decision-making process for it to make a difference even though it may well have been relevant at an earlier stage. Information may be put aside as potentially useful for later reading – but not just now. It may be ignored because it is too difficult to deal with or understand or because the individual is too occupied with other issues when it is encountered. Wilson distinguishes between the conscious neglect of relevant information and unconscious neglect such as the failure to recognise relevant information, forgetfulness or the unavailability of useful information (Wilson, 1995). Furthermore, just because something is relevant does not mean that it needs to be used, as Wilson states, you can have preliminary views on a matter based on partial information and it might indeed be more efficient means of getting things done. Such aspects on non-use of what, in an objective sense, seems to be potentially useful information reveal the inadequacy of a simplistic notion that non-use of information depends on either its irrelevance to the topic at hand, or on user inadequacies. Although Wilson bases his discussion on observations in work settings there are some comparison points between complex work tasks and the task of evaluating options and making decisions concerning
study and career choice. For instance, deadlines exist in both cases, tasks tend to run parallel with other tasks and events, career planning is a task susceptible to redefinition, where priorities can change and so forth.

There is no shortage of careers and study information in Sweden – around university application deadlines television, the press and the Internet abound with information, prognoses and advertisements and young people are more likely to suffer from information overload than from anxiety caused by a lack of information. The nature of the decisions and choices to be made will also have an impact on how informed the individual desires to be. Decisions that are reversible, such as the decision to apply to a university programme, might not be as well-founded as decisions that are binding such as buying a ticket to Australia together with a friend. Should travel plans fall through a casually researched but successful application to university might well save the day, at least in a short-term perspective. Although many young people will have the ambition to be well-informed in their choices the task itself may prove more than daunting unless they have, and understand the need for, reliable methods for selection and evaluation or, alternatively they have support in their social networks for whatever decisions they make.

3.4 Determining the authority of information

The term cognitive authority was used by Wilson (1983) to signify the relationship between two people where one of them is regarded as an authority in some issue of interest to the other. The issue of where to turn to find out about things we need to know and how we validate the information we find has been central to information science. The social distribution of knowledge requires us to develop strategies for finding out what we need to know from others and for discriminating between sources. The weight we accord the sources we discern as authorities depends not only on the type of source but on a number of interrelated factors such as acknowledged expertise on a particular subject, how well we know the source, the strength of, as well as the reasons behind, our desire to know and the degree to which the source is socially approved. Schutz argues that the power of social approbation is particularly great within the life-world because of the fact that it is often invisible and unarticulated:

> The power of socially approved knowledge is so extended that what the whole in-group approves – ways of thinking and acting, such as mores, folkways, habits – is simply taken for granted; it becomes an element of the relatively natural concept of the world, although the source of such knowledge remains entirely hidden in its anonymity. (Schutz, 1964c:133)

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8 Tuominen and Savolainen (1997) refer to ‘knowledge entitlement’ in much the same way. The term cognitive authority is somewhat unwieldy and better might be found but I prefer not to take up this discussion here.
Young people in the situation of leaving school are in a setting where one might assume that issues of cognitive authority figure prominently. The effects of globalisation on the labour market, the development of new occupations and spheres of work together with high rates of unemployment for young people, the effects of labour market policies and changes within it, and the fragmentisation of higher education into flexible, interchangeable study programmes create a complex situation where the significance of approachable, trustworthy and accessible sources of information seem indisputable. Yet Schutz’ comment above implies that people will continue to trust the sources they use out of habit and routine even if when asked, they might find it difficult to account for.

As Wilson (1983: 124) points out, the world is full of others willing to instruct us and influence our decisions, and this may well be particularly the case for young people on the verge of leaving school. Cognitive authority, Wilson maintains, is awarded those people or sources that the individual deems credible and trustworthy and to whom they will turn for advice, opinions and knowledge in some particular sphere and in all, they are those people or sources whom we allow to influence what we think. Influence in this sense refers to changes in the individuals’ behaviour or practices brought about by the anticipated responses of others (Dawson & Chatman, 2001). Savolainen (1995) found that people tend to be consulted in their different roles; as family members, friends, experts, information professionals, etc. He found that well-educated people were more inclined to consult experts and professionals than workers were and this finding has implications for young people who might be expected to have limited connections, at least in working life, or have recourse mostly to family connections in a socially stratified environment.

Chatman (1999) has further contributed to the idea of cognitive authority in the development of the theory of information poverty. Her studies imply that people are reluctant to lose their reliance on the shared beliefs, values and perspectives developed within their own cultural and social boundaries, or “small worlds” even to the extent that they will shield themselves from information originating outside their own everyday environment even if this information has the potential to help them. The cost of seeking or taking advantage of potentially valuable information is deemed too high if it entails breaking with the codes of behaviour established in the particular context of individual lives. Her findings referred primarily to people in marginalised communities where suspicion of authorities tends to be great. However, her small-world theory has also been found to work as a means of understanding information behaviour in an organisational context (Huotari & Chatman, 2001).

Wilson discusses potential problems in using people we know well as sources of information and points out that the people we know best tend to have similar outlooks on life through shared social location: “The people we know best tend to be much like ourselves and generalisation from what our friends think to what people in general think is sure to go wrong” (Wilson, 1983:16). Cross et al. (2001) investigated the benefits of seeking information informally from friends in an
organisational context and found that friends tend to have a similarity of attitudes and behaviour towards work tasks and information technology and thereby reinforce each others’ activities. However, they conclude:

if people tend to overemphasise their friends when conceptualising and validating problems and solutions, they will be limited by the fact that the same information and perspectives are already shared and well known among friends. As a result, problem resolution will not benefit from the different perspectives, novel knowledge, or remote expertise that might come from others not so well known. (Cross et al., 2001:444)

Johnson (2004:2) further problemises this issue with findings which suggest that “the use of people as information sources is not necessarily an easy option”. Using the theory of ‘strong ties/weak ties’, (Granovetter, 1973) she found that difficulties arise when people seek new perspectives or expert advice and need to consult those whom they judge to have better resources than they have themselves, perhaps in the form of a better education, a high status occupation or more diverse experiences. Such people, that is, ‘weak ties’, tend to be located outside the information seeker’s own social location, usually on a higher level in the social hierarchy. This explains why gaining access to useful information may come at the cost of personal effort and sometimes the cost may prove too great, particularly when, in addition, the source is not socially approved by those whose cultural and social values we share (Chatman, 1992; 1996). As Cross et al. (2001) and many other researchers have found, people on each level in a hierarchy tend to be drawn to each other and possess similar resources, i.e. people prefer to interact with those that they perceive are like themselves and strong ties develop between them. Strong ties link people with similar resources both in an abstract and material sense, therefore they have to utilise ‘weak ties’ if they need to access resources outside their social group. The problem lies in the fact that different resources tend not only to be found outside one’s social group but also on a different level of the social hierarchy – and people in general prefer to reach upwards rather than downwards to access new resources. Chatman (1999) emphasises that for everyday needs people in problematic situations will always turn to those closest to them and either observe or ask how they deal with similar situations. It is when something new crops up that one might discover that the resources of the social group one adheres to is not adequate to one’s new needs. It is at this point that people need to turn to weak ties to access better quality resources and in order to do this a price has to be paid in the form of psychological effort and feelings of uncertainty as to the outcome of one’s effort (Johnson, 2004).

It comes therefore as no surprise that it is common to all findings from studies on young people’s information seeking that they predominantly use other people as sources of information (Latrobe & Havener, 1997; Poston-Anderson & Edwards,
Research findings indicate that parents and friends are the most important and used sources of information (e.g. Chen & Hernon, 1982; Edwards & Poston-Anderson, 1996; Shenton & Dixon, 2003). Furthermore, Edwards and Poston-Anderson found in their study of 12-14 year old girls that they turned firstly to their mothers, more seldom to their fathers and rarely to their friends, in matters connected with future occupations. Although the practice of consulting other people was found to be, by and large, effective in these research studies, potential problems were also discerned by the researchers. In a British study, Shenton and Dixon (2003), for example, found that young people tended to overestimate adult’s expertise or knowledge depth on particular issues or they had difficulties in discerning the appropriate people to ask about specific questions.

The advantages of using trusted other people as sources of information are, however, considerable from an individual perspective. They are usually conveniently accessible, particularly parents and siblings; they may be in comparable positions, for example friends and school-friends; and they may have expert inside knowledge on topics of interest, for example, teachers or relatives in specific occupations. People are more flexible than brochures or search engines when queried. They are also the sources that can best offer appropriate encouragement and emotional support in connection with any information they can offer (Julien, 1999; Shenton & Dixon, 2003; 2004). From the perspective of cognitive authority their authority seems to lie more in implicit trustful relationships; that young people will turn for information, in the first hand, to people whom they know care about their welfare.

Cognitive authority has also been studied from a discursive perspective (McKenzie, 2003b) with a focus on how individuals discern, accept or dispute the authoritativeness of information sources in relation to the knowledge claims legitimised by members of specific groups. McKenzie explored the discursive techniques used by women pregnant with twins in enhancing or undermining the authority of peer and professional information sources. Two strategies used by the participants in the study were either to position themselves as unique individuals or as members of a collective of mothers of twins and then to use the positions they had established and other discursive techniques to make their views and actions seem reasonable to the interviewer and perhaps to themselves. For example, a position as a unique individual allowed participants to question the medical advice they perceived was aimed at a collective. The discursive aspect of the concept of cognitive authority demonstrates the practical techniques used to establish, accept or disregard claims of cognitive authority. McKenzie’s study demonstrates how particular discourses can position people in specific roles but also how creatively people can negotiate positioning in order to achieve their own objectives.
3.6 The information seeking process and information literacy

In the preceding sections information seeking emerges as a multifaceted, sociocultural activity intertwined with objectives beyond seeking specific answers to problems and everyday orientation in the lifeworld. Other research studies focus on information seeking as a dimension of learning processes bringing the concept of information literacy into view.

Kuhlthau (1993) developed a model of the information seeking process based originally on empirical studies of American high school students and information seeking related to problem-based assignments. The model describes the information seeking process in six stages and relates the seeker’s feelings, thoughts and activities to the different phases. In the first phase (task initiation) the task itself is presented to students as a task to be carried out independently within a specific subject area. Task initiation gives rise to feelings of uncertainty and apprehension as students try to comprehend what is expected of them and to define their options. In phase two (topic selection) students try to identify a topic to work on that is related to personal interests, the information available and which can be accomplished within the time available. This phase gives rise to feelings of elation and anticipation for the work ahead, once the topic is selected. It involves discussing possible topics with others, gaining an overview of possible information sources and attempts to create a general picture of the topic area by using general sources of information. This phase can also occasion feelings of increasing anxiety if students find it difficult to select a topic. Kuhlthau describes the third phase (pre-focus exploration) as the most difficult for many students because it involves settling on a subject and becoming informed on it to the extent that they can develop a personal point of view. Students may encounter problems in that information from different sources may be inconsistent or incompatible or perhaps not even available, or the information encountered may clash with pre-held conceptions and experiences. Confusion and frustration at this stage may lead to uncertainty and doubt and be combined with an inability to express, even to themselves, the precise nature of the information they require. The fourth stage (focus formulation) is for many, according to Kuhlthau, the turning point in the search process. Using the information they have gathered students move towards greater clarity and are able to formulate a focus for their work and to predict outcomes of possible alternatives. Focus, Kuhlthau argues, is likely to emerge gradually as students reflect on the ideas they encounter and discuss and write about them. As the topic becomes more and more personally relevant feelings of anxiety give way to feelings of increased confidence and the student is able to move on to the next stage in the process. The fifth stage (information collection) is characterised by a sense of direction as the student selects information pertinent to a formulated focus which in turn facilitates a more effective use of information systems and sources. The final stage (search closure), is characterised by feelings of relief if the search has gone well or of disappointment if it has not. The successful student is now prepared to organise his/her material and plan strategies on the basis...
of the selected information. The process itself is not necessarily linear but may loop back upon itself, for instance, if students change topics.

Kuhlthau’s model of the information seeking process was validated in subsequent studies of university students and in connection with work assignments (Kuhlthau, 1999). The study and work assignments involved covered relatively short time spans (a number of weeks) but the model has also been found relevant to longer term assignments such as doctoral studies (Seldén, 1999). The task of seeking information in relation to study and career choice is not as clearly defined as a school assignment or a work task with regard to deadlines and time frames. It may not even be perceived as a ‘task’ as such by the individual but it is possible to draw parallels between these different types of tasks. The goals of career guidance, for instance, emphasise the importance of formulating a goal and of predicting the outcomes of possible alternatives as well as of developing a personal point of view on future studies and occupations on the basis of personal experiences and current information (Lp 94:2.4). Kuhlthau describes information seeking as a process of ‘seeking meaning’ and as a pattern of experience that may be applicable to many situations, and it is therefore of interest in this study. The process itself has also a bearing on what we mean by information literacy and opens ways of supporting the development of information literacy.

Information literacy has been defined as a learning process through which the individual develops an effective relationship with the information resources of the lifeworld (Whitworth, 2007), and this is the definition I have found most useful for the thesis. The concept is multidimensional and encompasses the ability to seek and ascertain the value of information on symbolic, collective and practical levels in relation to the achievement of one’s purposes and the solution of problems that occur within the life-world. Information literacy is a concept that is usually characterised by the environment in which it emerges as a specific issue and which in turn leads to different emphases on its different dimensions. For example, when the concept is related to assignments in educational environments the ability to critically evaluate information and information sources is often emphasised in relation to the procedures of writing essays and reports. Bruce (2002) describes information literacy more specifically as the complex of different ways of interacting with information and includes the ability to use different strategies in seeking, critically evaluating and using information in various contexts, using a range of search tools and information formats. Lloyd (2006) includes a dimension of embodiment to information literacy as a result of her study of the working life of firefighters. She discerns information literacy in firefighters’ ability to observe and understand the information embedded in physical activities. She proposes an alternative way of thinking about information literacy as a meta-competency and defines information literacy as:

The ability to know what there is in a landscape and to draw meaning from this through engagement and experience with information. This ability arises from complex contextualised
Lloyd’s view bears strong similarity to Whitworth’s definition, where she defines the information literate person as one who is aware of and has an effective relationship with the information resources of a specific ‘landscape’, in this case the occupational world of firefighters. She emphasises that the workplace (or any other ‘landscape’) contains textual, social and physical information sources. The use of these sources implies an interaction aimed at facilitating efficient work routines and positive outcomes by developing common understandings of the nature and goals of given tasks and how they should be carried out.

This understanding of information literacy emphasises its contextual nature; that one is information literate about something or within a specific area. Tuominen, Savolainen and Talja (2005) define information literacy as a socio-technical practice thus emphasising the centrality of context in any understanding of the concept. It distinguishes it from information technology literacy i.e.: “The capabilities required for using technologies that deliver or contain ‘information’” (Bruce, 2002:2). Technical skills are an aspect of information literacy although their significance may vary depending on the context. A number of researchers emphasise the sociocultural dimensions of information seeking and this in turn has implications for how information literacy can be understood (Bruce, 2002; Holschuh Simmons, 2005; Tuominen et al. 2005; Sundin, 2005). Hjørland (2007: 1452), for example, maintains that information cannot be understood at the level of individual cognition because it arises “through ongoing interactions among members of a group” which implies that to be information literate entails this awareness; i.e. this is information or an interesting source of information for this particular group at this point in time. Hjørland’s view is particularly applicable to workplace environments where gaining an understanding of the information seeking practices developed by people at work tends to be one of the first tasks that newcomers have to engage in, albeit on a tacit level. Participating in the information seeking practices of a group concerns ways of social belonging as much as cognitive or technical skills. Although this might suggest that information practices developed in specific environments are peculiar to just those environments, information literacy implies the ability to recognise and participate in such practices and thus to master them. In this way information literacy is seen as connected not only to the micro-level of workplace or everyday practices, but also to broader sociocultural practices through the interconnections of contexts; it means not only the ability to participate in the information practices of a specific group but also, on a meta-level, to recognise those practices and how they differ between groups. In a life-world perspective information literacy can be seen as a means of facilitating participation and communication, as well as the achievement of goals, in the social world through a growing understanding of the rhetorical and symbolic practices of the field in which that information is embedded (Sundin, 2005; Holschuh Simmons, 2005).
Studies of the ways in which information is sought reveal that the information practices developed, for example, in educational contexts are not always effective in terms of intended outcomes, particularly when ways of thinking about information literacy are restricted to technical procedures. Lundh & Limberg (2008) focus in their study on how information seeking practices or routines developed in school environments influence how children think about and carry out information seeking in practice. In some situations information seeking may become a reflexive response to the structural problems that exist within different systems rather than a tool in effective responses to real problems. Sundin (2005) found that the pedagogical underpinnings of different web-based user courses in university libraries mediated understandings of information literacy that were likely to create different, as well as more or less effective, responses to the ways in which students tackle information seeking in relation to study assignments. In contrast, Limberg (1998) found that effective information seeking in alignment with the pedagogical intentions underlying school assignments was related to better learning outcomes for pupils through their development of a critical approach to information, whereas information seeking with departure points in unreflected routines in information seeking were less effective in relation to intended learning outcomes.

There is, in other words, a tension between understanding information seeking as a tool in critically illuminating and understanding real problems and as behavioural pattern connected to structural frameworks. This tension has contributed in turn to the development of the concept of “critical information literacy” (Holschuh Simmons, 2005; Andersen 2006; Elmborg, 2006; Whitworth, 2007). Critical information literacy emphasises that information is constructed and negotiated rather than based on facts and neutral. It is understood as the ability to read society, to see through its discourses by discerning where information comes from, with what intentions and to whom it is addressed (Andersen, 2006). Developing information literacy thus becomes a means of empowerment, enabling people to engage effectively in issues that interest them and matter to them.

3.7 Information seeking in study and occupational choice

Within research in information needs, seeking and use Heidi Julien’s work on adolescents’ information seeking for career decision making is perhaps the most relevant and interesting from the point of view of this study (Julien, 1997; 1999; 2004). Julien examined the information sources used by young people in Canada when making career decisions, how these sources helped, and if and how young people were hindered in their access to information. Using Harren’s theory on decision-making style, Dervin’s model of sense-making (1992) and Kuhlthau’s model of the information seeking process (1993) Julien found a number of ‘barriers’ between adolescents and relevant information. She found that young people relied heavily on human sources, in particular, on family members and people whom they judged to have experience relevant to the occupations or studies
they were interested in. About 60% of the respondents found it difficult to find out everything they needed to know about opportunities to continue their education. 40% of the young people in her study did not know where to go for help in their decision–making, and 38% were confused by the large number of places they had to go to for the information they required thus implying the scattered nature of information resources. Significantly, nearly 25% of her respondents did not feel confident about asking for information related to career decision making, of these respondents a larger proportion came from non-academic homes of low socioeconomic status. This suggests that feelings of self-efficacy will be diminished when young people do not feel they have the self confidence to ask for help.

Julien also found that some of the students in the survey did not know what was required in the way of grades and further education in order to pursue their career aspirations and furthermore, that they did not try to find out. She drew the conclusion that the whole process of career decision–making was so overwhelming for some that they just did not know where to begin or what questions to ask when support was offered. A further constraint lay in negative experiences of professional support where some students commented on the trustworthiness, helpfulness and knowledge authority of guidance counsellors and of their sometimes negative attitudes to students’ career aspirations. Others commented that they avoided seeking information for fear of what they would find out, for example, that they did not have the requirements needed for specific professions, or that they would be discriminated against. Few gender differences were found as far as information seeking activities were concerned, although young women appeared to be more active than the young men, and appeared to be more inclined to relate self-assessment to career decisions. Some respondents had difficulties in making connections with representatives of occupations they were interested in. Most information was, in fact, found incidentally rather than through the purposeful use of either formal or informal sources. A major problem for the Canadian students was financing their studies and in connection with this, finding information about possible funding sources, procedures and applications. The situation is different in Sweden as state education is free of charge and funding has been coordinated to a relatively simple, open process although prospective students may well encounter difficulties in assessing the consequences of taking study loans.

Using theory on decision–making style as an analytical tool in investigating information seeking Julien raised the question of whether information systems are biased towards any particular style, however her results were not conclusive. She also pointed out that information systems in career guidance do not fulfil their function if potential users are oblivious of their existence, fearful of using them or lack the technological expertise to make use of them.

This study renders visible a number of information related issues in connection with study and occupational choice; the preference for human sources of information, difficulties in locating, accessing and coordinating information and it also refers to factors such as self-efficacy and socioeconomic background as
influences on information seeking. The idea that ‘barriers’ stand between the individual and information is problematical to some extent in that it indicates a view of information as flowing between systems and individuals but hindered in its course by barriers which are often located in the individual’s cognitive processes, personal styles or attitudes. Studies with a socio-cultural perspective would instead emphasise the differences in cultural worlds that can occasion differences in understandings of information. As the focus of Julien’s study is on the decision-making styles of individual information seekers it does not investigate the systems of social relations in the lifeworld that determine or influence the actions of individuals and which is a focus of interest in this study.

Another study conducted within Library and Information Science research is that of Edwards and Poston Anderson (1996). They investigated how teenage girls, aged 12-14 years, managed information seeking related to future jobs and studies in an Australian setting. In general, they found that the participants in their study did not spend a great deal of their time on formal information seeking at all and were low users of formal information systems. They also found that the girls were seldom encouraged to engage in information seeking concerning future careers because it was ‘not the right time’ and too early for them to give such concerns serious thought. The study confirmed earlier developmental research that young teenagers are in a phase in life where their focus is mostly on present day life concerns. However, the researchers also found that the girls’ aspirations were in general realistic and related to their own assessments of what might be possible for them to achieve.

Information seeking has also been the subject of attention in research on study and career choice, albeit to a limited extent and sometimes has to be inferred. Darrah et al (2001) in an American setting, found that although young people preferred to use their parents and relatives as sources of information about work and studies the busy schedules of their lives afforded few opportunities for discussion beyond admonitions from parents to work hard and go to university. They also found that although young people had a quite extensive knowledge of working life it was also uneven and that they understood much less about the characteristics of specific careers, much less jobs. While parents might be significant sources of information about particular occupations, and indeed their influence can be seen in the replication of occupational choice from generation to generation (Willis, 1977; Dryler, 1998), it is not unlikely that those young people who wish, or are obliged, to break with tradition or familial expectations may experience difficulties in finding and accessing appropriate sources of information.

In an interesting study on gender and ethnic issues in parental involvement in student choices of higher education David et al. (2003) investigated the interaction between parents and their children. They found that gender was woven through social networks across the generations. Girls often collaborated with their mothers on choice of education, seeking not only information together, but also advice and support whereas boys were more inclined to signal independence and autonomy from their parents. On the whole, middle-class highly educated parents strove to
encourage their children’s choice of prestigious universities through advice, admonishment and by seeking information themselves for their children. They also encouraged their children to follow the same types of educational pathways that they themselves had done. Working class parents, on the other hand, wanted to transform their children’s educational fates because of the changes they could see in the labour market. However, those boys and girls that resisted their parents’ attempts to become involved in their choices did so on the grounds that they did not believe that their parents had sufficient knowledge of higher education or occupations. This was particularly the case for the children of immigrants. In a study of the career choices of Muslim girls Siann and Knox (1992) found that contrary to stereotype, the families of British-born Muslim girls were in general, positively disposed both to further and higher education and to careers for girls. Muslim mothers regarded higher education for girls as crucial in order for them to be able to support themselves and their children. However, it was also clear that Muslim parents in Britain often did not have sufficient access to information about career choices.

Foskett and Helmsley-Brown (2004), refer to ‘inertia’ as a constraint on effective information-seeking in their study; that the easy access to and availability of information on specific alternatives obstructs initiatives to examine other possibilities. This observation bears some relation to Wilson’s thoughts on how our experiences set limits on what we think is possible to achieve; according to him, what we know:

…constrains the future by providing the body of beliefs against which the intrinsic plausibility of new claims about the world is judged. By the time one is ready to leave youth for adulthood, one’s common sense is well-developed; one’s general picture of what the world is like, of what one can expect and cannot hope for, is settled. (Wilson, 1983:127)

Becoming well-informed can therefore be seen as considerably more complex than the effort involved in gathering and evaluating topic-relevant information.

Research into Swedish teenagers’ knowledge of the labour market (The National Agency of Education, 2005a) found that the majority of the interviewed upper secondary pupils had abstract notions of higher education and working life and were unsure of what awaited them in the future and this in spite of access to career guidance, work practice, lessons in practical work-life orientation, career guidance fairs, and opportunities to meet representatives from different occupations and higher education. This suggests that the choices young people make will be contingent rather than based on long-term planning. It was also found that lack of resources restricted career guidance activities mainly to the final year of studies. Counsellors simply did not have time to focus attention on first and second year upper secondary pupils. Although resources have also been collected on web-sites with the idea of self-service for upper secondary pupils Dresch and Lovén (2003)
found that even when Internet resources were consulted, contents were not found particularly helpful and pupils experienced a need to discuss the information they found with study and occupational counsellors. This was particularly the case for young people from non-academic and immigrant backgrounds; young people with highly educated parents were more inclined to discuss and corroborate such information at home (The National Agency of Education, 2005a).

### 3.3 Summary

In summary, information is seen as a context-bound phenomenon that is created and given meaning by people in specific historically, socially and culturally determined environments. Information literacy, in consequence, is understood as an effective relationship with the information resources of the environments in which the individual is active.

The research studies taken up in this chapter investigate information seeking from various research perspectives and reveal it as a multi-faceted activity with objectives that include practices such as keeping order in one’s life, gaining control over one’s life and, on a symbolic level, as a means of asserting and establishing who one is in relation to others. Studies show that people primarily turn to other people as sources of information and that they are consulted in their different roles – as family members, friends, experts, peers, professionals. Using other people as sources of information has been found to be problematical in some situations when routines and habits in seeking education may hinder the discernment and effective use of unproven resources. The research also shows that the evaluation of information is a social activity and its authority is determined through social interaction.
4 Theoretical framework

In research, the social world emerges in different ways depending on what assumptions are made about its nature and of how knowledge can be gained of it. In this chapter, assumptions about social reality that are relevant to the thesis are made more explicit together with assumptions concerning how it may be studied within a specific context. A general ontological departure point is presented first and followed by a more specific description of the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenological narrative inquiry. Ontologically, the theoretical perspective taken in the thesis has its roots in phenomenology, particularly in Schutz’ contribution in applying the philosophy of phenomenology to sociology. The idea of the humanly constructed nature of the social world and of the concept of the life-world are conceptions that are therefore central to the thesis. Truth and knowledge in this perspective are regarded as socially constructed, provisional and located in people’s experiences. Bourdieu’s idea of habitus is also drawn on as a conceptual tool in a further understanding of social interaction within the life-world. A sociocultural perspective on human communication is used within the theoretical framework in order to define information seeking as a tool in the communicative interplay between people where the creation of knowledge is viewed as the result of contest and commitment rather than as neutral and objective (Säljö, 2000). Finally, a theory of narrative within this framework is included to balance the risk of overemphasis on the authority of subjective perspectives in research.

4.1 The life-world, identity and habitus

The idea of the life-world is a central concept in the thesis. Schutz (1975), drawing on Husserl, describes the life-world as intersubjective and the arena in which we live our daily lives and experience reality in ways which we take wholly for granted, a state of being which Schutz terms “the natural attitude”. The natural attitude to everyday life is defined by Schutz as the ways we take for granted that we understand the pragmatic motives and actions of our fellow men adequately for all practical purposes. It is, therefore, self-evident to us that we can share our experiences (Schutz, 1964d:21). The life-world is where we carry on all our activities in interaction with others and pursue our goals; we take our bearings on

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9 Phenomenology is not a uniform philosophical discipline and here I draw mainly on the work of Schutz who in turn was inspired by the work of Husserl and the general sociological methodology of Weber.
our experiences within it and it is the world we feel familiar with. Schutz contends that the life-world is the basis of all our experiences and ought therefore to constitute the source, framework and goal for all science. In a life-world approach, life and the world are intertwined and inseparable from one another. Each individual is caught up in the world, in a historical context with a personal history and future, which means that the world emerges differently for each of us. It is also a shared world encompassing the assumptions, concepts and premises of a culture and its subcultures; we interact, in other words, in a common landscape of cultural meaning. Our existence in the life-world builds on the assumption that “what has proved valid in our experience thus far will remain valid in the future” (Schutz, 1975:116) and that what has worked for us previously in everyday life will continue to work for us in the future. Our aspirations and projects, which are by definition oriented towards the future, are nonetheless anchored in what has been.

Knowledge of the social world is mediated to us through insights, beliefs, traditions, concepts etc., where common experiences give rise to typified and expected ways of reacting to and approaching different situations and phenomena. Schutz argues that we interpret the world through the stock of our previous experiences of it, not only our own but those passed on to us by parents, teachers, peers, the media and others (1962:208). The world thus appears differently to different people because their personal stocks of experiences of it are necessarily different although individual experiences are to some extent formed by and through participation in common cultures. Consequently, we take for granted that those who share our social worlds take the world for granted in about the same ways as we do ourselves, because we have “a common schema of interpretation of the common world and a means of mutual agreement and understanding” (Schutz, 1975:120). In this view, the individual and the world are seen as inseparable although our experiences and anticipations of the future allow us to experience situations differently in a world we nonetheless share with others (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973).

Identity, argue Berger and Luckmann (1966:152) is specific to situations and assuming an identity is a means of locating oneself in the social world and of defining who one is in relation to others and to ourselves. Inspired by Mead, Berger (1980) argues that the individual develops an identity grounded in the assimilation and acceptance of contextually specific shared beliefs, rules, values and expectations as a result of interactions with significant others and with the social group to which the individual belongs; a view consistent with Bourdieu’s idea of the acquisition of ‘cultural capital’. Identity formation is thus seen as an interactive process as individuals develop and modify both a sense of their own uniqueness and of their affiliation to others. At the same time, society constrains choice by conferring identity; we become what we are expected to become. Berger (1980) suggests that the situated nature of identity means that individuals engage in identity formation in multiple contexts of what is a segmented life-world which offers a repertoire of identities to choose from. In this view, identity is multifaceted with individuals having as many different social selves as there are distinct groups
of persons with whom they interact. Furthermore, Giddens (1991) argues that identity formation has become increasingly challenging as the complexity of contemporary society makes accessible an increasing number of lifestyles and situated identities from which to choose. This does not mean that people are chameleonic in their presentations of the self but can make use of their diverse experiences “in order to create a distinctive self-identity which positively incorporates elements from different settings into an integrated narrative” (Giddens, 1991:190).

Even though people may adjust presentations of the self to suit different situations, this does not mean that such adjustments are always enacted with ease. Milligan (2003), for example, has shown that changes in context may result in feelings of loss and discontinuity. Leaving school is likely to be one such transition that necessitates the development of identity but which also entails the loss of familiar situations and of social contacts. From this point of view, geographic place, such as the locality of a school, can be seen, not so much as a stable unchanging entity, but as the scene of the social relations that give identity meaning.

There is a strong kinship between the idea of the life-world and concepts and arguments found in the work of Bourdieu. The idea of habitus, for instance, can be used as a tool in investigating the workings of the life-world. It represents an attempt by Bourdieu to conceptualise the interplay of constraint and freedom in individual action within the bounds of the life-world (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). Habitus, Bourdieu claims, designates “a posture” or particular ways of demonstrating our understanding of the social practices we participate in. We develop, through our life experiences, dispositions for behaving in particular ways and for adopting certain strategies in particular situations. Habitus influences the ways we view our choices and is characterised by the family’s socioeconomic status, gender, ethnicity and common experiences. It comprises patterns of behaviour inculcated through family, social class and everyday interactions with others and, although it can develop and change as individuals adapt to new circumstances and experiences, it is durable and can therefore be a powerful agent of social reproduction. Lifestyle, taste, dress-codes and ways of speaking, and even of moving, are attributes of habitus and used to signify group belonging. Habitus sustains common ways of viewing the world and ourselves, as well ways of distinguishing ourselves from others. Bourdieu’s’ notion of ‘cultural capital’ for instance, describes knowledge as a form of wealth that is acquired primarily through the family. It can also be argued that schools mediate cultural capital to students in order to prepare them for transition to university and Bourdieu specifically applied the idea of cultural capital to educational institutions that reproduce the values, attitudes and dispositions of the dominant group in society (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977).

Bourdieu argues that although habitus is constituted at an individual level common experiences of the social world will tend to produce a collective habitus so that people sharing the same sociocultural landscape will tend to have similar
subjective experiences, dispositions and schemes of perception (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:126). Bourdieu argues, in line with Schutz, that people bring order and meaning into the world by typifying and categorizing life-world phenomena. He argues that social practice is a practice of classifying: powerful classifications include those of social class and gender and they work by appearing self evident and are taken for granted as ‘natural’. Referring to rational thinking Bourdieu uses the idea of habitus to explain its weakness:

Rationality is bounded not only because the available information is curtailed, and because the human mind is generically limited and does not have the means of fully figuring out all situations, especially in the urgency of action, but also because the human mind is socially bounded, socially structured. The individual is always, whether he likes it or not, trapped – save to the extent that he becomes aware of it (…) within the limits of the system of categories he owes to his upbringing and training. (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:126)

Habitus, in the mind’s eye of the information seeker can thus be said to imbue the world with meaning without the individual having to think too much about it. Some studies in information seeking have taken this perspective; that information seeking itself is an activity focused on discovering, or becoming aware of, the context in which the individual is embedded and how the system of categories that describes it works (see for example, Chatman, 1999; Solomon, 2002; Johnson, 2003). In a life-world perspective, information related activities or strategies need not therefore be based on conscious calculation or a gathering of ‘the facts’ but may take the form of unreflective or symbolic actions that are the outcome of unconscious dispositions towards practice. However, Bourdieu also contends that “people are not fools”; they are both creative and capable of modifying or changing the system of dispositions that make up habitus particularly in situations that disrupt the normal course of life and require reflection (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992:126).

The concept of habitus has also been used in a phenomenological perspective in studies of career and study choice. Hodkinson & Sparkes, (1997) for example, use the idea of habitus to analyse situations where young people confront, adapt to or build on work training experiences. They present five types of outcomes grounded in these experiences (see section, 2.4) that in turn influence the study participants’ views of what is was possible for them to achieve. From the perspective of this study, choices of upper secondary programmes can be seen as structurally induced turning points in the lives of Swedish young people that are guided by the dispositions developed through habitus in interaction with what they perceive to be the available options, and such options are always framed by a life-world perspective. Such experiences may confirm habitus or constitute a challenge to the individual’s self understanding or open new alternatives through which habitus can be altered or adapted. The concept of habitus within a life-world framework
emerges in these circumstances as a useful tool for investigating the meaning of the
information related activities of young people in the process of planning their own
futures.

4.2 Knowledge, communication and sources of information

In a phenomenological perspective, most of what we know is seen as socially
derived and negotiated through interaction with others. Schutz typifies the sources
of information in human terms as ‘the expert’, ‘the well-informed citizen’ and ‘the
man on the street’ and argues that our use of these sources depends on our goals
and the degree to which we wish to be knowledgeable; we satisfy ourselves with a
knowledge “that is sufficiently precise for the practical purpose at hand”. In
building up ‘a stock of knowledge’, we sediment and code previous experience for
use as a reference schema in defining new situations. Parts of the stock of
knowledge become unquestioned, ‘trustworthy recipes’, practices or procedures for
action (Schutz, 1964b:122). Schutz uses the above constructs to illustrate that
knowledge is socially distributed and not equally accessible to all, for instance, the
results of scientific research are theoretically available to anyone but are distributed
in systems that are far from transparent or even compatible with one another. This
focuses interest on the nature of communicative processes and on how other
people’s experiences and knowledge are understood, assessed and mediated. Schutz
classifies the communicators of socially derived knowledge in four typifications:10.

- Eyewitnesses, i.e. people with similar perspectives and experiences to my
  own that have directly experienced some phenomenon I am interested in and
  whose experience can therefore be trusted. From the point of view of this
  study eyewitnesses might be friends with work or study experience.
- Insiders, i.e. sources that have direct experience of a phenomenon but whose
  perspectives are different from my own, or are unknown to me. Insiders are
  trusted on the assumption that the experiences reported are more informed
  than my own are; they ‘know it better’.
- Analysts, i.e. the opinion of those who select and organise information from
  other sources concerning the phenomenon in which I am interested and who
  do so in ways that I find personally relevant. These opinions are trusted the
  more the facts can be corroborated with other sources.
- Commentators, i.e. the opinion of those who select and organise information
  from other sources in ways that I find unfamiliar but may trust if opinions are
  backed up by an explicit description of the underlying criteria of organisation

10 ‘Reporters’ are also included in the 1953 version.
thus contextualising information and pointing to its implications and significance. (Schutz, 1964c:132-3)\(^{11}\).

These are idealized types and not exhaustive or exclusive of each other but they illustrate Schutz’ point that knowledge is socially distributed and that we access it through social interaction with mediators whose function is to shape and frame visions of the world for the information seeker. The weight accorded to sources of information will depend on a number of factors: if the source is an expert or not, the system of signs, symbols or artefacts used for communicating, whether communication occurs face-to-face or through another form of social relationship, whether the informant is well-known to us or anonymous. These factors, claims Schutz are “even decisive, for the weight which we, the information seeking citizens, accord the source of our socially derived knowledge” (Schutz, 1964c:133). In addition, Schutz comments that socially derived information, as well as personal experience, will receive additional weight if it is socially approved by those who belong to the social groups we participate in, in the situation at hand. Schutz’ reasoning around socially derived and socially approved knowledge can be traced in Wilson’s reflections, taken up in the previous chapter, on the nature of cognitive authority and in his notion of ‘second-hand knowledge’ (Wilson, 1983).

Cultural patterns developed within social groups function as systems through which the group interprets the world and they provide socially accepted procedures for seeking information with a minimum of effort and reflection. Schutz defines cultural patterns as a system of ‘recipes’ for dealing efficiently with everyday life. They could be described as self-protective mechanisms that save us from thinking through every situation we meet per se. If they should fail us, for example in a crisis, we may reflect on their applicability and concede their use as restricted to specific historical and social situations. Schutz also points towards the potential risk in the power of socially approved recipes for action; they contribute to unreflective ways of thinking that are taken for granted as ‘natural’ and may form the basis of public opinion; i.e. that of ‘the man on the street’. Public opinion, which seldom goes beyond habitual ways of thinking, or ‘thinking as usual’, in turn challenges and often supersedes informed opinion. Schutz maintains that; “It is the duty and privilege therefore, of the well-informed citizen in a democratic society to make his private opinion prevail over the public opinion of the man on the street” (Schutz, 1964c:134). Although the concept of information literacy as such was unknown to Schutz at the time, he indirectly advocates the concept in his argument for reflective thinking in the everyday construction of knowledge.

In everyday life, people usually have no problem with the fact that the experiences, knowledge, norms, values embedded in cultural patterns and which guide them in their activities can be full of contradictions, partial and incoherent. It is when our assumptions are challenged that we may feel inclined to question them.

\(^{11}\) These types of sources have a deal in common with the list of information traits constructed by Taylor (1991:231). Taylor’s list is more specified, containing, for example, quantitative data/qualitative data, factual/diffuse idea-based, etc. I find Schutz’ more person-oriented description of source types more useful as categorised types.
Getting by on partial knowledge, even in matters of concern to us, is explained by Schutz that in the everyday way of life one is seldom in search of the truth or even of certainty: “All he wants is information on likelihood and insight into the chances or risks which the situation at hand entails for the outcome of his actions” (1964c:94). The implication is that ‘thinking as usual’ will seldom prove adequate as a framework for action in the event of a crisis or unusual situation that affects us personally, but we may be induced to believe so simply because we assume that things will work out ‘as a matter of course,’ if we follow the procedures and because other situations have done so in the past. To be well-informed requires, beyond interest, an endeavour to question assumptions, to define situations and to acquire an explicit knowledge. A prevalent assumption in Sweden today is that it is in the interests of young people to become well-informed about the labour market and its conditions in order to make wise study and career choices. The question is, if this is also what young people experience is in their interests and how, in this case, they go about becoming well-informed.

4.2.1 Communication through language and artefacts
The system of signs, symbols or artefacts used for communicating mentioned in the previous section refers to language and other artefacts that objectify experience; a weapon, for example, signals both a subjective intention of violence as well as indicating a need to kill for food. Institutions and society itself are also human dialectical products which “in turn act back on the producer” through the contribution of language in forming our relation to reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966:78). The language we use is also characterised by the social groups to which we belong and it can be argued that society defines for us in advance the basic symbolic apparatus with which we perceive the world, organise our experiences and interpret our own lives (Berger, 1980). Language both permits the objectification and typification of a great variety of experiences and anticipations and by so means affords us the possibility to share our experiences with others, while at the same time language forces the experiencer into its patterns and metaphors. Integral to a phenomenological understanding of the social world is the idea that there is a connection between what people say and how they think or feel about what is happening to them, to others and to the world (Schutz, 1962). Schutz sees language not only as a medium of expression but also as the embodiment and vehicle of our interpretations of the social world (In Gurwitsch, 1975); the term ‘dog’, for instance, bears all our notions, mediated and directly experienced, of what a dog is. Language also gives us the possibility to define exactly which aspects of ‘dog’ interest us in the situation at hand and to analyse and communicate its abstract, metaphorical, poetic, social and physical connotations.

Neither Schutz nor Berger and Luckmann (who were students and colleagues of Schutz) refer directly to the power of discourse, although Berger and Luckmann do discuss, for instance, the ‘typification’ of ‘mother-in-law-troubles’ as a way of externalising and speaking about this phenomenon in collective and taken-for-
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Berger & Luckmann, 1966:53). Schutz holds that the whole history of linguistic groups is embedded in its ways of saying things, language is tinged with the linguistic group’s literature, social environment and the actual occasions in which it is used (Schutz, 1964d). The ways in which we communicate knowledge are therefore dependent on the cultural circumstances in which we live and the artefacts we have at our disposal. Tools, artefacts, cultural objects, institutions and ‘action patterns’ mediate the conscious lives of those who produced and used them and these artefacts and the language itself, in turn shape the ways in which we can communicate. Communication with another person is therefore embedded in a multiple context of meaning:

It is experience of another human being, it is experience of a typical actor on the social field, it is experience of this particular fellow-man, and it is experience of this particular fellow-man in this particular situation. (Schutz, 1964d:30)

The communication of knowledge is thus an interactive embodied, sociocultural, personal and situational phenomenon. Schutz’ focus lies primarily in the relation between subject and the world and he describes the life-world and knowledge as ensuing from interaction with the social world. However, he does not specifically explore processes of communicative interaction in learning processes although his theories do not disallow such a development. Säljö (2000), using a sociocultural perspective on learning, rather than the more insider-oriented approach of phenomenology, is more explicit. He uses a comparison between scriptless societies dependent on oral traditions, memory and physical observations for upholding its rules and values and societies that have written documents and modern technology at its disposal to illustrate how the prerequisites for communication and the focus of education in these cultures will be widely different. Säljö (2000:29) defines culture, in much the same way as Schutz defines cultural patterns; as the sets of ideas, values, knowledge and other resources that we acquire through interaction with the world around us and includes physical tools, such as information technologies, as well as intellectual tools such as discourses, that we develop in interaction with our ideas and knowledge. This, in turn, means that the tools we develop manifest and communicate what we collectively know and implies that even the norms, standards, rules and metaphors we construct and use to guide our everyday activities contain and communicate our knowledge of the world. A case in point might be that a person who aims at becoming a doctor in Sweden will not only have to learn about bodily afflictions but also to use and conform to the technology, modes of conduct, ways of behaviour, values and other communicative tools that are seldom explicitly described but built into professional cultures and mediated more subtly.

School leavers are expected not only to learn about the labour and education markets but also the use of the information systems developed in relation to them as well as the appropriate modes of conduct and values deemed valuable in study and
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working life. Within Library and Information Science, Limberg, Alexandersson & Lantz-Andersson et al. (2008) use a sociocultural perspective to define information seeking as a tool in communicative participation in education and as a means of questioning the underlying assumptions upholding social practices in the process of building informed opinions. As taken up above, Schutz describes the social and uneven distribution of knowledge as typified by experts, the well-informed and the ‘man on the street’ (Schutz, 1964b). Young people engaged in the process of leaving school will find themselves faced with issues that concern ascertaining reliable sources of potentially valuable information, of access to them as well as of interacting effectively with them in the furtherance of their aims. A sociocultural perspective in this respect is helpful in discerning the ways in which information seeking, as a tool in the critical evaluation of information, contributes to these interactions.

4.2.2 Relevance

Every culture, Schutz argues, makes available “tools, procedures, social institutions, customs, usages, symbolic systems” that the individual uses to define and understand his situation in the life-world (Schutz, 1975:132). He reasons consequently that in order to understand action and decision in the life-world a theory of ‘relevancies’ is required and that it is the task of the social sciences to investigate the extent to which our understandings of the relevance of knowledge and information to our endeavours is socially and culturally conditioned (Schutz, 1975:131). The idea of relevance is also central to Library and Information Science, particularly with reference to the selection and evaluation of information in formal information systems. Schutz takes a wider view, focusing on how people discern relevance in the life-world as a means of facilitating action, overcoming obstacles and achieving their purposes.

Schutz reasons that people accord relevance to elements of the world selected subjectively or intersubjectively through processes of social approbation, as having meaning for their ‘projects’. Relevance can therefore be imposed on the individual by the society in which they live or by groups within it. Study and careers information in this respect is imposed as relevant to young people who are expected to be in the process of making career related decisions. Schutz defines ‘projects’ in the everyday life of the individual as part of systems of projects that encompass plans for the hour, day, work, leisure etc. and integrated into what he calls ‘life plans’ (Schutz, 1975). Life plans do not necessarily involve deliberate planning but can be seen as an umbrella term that describes a myriad of interconnected systems of plans and projects that characterise everyday life in the life of an individual where each project has its own domain of ‘relevancies’. What is singled out by the individual, i.e., is discerned as ‘relevant’, is used to define situations; “thinkingly, actingly, emotionally, to find his way in it, and to come to terms with it” (Schutz, 1975:123). Schutz argues that our intentions determine the relevance to us of information and ideas about the world and ourselves. This suggests that an inner
conflict may arise between what the individual discerns as relevant to their activities at any particular time and what others may deem as relevant to them.

Schutz also distinguishes between three dimensions of relevance: motivational relevance, thematic or topical relevance, and interpretational relevance. His departure point is that when individuals attempt to define new situations they draw on three categories of knowledge: knowledge derived from practical experiences of the world, both personal and those of others; knowledge which has yet to be discovered and is connected to specific goals; and ‘interpretational knowledge’ or knowledge of interpretation. Schutz emphasises that the ways in which we discern relevance are socially and culturally conditioned, in particular the perspectives through which we interpret phenomena in the lifeworld. These dimensions of relevance are described briefly below.

**Motivational relevancy**

Motivational relevancy, according to Schutz, is bound to the past experiences of the actor that contribute to his view of the world. The idea of motivational relevancy is connected with the distinction Schutz makes when he conceptualises motives for action (Schutz, 1962:21-2). Here, he distinguishes between ‘in-order-to’ motives and ‘because’ motives. ‘In-order-to’ motives refer to what it is we imagine we will accomplish through our actions, for example, a young person’s actions may be motivated by the idea of becoming a doctor or planning for a ‘gap year’. “Because” motives refer to past experiences and models of behaviour that suggest to us the type of action to take in order to reach our goals. Schutz takes the rather drastic idea of the murderer, who murders in order to get money, to illustrate his point. The in-order-to motive of the action is to acquire money. Like a surgeon selecting his tools, the idea of murder is selected as relevant to the murderer’s plan because his past experiences and upbringing suggest murder as an appropriate means of achieving his goal: the idea of murder thus carries motivational relevance.

Motivational relevance is usually implicit and not something we question in everyday, ‘life as normal’ situations - we plan to watch television in the evening, the contents of the TV page in the daily newspaper are motivationally relevant and its use is unproblematic. Schutz argues that ‘motivational relevancy’ is a quality of the knowledge we bear with us and take for granted as self-evident and which is often embedded on a collective level in our social practices and routines.

**Thematic relevancy**

In cases where what we know is inadequate for defining the new situation it becomes necessary to acquire more information to develop more explicitly what we may already have ‘knowledge of’ rather than’ knowledge about’. The information required becomes a “theme for our knowing consciousness” or attention (Schutz, 1975:124), i.e. it carries “thematic relevancy” and is specifically related to some problem that we wish to solve, whether the solution is practical, emotional or theoretical. The relation between motivational and thematic relevance is constituted as a synthesis between newly discovered information and the individual’s stock of
knowledge at hand, through a process of integrative construction. This dimension of relevance is in focus in a track within user studies which takes its departure point in information seeking as a dynamic process where the relevance of information develops in relation to the individual’s growing understanding of a problematic issue (for example, Anderson, 2005; Kuhlthau, 1993).

Interpretational relevancy
Interpretational relevancy adds a further dimension and Schutz argues that this quality determines how we understand the bearing new information has for the problem or situation at hand. As I understand it, it refers to the perspectives we use to interpret information and to understand its bearing to our own lives and the problem at hand. Schutz suggests that the ‘interpretational relevancy’ of information is established both subjectively and collectively. The concept of cognitive authority, taken up in section 3.4, is useful here in understanding how the interpretational relevance of information is conditioned by social processes such as consensus within social groups and knowledge domains. Relevance can therefore be discerned, negotiated and imposed by others or in interaction with others. This dimension draws attention from the actual content of information to the context in which it is to be used and hence given meaning. Within Library and Information Science, this aspect of relevance is gaining increasing attention in context oriented research approaches to information seeking (for example, McKenzie, 2003a; Sundin & Johannisson, 2005; Limberg, Sundin & Talja, in press). Schutz’ exploration of the concept of relevance is interesting because it helps to explain why information that might seem relevant to a group of individuals on a purely rational level might go unnoticed or be rejected for a complex of reasons.

Schutz concludes that knowledge in everyday life is often incoherent, only partially clear and not at all free from contradictions for a number of reasons. One, he argues, is that people are not really interested in achieving certainty but in “having a fair chance in realizing [their] purposes” (Schutz, 1964a:73). Personal knowledge is incoherently organised because we have so many projects operating at the same time in the course of everyday life; for leisure, work, life, and pertaining to our social roles. Our interests are thus never isolated but interconnected and intermingled. Situations change, we change, and what is paramount one day might seem trivial the day after. Knowledge is partial, because we do not need to know everything; we are fully aware that: “a benign modern civilisation holds ready for [the individual] a chain of information desks and reference libraries” (Schutz, 1964f:94). Knowledge is inconsistent because of our many roles; as citizens, employees, school leavers, for instance, and as members of any social group we tend to accept the cultural patterns that characterise them or as Schutz describes it “their recipes for interpreting the social world”, because it is both convenient and necessary for us to do so.

Schutz’ theory of relevancies has implications for this study by offering insights into the relationship between information and judgements of its relevance. Career and study information is easily accessible to school leavers in a physical sense and
its relevance to their lives is imposed on them through the circumstance that they will shortly be leaving school. However, that does not mean that they see it as thematically relevant to their situations as they think about their futures. Some may turn to it as a matter of course and others may not. The conditions that determine the use or non-use of the career guidance system and its information sources arise as interesting issues. The thematic relevance of the information afforded by the careers guidance system to career and study choice may not be in question in an objective sense. However, its interpretational relevance - whether or not school leavers can relate it to their own situations and aspirations, the extent to which they share the assumptions and perspectives which shape its presentation and content, as well as the extent to which its perspectives are endorsed by the social groups to which the individual belongs, or aspires to belong to, are all issues that are of interest to the thesis.

A further implication is that young people can be expected to have perspectives on study and career choice that differ from the perspectives of either researchers’ or career guidance professionals. The theory implies that school leavers are unlikely to aim at a systematic or exhaustive knowledge of careers and study information, nor will they be tied by the constraints of objectivity and impartiality that guide career guidance professionals in their evaluations of information. They will have their own views of the social world, related to their overall ‘life plans’, to their biographic situations and to their interests. The lifeworld will have, for each of them, its specific domains of relevance, hierarchies of objectives, agendas of priorities, sets of convictions and opinions. School leavers can hardly be expected to be experts on occupations, conditions on the labour market or on the long-term value of university education, but they can be expected to want “to form a reasonable opinion” (Schutz, 1964c:131) of matters that concern them and to do so by seeking information. What is of interest is how they go about doing so, and the types of sources of information they trust and use.

Further, the career guidance system together with for instance, mass media coverage of career and study choice, can be seen as central institutions that shape the tools, procedures, customs and symbolic systems through which relevance is accorded to information. They organise frames of relevance through which factual and ideational elements are grouped and held together. Exemplary stories, visual images, catch phrases, metaphoric devices, ideological slogans, and appeals to morality are embedded in the study and career literature as well as in local and national newspapers and magazines for young consumers each year as deadlines for applications and the end of the school year draw close. Schutz comments on the issue of the imposition of relevance in a reference to the effects of globalisation:

We are less and less masters in our own right to define what is, and what is not, relevant to us. Politically, economically, and socially imposed relevances beyond our control have to be taken into account by us as they are. Therefore, we have to know them. But to what extent? (Schutz, 1964c:129)
How school leavers evaluate what is relevant to them as private persons with their own interests and needs and as members of a society with specifically formulated political, social and economic goals is of interest to the study. Schutz’ reasoning on relevance brings to the fore questions such as: how imposed relevances are viewed and understood by young people. How, for instance, do young people accord weight to sources of information on careers and studies? And if our ideas of relevance are socially and culturally conditioned how do young people with roots in other cultures judge the relevance of the information provided by Swedish information sources?

4.2.3 Temporality

Schutz describes the temporal structure of the life-world as both inner, personal and as outer, social experiences (Schutz & Luckmann, 1973). On a personal inner level, the present moment encompasses our experiences of the past, present and future and is organised, not chronologically, but in different zones or provinces that we relate to each other through association. The future, according to Schutz (1962), is experienced in anticipation and is conditioned by both biographical situation and the stock of knowledge at hand. An experience, therefore, happens against a background of what it succeeds and what we anticipate will succeed it, and our actions are directed towards the future whether they result in the consequences we intended or not. This implies that in questions of career or study choice we act within a horizon framed by past experiences together with anticipations of the future that will, at least, foreground some options while obscuring others from view. Goals, whether they involve becoming a journalist, or ‘taking the day as it comes’, and the activities geared towards pursuing these goals stem from overarching ‘projects’ according to Schutz, and in the everyday world our projects can be many and overlap each other. In terms of temporality the meaning that our activities hold for us may change or be reinterpreted through hindsight:

When an action is completed, its original meaning as given in the project will be modified in the light of what has been actually carried out, and it is then open to an indefinite number of reflections which can ascribe meaning to it in the past tense.
(Schutz, 1964e:11)

Reflection on the motives for, and meaning of our activities occurs only if the actor sees pragmatic reasons for doing so; otherwise our activities tend to be a ‘matter of course’ and a part of the ‘natural attitude’ – things we do without paying much attention to the actual ‘doing’ and of which information seeking is a case in point. Reflection is a choice one makes, a kind of stepping aside for a moment in order to articulate knowledge of the social context of our activities, even if it is only to oneself. Previous experiences may receive additional interpretative meanings in the
light of new experiences; our anticipations may or may not have been fulfilled, changing our perspectives on the meaning of our experiences. Study and career choice cannot, therefore, be viewed as instantaneous happenings but as evolving over time in a social context. This contrasts with models of decision making in which time is disregarded and choices are assumed to be arrived at through an abstract process in which salient considerations are simply contrasted or combined.

On a social level, experience is also bound to standard, clock time and is situated within a longer-term historical narrative that we share with others. Berger and Luckmann (1966:40) describe temporality on this level as ‘intersubjectively available’ in everyday life and also coercive in the sense that it regulates the individual’s situation in the world of everyday life; for example, the participants in this study were all born in a particular year, live in a particular country and at a point of relative economic recession that was to turn into greater economic expansion as they were growing up. The specific needs of the Swedish labour market in a given period or the number of available university places for prospective students in a particular year can impose themselves on individual biography and the individual’s goals and aspirations.

Temporal structures also dictate sequences of events – you have to be eighteen years old before you can take a driving test, qualifications have to be acquired before certain other activities can be initiated and so on. Outer time constrains us in carrying out our intentions and achieving our goals and requires us to order our activities in terms of “first things first” (Schutz, 1975:125). The relationship between the inner and outer experiences of time need not be problematic; it is indeed something that is taken for granted. However, the discrepancy suggests that the meaning that our activities have for us cannot be ascertained in the ‘vivid present’ but requires reflection on their role or relevance to our lives in general.

4.3 Narrative in a life-world approach

Crossley, a narrativist, contends that phenomenological analysis explores the individual’s view of the world by adopting, as far as possible, an ‘insider’ perspective. She suggests that there is a potential problem in this approach in that it “tends to celebrate the authority of the individual” (Crossley, 2000:34), by overlooking or downplaying the social structuring of individual, personal experience. Silverman (1993) also refers to the problem of researchers emphasising the experiences of the individual by neglecting to confront such experiences with the situations and contexts that give rise to them, thus romanticising the insider viewpoint. Full acceptance of the insider viewpoint by the researcher, they suggest, risks rationalising informants’ views and thus perpetuating inequalities between people. Crossley concludes that the utterances of individuals must be located in wider structures of discourse and power in order to better understand their implications and argues that the insider perspective can be retained while avoiding the risk of romanticising it by using a narrative perspective. Chatman, from a Library and Information Science perspective, points out that from a research point
of view the private insider view is not enough: “It is the collective view that leads to understanding the workings of a small world” (2000:9); i.e that it is the interaction between the personal and the social and cultural conditions of the times that are the object of study. Although these researchers make an important point, as I see it, the problem itself does not lie in the nature of phenomenological research but in the relation between researcher and study participants, particularly as this very problem is taken up as a potential problem in narrative analysis itself (Clandinin and Connolly, 2000). However, the increased emphasis in narrative phenomenology on situating personal experience socially, temporally and culturally by paying greater attention to the power of discourse contributed towards making it an interesting approach for the study at hand.

Phenomenological narrative theory pays particular attention to the ways in which the lived experiences of individuals may be interpreted. Its departure point is that reality is storied and through narratives people construct and express meaning by drawing together events, happenings and actions into a dialectic of “what was expected and what came to pass” (Bruner, 2002:15). Narrative theory is consistent with social constructionist approaches including postmodernist and discursive approaches insofar as it emphasises the significance of the language for mediating experience. On the other hand, purely discursive approaches have not been found to be fully appropriate for addressing the experiential and personal dimensions of human experience although they enable the researcher to investigate, not lives as such, but the words used to speak them. Crossley (2000), for example, argues that postmodernist and discursive approaches tend to “lose” the subject, by depicting identity as so fluid, flexible and fragmentary that the individual disappears or becomes pointless for the more abstract, theoretical level of analysis employed in these approaches. Also from a narrative perspective, Polkinghorne (1990) acknowledges that discursive linguistic analysis may provide a description of the discourse of our activities, however, he maintains that it is experience that is the driving force behind the construction of language and not the other way around. He argues that language is a “medium for the display of original experience” (1990:92) inferring that our linguistic ability enables us to make experience real and accessible to others. Phenomenologically inspired narrative approaches therefore attempt to retrieve subjectivity by specifically focusing on the lived experiences of individuals while at the same time, paying attention to the implications of societal discourse on human activity.

4.3.1 Narrative embeddedness in the social world
A central premise of narrative inquiry is that in their expression of their experiences, knowledge and understandings people mediate a sense of unity, continuity and meaningfulness that does not mix well with the postmodernist scepticism towards mapping what people say onto underlying subjective experiences (Crossley, 2000). At the same time narrativists acknowledge that human experience is inextricably related to the culture of a society with its
predominant discourses, and its inherent goals and moralities. Daiute and Lightfoot describe narratives as: “culturally developed ways of organizing experience and knowledge ... [and as] specific discourse forms, occurring as embodiments of cultural values and personal subjectivities” (Daiute & Lightfoot, 2004:x). Every utterance is, therefore, to some degree, imbued with culturally and socially located meanings and refer back to social contexts as well as to the lived experiences of individuals. Narratives in this sense afford opportunities for the researcher to gain “insights into the range of multiple, intersecting forces that order and illuminate relations between self and society” (2004:xii). A further objective of narrative inquiry is an endeavour to promote the image of the individual as a teller of stories active in dialogue with others rather than the somewhat dehumanised individual processing information in a mechanical way which often emerges in positivist approaches.

Access to experience is seen as mediated where language fills a significant role in the mediation of experience; its categorizing and perspectivising functions structure how people understand the world (Schutz, 1962). Crossley (2000:10) describes language as “one of the vehicles which makes experience meaningful.” In this approach narratives are viewed as stories that relate the unfolding of events thereby giving them meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). This fits in well with a general phenomenological definition of ‘meaning’. Schutz, for instance defines meaning as “nothing else but the attitude of the experiencing mind toward its past experiences” (1944:271).

A distinguishing characteristic of phenomenological narrative inquiry is therefore its focus on the individual nested within a cultural context and how stories, life histories and personal experiences are woven into the larger cultural processes that shape and inform them within their historical location (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Narratives may show us how cultural values shape our perceptions of work or higher education or of ways of acting as young people in a modern society with regard to information seeking. Citing Smulyan, Hatch & Wisniewski frame the issue as follows:

> [At issue is] balancing the story of the individual in all of its uniqueness with the larger social, political, economic contexts which frame it and are, in turn, reinforced or challenged by the individual’s actions and responses. How do we place the individual within her social context and demonstrate the powers and forces that shape her experience and also provide a rich description of her story, her shaping of her world? (Smulyan in Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995:120)

Narrative inquiry is therefore concerned with the individual’s embeddedness in sociocultural context and with the construction of self in such contexts. For example, analysis of narratives may show us how cultural values shape perceptions
of work or higher education or of ways of acting as young people in a modern society.

4.3.2 Narrative structures
Narrative theory emphasises that the cultures we have been brought up in make available to us linguistic and moral resources that we use to understand the world and to communicate our intentions and goals. Reissman (1993:2) argues that “Nature and the world do not tell stories, individuals do”, suggesting that knowledge or explanations of the world are interpretations located in people’s accounts of their experiences. Narrative, contends Richardson (1990:20) “is everywhere, present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance (...) conversation, journal articles.” The cultural environment provides the innumerable narrative forms that the individual uses to communicate his /her story to others that it may be understood, i.e. the contents of narratives are personal but the structural forms used to narrate lie in a collective public domain outside the individual in the life-world (Polkinghorne, 1990). The narrative structures, or ‘plots’ available to us and that we use to make sense of events can be restructured in the light of new events but are nonetheless shaped by narratives of personal and common cultural experiences. Narrative can therefore be described as an intellectual human achievement where the individual selects and brings together events, facts, activities in time and place to a coherent episode for a purpose. In constructing narratives the individual relates activities to one another, thus making them meaningful and from a research point of view narratives can be used to examine the connections between events for insight in the intentions and “the changing directions and goals of human action” (Polkinghorne, 1990:94).

Structure in narratives is achieved by configuring events in patterns in order to reveal purpose and direction in human activity. Selected events, those of significance for the story, are linked together by the ‘plot’ to culminate in an outcome and communicated through the use of discourse and metaphor, and include images and body movements, in face-to-face situations. (Polkinghorne, 1995). Narrative, contends Reissman (1993:3), structures perceptual experience, organises episodes, actions and memory and refers to “talk organised around consequential events” so they may be understood as connected parts of ongoing narratives rather than as discrete events occurring in isolation. People make sense of experience by configuring it in narrative form, narratives are therefore not merely descriptions of past events but also individual interpretations of their meaning. Plots are created by selecting instances, happenings, events from the myriad of disordered experiences of daily life to a unity or sequence comprising a ‘story’ with a beginning, middle and an outcome (Bruner, 1990; Polkinghorne, 1995; Reissman, 1993). It is thus the connections or relationships between events that gives the story meaning. Narratives are not necessarily chronologically organised but may be sequenced through theme or consequential in character (Reissman, 1993). Burke discerned five major characteristics of narratives: act,
scene, agent, agency and purpose that offer “some kind of answer to these five questions: what was done (act), when or where it was done (scene), who did it (agent), how he [or she] did it (agency), and why (purpose)” (Burke, cited in Reissman, 1993:19). Narrative thus allows individuals to include their reasons for their acts as well as what they experience are the causes of happenings. People’s stories are therefore interpretive in themselves and require, in turn, interpretation by a researcher who is interested in human agency and imagination as well as in the contexts and world views that inform narratives. In this sense, narratives are representations, not individual voices, they do not give direct access to experience, cultures or historical times and places. As Reissman points out; “We cannot give voice, but we do hear voices that we record and interpret” (1993:8). Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to consider how people use stories, language and social interaction to shape meaning where language is seen as constitutive of reality as well as giving access to the individual’s social and cultural world.

It can be argued that life itself does not consist of stories with beginnings, middles and ends but is a disorganised mass of experiences and on which we impose narrative from the ‘outside’. However, this is countered by narrativists who argue that human reality, including experience and memory, is inherently temporal and therefore inherently storied. Our capacity to select and structure forms the basis of our ability to pay attention and follow through our endeavours. We background details that are irrelevant for our purpose at hand and select elements and events of specific relevance, their significance becoming apparent in their contribution to the completed episode. Narratives of personal experiences are to be found everywhere, as Reissman (1993) argues, telling stories about past events seems to be a universal human activity and one of the first forms of discourse we learn as children. Unlike fiction, narratives draw on what we have in the way of characters, experiences and capacities; for example, a young person with poor grades and extremely negative experiences of school would be highly unlikely to present a convincing narrative recounting the pleasures of school life and the joy of learning. Polkinghorne (1995) argues that while we take in, on a rudimentary perceptual level, what is happening around us we go on to interpret such happenings in terms of the relationships and connections of plotted stories in a narrative process. We ask ourselves “what does this mean?” and such meanings are formulated through cultural meaning systems such as language, which has embedded within it the experiences and interpretations of generations.

4.3.3 Narrative identity, self-biography, structure and agency

Self-biography can be simply defined as a description of someone’s life. However, when people story their experiences they are also telling us who they are, how they would like to be seen and who they would like to become, actively constructing themselves in terms of identity and in relation to others as stories unfold. In this respect, descriptions of a life can be understood as something created in response to a set of circumstances, as experiences of the past and anticipations of the future are
weaved into the present situation. It is possible to interpret narratives of the self as merely blind responses to structural and situational influences rather than as people being actively creative of themselves in the telling of their stories. The choices described in narratives might simply be interpreted as directives from cultural roots and social backgrounds to reproduce the same lifestyles, values and aspirations that have gone before.

Through his development of structuration theory, Giddens (1994) provides a useful way of thinking about the relation between personal agency and structural influences. He describes social systems and structures as durable patterns of enacted conduct in the form of structured practices; the labour market, institutions of education, social class, political organisations, for instance, are constituted through their procedures, their moral rules that are concerned with appropriate ways of doing things, their material resources and their allocation, as well as their resources for legitimating authority, social mobility and for organising time and space. At the same time as people use these rules and resources in order to get things done, structures are reproduced and reinforced. Social structures become the medium of human activities as well as the result of those activities. These structures do not just exist in and of themselves and they cannot exist without the enacted practices which maintain and reproduce them. Structural characteristics permeate all social interaction, for example, conversation between people is structured by the rules that govern conversational encounters; Giddens illustrates his point through an analogy with the rules of grammar and the ways in which its rules make it possible for us to express ourselves while at the same time influencing what it is possible to say. Breaking grammar rules is not a crime, but it often disturbs people’s sense of what is ‘correct’ and at the same time can lead to new developments in language use. People can, in other words, ignore structures, both great and small, replace them, or reproduce them differently. The narrative viewpoint recognises both the individual ability to construct social identities and self biographies in narratives as well as the different structural possibilities and conditions for such construction.

Narrating a self biography involves connecting lived experiences and activities to a coherent and unique whole forming what Giddens (1991:75) calls a “trajectory of development from the past to the anticipated future”. Looking back, our present situation may seem self evident and logically ensuing from prior activities and events even though it may not have been anticipated from the outset. Schutz and Luckmann (1973) describe present situations as ‘biographically situated’ where our pasts are subjectively formable and influenced by our lives ‘here and now’; in the telling, our biographies become a selection of moments that appear to us as particularly relevant to the situation at hand. Some of these moments may take on the characteristics of what Giddens (1991) calls ‘fateful moments’ or Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) refer to as ‘turning points’. These are events such as the death or illness of a parent, becoming a political refugee, changing schools or deciding to aim for a specific occupation, that are consequential for our future lives and that can drastically change our evaluation of the past and lead us to rework our
biographies in line with them. They are deemed ‘fateful’ only in hindsight so that their impact on one’s understanding and worldview is realised only in retrospect through the narratives we create.

The temporal context of the life-world has not only a past and a present but also a future. The life-world, claims Schutz, is future oriented. Our anticipations of the world lying in wait for us are based on our present stock of knowledge and dependent on our prior experiences both direct and indirect; it is also the subject of our intense interest. In daily life we have to be prepared to meet or avoid anticipated events; we may have to come to terms with them, endure them or attempt to influence their course. Anticipations are thus, in turn, determinative of our plans, tactics and overall life projects. Everyday life is therefore not experienced as a haphazard succession of events in response to stimuli in the environment but we take responsibility ourselves, for our everyday world and its meaningfulness in the telling of our stories. From a narrative perspective, Crossley (2000:50) goes so far as to say that it is only in using autobiographical selection in our narratives that we can take on responsibility for our lives.

As we rework our pasts in alignment with our present situation we also define the conditions for forthcoming projects in quite individual ways. According to Giddens, the conditions of late modernisation require an increasingly individual approach to the future when traditions, religious and political ideologies and other externally constituted frameworks no longer compel us or encourage us follow specific pathways. Choice in everyday life, in matters both small and great, becomes compulsory; “we have no choice but to choose” (Giddens, 1991:81). This means that all the choices made in everyday life become not only consequential for the future but are also connected to a generally increased anxiety for making the wrong decisions; from choosing an item of clothing (has it been ethically produced?) to career decisions (will it fit in with my lifestyle, politics, potential for personal development etc?). However, there are protective mechanisms in the form of the ‘recipes’, routines and social practices developed in everyday life that facilitate choice and decision making.

In the life-world, routines and practices are created and sustained through “the natural attitude”, the self-evident kind of everyday knowledge of social context which contributes to the ‘ontological security’ Giddens refers to (1991:188), and against which people measure the effects of different types of situations and the effects of information and novelty. Ontological security provides “answers” to fundamental existential problems raised by new situations or events. Routines and ‘recipes’ or practices function by seemingly reducing the number of options available and by countering the effects of anxiety through their self-evident character. Giddens’ emphasis on the stabilising function of routines fits in well both with a life-world perspective with its ‘recipes’ for dealing with different types of situations as well as with a narrative perspective, which is highly concerned with the practices embedded in our social interactions (Webster & Mertova, 2007).

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12 The examples here are taken from the interview material.
Other protective mechanisms that Giddens connects to ontological security include ‘strategic life-planning’ – “a course of future actions mobilised in terms of the self’s biography” (Giddens, 1991:85) and concerns both long-term life plans as well as shorter term tactics that are interwoven with each other to create a coherent narrative of the self. Giddens argues that narratives of the self are given meaning through reflexive awareness, a kind of self interrogation concerning what is happening or has happened or could happen in one’s life, and this is accomplished through a discursive consciousness. Discursive consciousness enables the individual to express personal biography in terms of identity. Self identity is therefore something that is routinely developed and sustained through reflexive activities and Giddens argues that the conditions of late modernity place a greater emphasis on the development of self identity as a life project (Giddens, 1991:52).

The idea of reflexive awareness and discursive consciousness in the creation of identity fits in well with a narrative perspective, Bruner asserts, for example, that “self-construction begins very early and is a strikingly systematic process that is deeply enmeshed with the mastery of language itself” (2001:36). A principle of narrative research is the idea that “individuals understand themselves through the medium of language, through talking and writing and it is through these processes that individuals are constantly engaged in the process of creating themselves” (Crossley, 2000:10). Giddens (1991:54) describes identity as the “capacity to keep a particular narrative going” by integrating events in the external world into the ongoing story of the self; i.e. the creation and communication of identity in narratives is never wholly the achievement of a fictional account composed to suit a particular occasion. Narrativists Brubaker and Cooper argue that the identities or ‘self understandings’ people construct in narratives designate “one’s sense of who one is, of one’s social location and of how (given the first two) one is prepared to act” (2000:17). Self-understandings may vary over time and place but people strive towards creating coherency and stability in stories of the self. In a social constructionist perspective, it is argued that identity is created dialectically through social processes and even if the way in which one understands oneself is subjective external categorisations such as gender, ethnicity and class, may determine how one is treated by others and contribute in shaping one’s own understanding of oneself (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Narrative research does not therefore focus on who participants “really are” nor does it ignore the individual and the particularistic but is free to investigate the varying ways in which actors draw on cultural idioms, public narratives and prevailing discourses to attribute meaning and significance to their actions in relation to their (developing) understandings of themselves.

4.3 4 The position of the researcher

As researcher I am a part of the life-world that I am trying to develop knowledge about. I can therefore never position myself outside the world as an objective observer. However, because I share the world of my daily life with others I can also gain access to aspects of the world that others experience. “The world of everyday
life is an intersubjective one,” according to Schutz (1962:312) and this means that we can also gain insight and understanding for each others’ experiences of it. Schutz argues that we understand other people through interaction with them; that it is possible for our worlds to meet through the empathy created in a communicative common environment; we cannot share others’ experiences of the life-world but we can understand their representations of it (1962:315). The life-world has a public character, which means that actions undertaken within it, such as a narrative account of our doings, is undertaken with the assumption that it will be understood and evaluated properly by the listener. This also involves the recognition that the stories people tell about themselves and their activities will be crucially affected by the person who is serving as listener and by that person’s social role which in turn suggests that meaning is indeterminate; stories that take form in an interview may be told differently to someone else and for different purposes. However, it is possible to consider that what participants talk about in interviews does have some significance and reality for them beyond the boundaries of the interview itself. By contrast, the discourse analyst views the interview as a place where specific social and interactive functions are being performed. So, rather than taking an interviewee’s response to a certain question as representative of how they think or feel, the interviewer is interested in the social functions achieved by particular responses, for example, the presentation of a “morally worthy” self, the allocation of blame and so on. The discourse analyst is not at particularly interested in how this response may reflect on the social reality of events outside the interview context. However, my position is that interviews can elicit aspects of participants’ ongoing stories which reflect their positions in the social world. This is not to suggest that people are not also performing particular social and interactional acts in the interview situation, such as making themselves look good in the eyes of others, or that everything they say is significant, but that the accounts people produce in interviews relate to their own personalised narratives; that they do not just invent themselves and their experiences in the course of an interview.

Accounts elicited in interviews are representations, that is; it is not possible to gain access to the actual lived experiences of others except in the sense that they are already mediated by their rootedness in a historical period, a social environment, a particular language etc. In this study I have attempted to gain greater understanding of and insight in human experience as it appears in narrative accounts and through my own prior knowledge and my interpretations of school leavers’ descriptions of their information related activities, descriptions of how they have experienced upper secondary school programmes and descriptions of how they envisage their futures as well as in their constructions of self.
5. Methodology

In this chapter the research process and procedures are described and discussed. In order to gain a deeper understanding of information seeking in relation to study and career information I have analysed an empirical material consisting of 42 qualitative interviews and a selection of study and career information brochures. The study is based on the principles of phenomenologically oriented narrative inquiry, this means that the research questions have guided the method chosen and that the results are oriented towards describing and contextualising experiences of information seeking in relation to study and occupational choice in contemporary Swedish society.

In the next section some of the theoretical aspects that underpin the choice of method are taken up, as this choice both determines and limits what it is possible to see from a research perspective while working with empirical material. In describing the research process and procedures there is a minutiae of details that sometimes elude description. The process involves a stream of both conscious and unconscious choices that stem from prior knowledge, purpose, empirical material, the world around as well as from relevant theory. Such choices both define and limit what can be investigated, what conclusions can be drawn and what new questions arise. Without claiming to describe the research process in all exactitude, my purpose in the presentation below is to describe some of the considerations that had to be balanced, standpoints that were taken and their consequences for work with this study. The interviews and the procedures connected with them are taken up in the first part of the chapter. The second part of the chapter concerns the analysis of the interviews and is followed by a description of the literature study. The chapter is concluded with some methodological and ethical considerations.

5.1. Interviews in qualitative research

Within Library and Information Science the last two decades have shown a steady increase both in the number of qualitative studies and in the widespread acceptance of their contribution in discovering unknown dimensions, variations and interpretations of information seeking and use (see the following for examples of different qualitative approaches; Chatman, 1996; Limberg, 1998; Sundin, 2003; Tuominen, 2004). An examination of articles published in JASIS(T) in the last decade, one of the top-ranked journals within the domain of Information Science, also reveals a considerable diversification of methods pertaining to qualitative
research; indicating not least dynamism and development within the field and a willingness to experiment and discover methods best suited for investigating complex and ambiguous phenomena.

The focus of narrative interviewing is on description and on understanding human experience and its relation to the social world rather than on providing proof. According to Kvale (1997), the modern interest in interview research is a consequence of postmodern perspectives on the nature of the world, that is, a view of the world as socially constructed through human interaction. However, a tension exists between seeing interview data as purely situated ‘symbolic interactions’ between interviewer and interviewee or as expressing lived experiences. Silverman (1993) argues that accounts in interviews must be taken as an informed statement by the person whose experiences are under investigation. In discussing the risk of polarising interview material as either locally situated activities or as informed accounts Silverman maintains that, in addition, interview accounts are part of the world they describe and give researchers access to “a cultural universe and its content of moral assumptions” (Silverman, 1993:108). This means that accounts in interviews can be interpreted as both personal and social. Drawing on narrative theory, both Mishler (1986) and Polkinghorne (1995) argue that the process of telling stories enables people to create meaning from their own experiences through the use of collective narratives and Bruner describes this process when he distinguishes between a life as lived, a life as experienced, and a life as told, in the following way:

A life lived is what actually happens. A life as experienced consists of the images, feelings, sentiments, desires, thoughts, and meanings known to the person whose life it is … A life as told, a life history, is a narrative, influenced by the cultural conventions of telling, by the audience, and by the social context. (Bruner, 1984:6)

My assumption is that there is a reflexive relationship between lives as lived, experienced and told. Accordingly, Alvesson and Sköldberg (1994) mean that analysis of interview transcripts requires not only attention to the contents and circumstances of accounts, and the ideas, values and motives that are embedded in them, but also to the discursive level. The strengths of narrative inquiry, according to researchers that have engaged in it, include its flexibility in the face of complexity in the way that it accommodates both an understanding of stories as descriptions of experiences, while acknowledging the discursive tools used to achieve these descriptions (Bruner, 1984; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Daiute and Lightfoot, 2004). This is a significant standpoint in this work and warrants both individual and collective interpretative strategies in the analysis of the interviews. The study’s focus on people’s experiences of, and relation to, information seeking through interviews is grounded in the conviction that they can contribute to knowledge of the social reality they describe, that such descriptions can be
interpreted beyond the interview situation itself and that they are achieved in an interactive process, using discourse and the available cultural conventions of story telling in a given social context.

The overall concern of the thesis is an interest in how people make meaning of the world through their information related activities. This motivates both an information science and a narrative inquiry perspective when the creation of personal meaning in relation to the social world is in focus. On a meta-level I have used a phenomenological perspective in order to place information science within a human meaning-making framework. The description of the life-world and the nature of knowledge in chapter four can therefore be regarded as basic assumptions concerning how people create knowledge and how reality is experienced. I found a narrative approach within this framework as particularly appropriate because it aims at understanding and making meaning of experience not only on an individual level but also interactively on a social level. This does not mean that the participants in the study are regarded as representatives of social structures such as cultures, gender or class. These structures are acknowledged but the participants are viewed as embodiments of lived experiences that shape and are shaped by social and cultural narratives (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000).

5.2 Procedures in the interview process

Individual interviews with twenty-one young people were carried out during their last year at school. Each person was interviewed twice, resulting in forty-two interviews. At the end of each interview the participants were requested to draw a map, or ‘information horizon’ of the information resources they used in connection with study and career choice. This resulted in forty maps as two of the participants considered that their original maps still adequately described their information landscapes. In addition to the interviews with the participants, one interview was conducted with a career guidance counsellor at one of the participating schools. The objective of this interview was to gain background information on guidance activities and the counsellor’s workload at the school and it took place in September, 2003, two months before the first interviews with the school leavers took place.

5.2.1 Selection of participants

Selection of the participants was, in the first hand, guided by the results of a pilot interview with four young people that had recently left school. These four were selected randomly from a catalogue containing the names and phone numbers of all upper secondary students in the region. They were interviewed together in a focus group interview that was recorded. The length of the interview was 1 hour and thirty minutes. The interview led to the development of my interview technique and made me aware of several pitfalls I might face. Although in many ways the informants were open and generous in expressing their views the fact that they
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were unacquainted with one another seemed, in my view, to inhibit free expression, or rather, more time was used in sizing each other up and conforming to the general opinion. I was also aware from previous experience that groups of friends would discuss questions of their future in much different terms than this group did, which I found intriguing as it emphasised the significance of the immediate context for what is said and how it is said. This led to a decision to interview each of the participants individually. I considered interviewing groups of friends but the disadvantages attached to interviews of this type outweighed the advantages. For example, peer group pressure is likely to affect responses in the rather formal situation of a group interview. There was also a risk that I would not be able to discern tacit understandings held within the group. The pilot study is therefore not included in the material.

My second strategy was to contact three career counsellors at three schools and ask them to recommend students with varied future possibilities and ambitions on the assumption that they would have a fuller picture of the career and study aspirations of young people than teachers at the schools would and therefore be in a better position to help me with my selection of participants. However, I found that although the career counsellors were willing to help me they did not in fact come into individual contact with all the final year pupils. This meant that there might be groups of young people that either felt they had no reason to consult career counsellors or who actively avoided such encounters. From an information seeking perspective, this is interesting and I did not want to risk missing the points of view of people who did not actively make use of counselling services. I finally contacted study directors for the different programmes and asked them to help me find as varied a group of young people as possible. In our discussions, I described the purpose of my work and the importance that participants had varied socio-economic backgrounds, ambitions, interests and motivations in order to avoid the selection of ‘star’ pupils. I was also interested in finding reasonably articulate people as I needed to carry out in-depth interviews. In this, I followed Silverman’s advice; he maintains that “we need to recognise that the skills involved in bringing off a successful interview are shared by both interviewer and interviewee” (2001:95). I was supplied with three lists of names and telephone numbers of 60 pupils at three schools and thereafter contacted twenty-two of these young people by telephone with an invitation to participate in the study. These 22 young people were selected on the bases of gender, ethnic background, domicile (town, suburb, village countryside) and upper secondary programme in order to achieve as much variation of experience as possible within the framework of the study. Details of biography, everyday interests and school experiences, information seeking and use, plans and dreams for the future have been important themes in the interviews.

All but one of the invited young people agreed to be interviewed. This in itself is interesting, that twenty-one young people whom I had never met agreed to take the time and trouble to be interviewed about their information seeking activities, a type of activity that is seldom reflected on but embedded in other activities. A tentative explanation might be that the opportunity to talk freely about how they
experienced information seeking in relation to leaving school may have been seen as a way of contributing to their own understanding of an important situation. If this was the case, it illustrates the tenet of narrative theory that claims that the telling of stories is a basic human means of gaining understanding of one’s world (Mishler, 1986; Polkinghorne, 1995).

I cannot guarantee that there was no bias in the selection of participants, more than that I trusted the judgement and integrity of the school staff. There were also other advantages to be gained by this selection strategy. It meant that I came into contact with members of school staff who in turn became interested in the project itself. In this sense I acquired a response community in the field, who asked for explanations of what I was doing and about developments in the project when we met. It also resulted in invitations to give accounts of the study at conferences in career guidance which gave further feedback and helped me to clarify and shape the purpose of the study. This is a negotiation process that is recommended by several narrative researchers (Clandinin & Connolly, 2000; Webster & Mertova, 2007) on the grounds not only that it is beneficial for the researcher to find many places where the research has to be explained but also as a means of getting a feel for the landscape in which the participants spent a great deal of their time.

On a practical level contact with school staff facilitated access to meeting rooms where the interviews could be held; that is, in premises that were familiar to, and convenient for the participants but that were not classrooms. Classrooms are suggestive of the teacher-pupil role, which I wished to avoid, however, two interviews did take place in small classrooms as no other rooms were available at the time and this may have had an effect on the interviews. I emphasised that I was not employed in any capacity by the schools at the interviews and could not discern any conclusive differences between the interview outcomes on the basis of the rooms they were held in. All the participants were invited to suggest times that suited them and with which I complied.

In deciding how many people to interview, I was initially guided by Kvale’s (1997) observation that the number of participants in interview studies tends to lie between 5 and 25 \((15 \pm 10)\) and that the number interviewed is to some extent dependent both on the resources available for the study and the principle of diminishing returns; that is, that after a number of interviews a point of saturation is reached when nothing new comes to light. Looking back, it is difficult to determine if fewer or more participants would have been better solutions. Each story is personal and can be added to ad infinitum, at the same time as they are historically, geographically and culturally anchored in the social world which gave them common frames of reference. As expressions of the social influences at work at this time I think the number of interviews was adequate.

The participants were not equally articulate and some were more restrained than others. However, this eased during the course of the interviews and in general, the participants were open, generous and willing to talk at length about their interests, dreams and ambitions and allowed me to relate their stories to themes concerned with information seeking and use.
The interview study spanned over the participants’ last year at upper secondary school. Each participant was interviewed twice, once in November/December and once in April/May shortly after the deadline for applications to further education. I took the double precaution of using two recorders as back-up in case technical hitches occurred with one or other of the recorders. All the interviews have been saved on CD-ROM. Each transcript has been coded and indexed using the AtlasTi software programme and is also transcript numbered and line numbered. For example, quotes in the text are referenced in the following way:

I sat and read what courses they had, every single course they had in philosophy, they made my mouth water! (Ben, 2)

‘Ben’ refers to the participant’s pseudonym, and ‘2’ to the second interview. Each interview took between 40-55 minutes, they were recorded and I personally transcribed them during and immediately after the interview period. Immediately after each interview I noted my own observations and impressions. The transcriptions include what was said, emphases on words and phrases, pauses, indications of laughter, sighs and descriptions of other gestures that seemed significant or emphatic to me at the time.

5.2.2 The interview guide
The initial interview guide was loosely structured in that questions were centred round themes rather than in the form of detailed questions (see Appendix II)). I felt that a thematised interview guide would be a flexible instrument that afforded participants the scope to craft their own stories while at the same time allowing me to keep them on track with regard to the research purposes of the interviews.

The interview questions were designed to encourage the participants to tell me about how they chose upper secondary school programmes, their experiences of those programmes and experiences and events that had influenced their future plans and/or ideas. Attention was given to the relation between the seeking and use of information and of how participants expressed and gave meaning to their experiences in the context of leaving school. Each participant was invited to tell me about incidents in which they actively sought information, what had led up to such activities and what they meant to them. Inactivity was also pursued as an interesting topic, as well as situations in which participants were offered information by others or told about or directed to potential information sources.

Accounts in interviews are usually, but not always, structured chronologically and consist of plots, that is, beginnings, middles and endings, and they also have a social dimension in that they are stories told by someone to someone else for a purpose. They will therefore contain evaluative meanings that indicate why the story is being told in the way that it is. Polkinghorne (1995) argues that one of the

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13 Further education refers to all types of education undertaken after upper secondary level while higher education refers to education at university level.
most important functions of a story is to maintain social relations, for example, by constituting individual or group identities and holding groups together. One way of eliciting stories in the interview situation is through attentiveness to indications given by participants when they spontaneously begin to tell a story and to encourage that they continue. It is also possible to help interviewees to create coherence through prompts such as; “what happened next, what did you do, then?” and by asking them for times and dates, to describe situations and events in more detail and about the people involved in them.

The second interview guide was designed individually for each participant as a follow-up to the first interview. The guides had common themes but each had a departure point in the previous interview. Each interview was introduced by giving the participants a written summary of the previous interview which they were invited to comment on and discuss. They read the summaries with a great deal of interest and eagerness, often commenting spontaneously on details, discussing changes, giving new suggestions and immediately taking up developments since the last time we met. From this starting point the interviews progressed to the themes I wished to take up. At the end of each interview I summarised my understanding of what we had discussed and gave each participant a preliminary thematisation of information seeking experiences based on the first set of interviews and asked for their comments. This resulted in further discussions where participants often quickly related themes to themselves and their peers and made further suggestions that were included in the transcriptions.

### 5.2.3 Information Horizons

As an aid in interviewing I also used the information horizon technique developed by Sonnenwald (1999; Sonnenwald, Wildemuth & Harmon, 2001). Information horizons are seen as an imaginary field in the mind’s eye of the participant that contains information sources. These are positioned in order of personal relevance, where the most important in a particular issue are placed closest to the participant and those least relevant are placed further away; that is, the horizon encompasses only those information sources that have been selected as relevant to the issue at hand. One of my main interests was to find out more about connections and interactions with information sources by young people. Based on earlier readings I was aware that direct questions about the future and future plans might be met with simple statements about ideals and aspirations or descriptions of what they thought they ‘ought’ to be doing at this time or assumptions about what they thought I wanted to hear. I saw the horizons both as a means of concretising actual information seeking activities that had taken place and the sources they had interacted with, and as individual viewpoints over information sources in a particular situation.

After each interview, participants drew a map that included the people and other information sources and channels they used. They began by placing themselves in the middle of the paper. They were encouraged to talk and to explain
preferences and relationships between sources while drawing. Examples of questions included: "Why is that source placed so far away from you?" “Why did you include this one?” “How come you contacted that person?” “In what ways did you think he/she would be helpful?” “Before you mentioned X - where would that/he/she fit in here?” “You haven't mentioned Q this time- why's that?” All but two participants drew two maps, one after each interview. The two participants that did not do so drew one map after the first interview and meant that nothing had changed since the last time we met, which, in turn, is also part of a story.

My hopes for the horizons were threefold: one was to confirm what had already been said by the participant in the foregoing interview and to encourage more detail in a kind of pictorial recapitulation, the second was to support my attempts to explore relations between the participants, information sources and their future aspirations in the interviews, and finally, given the pictorial character of the exercise, I hoped that other perspectives or details would come to light through the actual drawing of information horizons; that participants would be stimulated to further reflection on changes that occurred over time and on the relations between sources. It might be argued that the drawing of horizons could interrupt the flow of their stories; I did not find this to be the case. The horizons were drawn after the main interviews and served to deepen them. I also hoped that the pictures would prove useful in the analysis in that they could be compared, for instance by showing how people and other sources are foregrounded and backgrounded over time (for examples see Appendices 111-V11).

The horizons were a valuable tool in the interview situation and they became valuable data because they represent in one sense, a concrete manifestation of the extent and nature of participants’ information related activities and this in turn can be connected with their aspirations and their experiences. By literally drawing in people as information sources the participants depicted and clarified relations between people, and between people and other sources and channels, thereby displaying the complexity of information seeking and use in the project of leaving school. In practice, they worked well as a basis for discussion and most of the participants were eager both to draw them and to see and discuss them again after some months had passed. The horizons also had a value which I had not anticipated from the outset and that was that by specifying sources and how they were interacted with the horizons became manifestations of the participants perspectives on study and occupational choice.

5.3 Analysis of interviews

The analysis was a complex process and has been, in Glaser and Strauss terms (1967:32) “ever-developing” and confronted continually not only by the diversity inherent in the narratives but also by my own developing insights on how an analysis could be accomplished.

Initially, the analysis of the interviews involved several and different readings of the text as a whole in order to become familiar with it and find my way round in
it. During this process I noted points of interest such as descriptions of information seeking activities and life experiences and turning points that seemed significant to the stories being told. For further readings I constructed a narrative framework based on these notes and that served as a screen through which the stories of the participants could be examined and organised. This was used together with a specific model of information practices which is described below. The narrative framework for analysis was also inspired by Polkinghorne’s suggestions (1995:16-18) and focused on the following points:

1) The choices, future intentions and aspirations, and actions that make the story move along, together with the understandings, motivations, interests and feelings of the individual concerned.
2) The significance of past experiences and place. This is not to suggest that the past always determines the future; stories may concern the individual’s struggle to break with the past or appropriate new ways of thinking and acting.
3) Physical and psychological dimensions; for example, references to handicap, sickness, personal development, self-efficacy, state of maturity etc. that are used to describe influences on goals and actions.
4) The significance of other people in the individual’s story in affecting goals and actions.
5) The particulars of stories that allow the individual to emerge as unique in a particular situation or as affiliated to groups.
6) References to the values, social rules, cultural stories, norms and expectations in Swedish society that form the basis of assumptions concerning acceptable and expected personal goals and normal strategies, tactics and practices for achieving these goals.

5.3.1 A model of information seeking practices

The criteria above support a general narrative analysis but I also needed a tool that would enable me to discern and relate information related activities in order to contextualise narratives in terms of the research. I found the two-dimensional model of everyday-life ‘information practices’, developed by McKenzie (2003a; 2003b) helpful and it is reproduced below. It was developed from empirical research in a constructionist discourse analytic approach to information seeking in everyday life where the concept of ‘information practice’ emphasises the view that information needs, seeking and use are constituted socially and dialogically. I found the model appropriate for this study because by recognising information seeking as a social practice it acknowledges the complexity and fluidity of information seeking in everyday life. Detailed descriptions of information seeking processes have been encompassed in other models (e.g. Wilson, 1999) but McKenzie’s model makes room for analysis of the actual ways in which people use
accounts of information seeking discursively to express experiences, values and identity.

**Fig. 4 Two dimensional model of information practices in everyday-life (McKenzie, 2003a:26)**

Information practices in the model are described as different modes of information seeking such as active seeking, active scanning, coming across information serendipitously, as well as being identified by others as an information seeker and offered information. The process of information seeking is described in two phases as ‘connecting’ and ‘interacting’ with information sources in everyday life. Making connections covers descriptions of the complications and dilemmas met by individuals, as well as the specific practices involved, while trying to identify and make contact with potentially interesting sources. These include accounts of attempts, successful or otherwise, to contact experts, insiders or to access documents, whatever the format. Accounts of interacting with sources describe practices and difficulties involved during actual encounters with information sources. Active information seeking and scanning in likely “information grounds,” refers to a term coined by Fisher (Fisher & Naumer, 2006) to signify localities (physical or virtual) where the issues people are interested in are likely to be discussed. The model also pays attention to circumstances where people do not actively seek information but are identified by others as potentially interested or as people who ‘ought’ to be interested in certain types of information or information
sources. This means that the model can be used, for instance, to discern the reasons why people do not connect or interact with information sources.

In this stage of analysis I used the information practices model as an instrument for categorising information related activities and practices of the participants through marking, coding and thematisation. This gave me a general picture of the range and type of information activities that the participants engaged in as well as a general sense of their personal information landscapes; of their awareness of, and relationships with, information resources that could be useful to them.

The individual stories are all located in a common sociocultural environment with its institutional frameworks for action, its everyday discourses and its collective narratives. The participants’ descriptions of experiences cannot therefore solely be seen as representations of inner realities but as intertwined with the affordances of the social world. Collective expectations and assumptions concerning working life, higher education, and what young people in general should do with their lives, come to expression, for example, through everyday discourses and are sometimes used in the interviews in contradictory ways. Opposing discourses emerge when participants express, in the course of an interview, different views on, for example, the value of higher education or inconsistent views of their ambitions in relation to their information related activities. This does not make participants’ narratives any the less true or mean that they simply shape their responses to the questions asked, but, as expressed by Goodson and Sikes:

> They are telling their story in a particular way for a particular purpose, guided by their understanding or conceptualization of the particular situation they are involved in, the self/identity/impression/image they want to present, and their assessment of how hearers will respond. This happens in all social situations, not just in the context of research. (Goodson & Sikes, 2001:41)

Narrativerisation assumes these inconsistencies and recognises that accounts are actively constructive not only of past experiences but also in composing a coherent identity by stressing continuity of experience. Some people are, of course, more fluent than others in describing their experiences but the language and discourses they have access to depend also on the social contexts they experience and how they are socially positioned. This is evident in the interviews when participants use their social positions or ethnic identities to interpret difficulties or opportunities in accessing information. The interviews therefore required a level of analysis that is socially oriented and attentive to the cultural stories used in accounts to make activities comprehensible.

The interpretation of the interviews has been a continuous process carried out against a background of my own experiences and growing knowledge during the research period. Interpretation moved between consideration of the material as a
whole, the individual interviews as well of the temporal dimensions of the past, the future and the present. How the participants experienced information seeking was accordingly interpreted against the background of their experiences and their anticipations of the future.

The results of the analysis of the interviews are presented in two chapters. Four broad approaches to information seeking were discerned in the material and these are presented thematically in Chapter 7. In Chapter 8 four individual portraits each related to an approach are presented. The four portraits are an attempt to illustrate and explain the temporal and unfolding experiences of four young people in greater detail and with greater focus on the personal effort and circumstances that characterize the individual case as they are rendered visible through their information related activities. It seemed to be a workable way of presenting the results of the study that was better than the detail and recapitulation of twenty individual narratives or than a collective narrative that risked submerging the uniqueness of stories. The chapters blend fairly detailed narratives of information seeking with a degree of conceptual thematisation. None of the stories are complete or exhaustive but focused on themes and points of comparison and contrast within and between approaches. This means that approaches are not mutually exclusive; statements or stories from one young person can appear in more than one approach; some of the distinctions between approaches are very fine indeed. I have tried to achieve a flexible type of analysis that does not, in T. S. Eliot’s poetic description, “pin” the individual “wriggling on a wall”\(^{14}\) like a butterfly specimen.

Further objectives I had in the analysis were to avoid portraying the young people as victims or winners but to keep foremost how they went about connecting and interacting with information sources from their own lifeworld points of view. As far as possible, I have tried to represent these young people as socially embedded, living characters, however, the data does not allow the construction of holistic accounts not only because I have been selective but also because I am aware that these young people live other lives; at school, at work, in their leisure time, with their families and so on, and I have access to only one aspect of who they are and who they might become.

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\(^{14}\)The reference is to “The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock” by T. S. Eliot.
indicating that participants had integrated information and were in the process of planning for the future. Several participants exhibited this idea by drawing larger pictures of themselves or writing their names in very large letters on the second horizon (See for example, Andreas’ horizons, App. VII). Others made few or no changes to their horizons which can also be described as a tactic in itself. The horizons could also be examined as indicators of the relation between active information seeking and the aspirations of the participants; that is, an indication of the extent to which aspirations were becoming achieved or not, or of how “real” aspirations were.

One of the potential drawbacks of information horizons is the risk that participants will draw in sources that they think they ‘ought’ to include and I tried to counteract this problem by asking specifically if drawn sources had actually been contacted and connected with and what connections had resulted in. Sometimes, participants indicated that they planned to use certain sources when the time was ripe. Another drawback was the difficulty encountered in analysis in determining the boundary between sources of information and sources of inspiration; role models for example, can be both. Can parents, in giving advice and support be regarded as sources of information? I took the view that the sources depicted by participants on the information horizons were counted by them as information sources of a special type; that is, their authority as sources was dependent on their personal relation with the participant.

5.4 Literature study

Narratives, according to Reissman (1993), are always situated within social, cultural and institutional discourses, and this motivated a discourse oriented examination of the literature. My interest in the literature was grounded in the assumption that information would be mediated particularly through prevalent institutional discourses. This examination took place after the interviews because I wanted to see what discourses were at play in the literature, what they had in common and what the tensions between them were, as a means of further contextualising and understanding the accounts of the participants both historically and socially. From an information science perspective it has been argued that user studies pay too little attention to context (Dervin, 1997) and Hjørland (2002) suggests that one way of approaching social context is to examine what, within any particular knowledge domain, is epistemologically taken for granted and held as true, as well as how these ‘truths’ come to expression when domain specific information is discussed. This study, which is minor in relation to the interview study, is focused on rendering visible the discourses used within study and career guidance together with related norms and values that are mediated to young people through them. Discourse is here understood as the basic patterns of thinking and acting that characterize different activities such as study and career guidance and which have the potential power to exclude or include people, for example, by creating norms that steer action (Bergström & Boréus, 2000). However, I would
like to point out that it is not the discourses themselves that are the main focus of
the work at hand but of how the participants in the study experience and relate to
them.

Three major brochures were chosen because they were general in character, in
widespread use and were published both in print and digital formats. The publishers
were two influential organisations and The National Agency for Higher Education.
The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (CSE), was responsible for *18 at last!*
(CSE, 2003, 138 p.), the organisation’s mandate is to further the interests of
Swedish trade and industry. *Choose an Occupation* (SACO, 2003, 222p.) was
published by The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO), a
major trade union for professionals. *The Student Handbook* (2002, 239 p.) was
published by The National Agency for Higher Education as a guide to universities
and contains a catalogue of university profiles and their major programmes.
According to the career counsellor whom I interviewed these brochures were the
most central to her work. All three participating schools had links to the electronic
versions on their career guidance web portals.

In analysing the brochures I was primarily interested in articulations of higher
education and the labour market, in the norms and values associated with them and
in how the sender and the addressee were constituted in relation them. This meant
close readings of the brochures with the objective of discerning the nodes around
which descriptions of the labour market and higher education revolved and the
terms or ‘elements’ which together gave meaning to them (Winther Jörgensen &
Phillips, 2000). The study is taken up in Chapter 6 (6.5).

**5.5 Methodological considerations**

In this work I have been striving towards an understanding of how the participants
in the study approach the future as expressed in their accounts of their information
related activities. This rests upon an attempt to position information related
activities between participants’ earlier experiences and future aspirations in order
to understand what meaning they imbue these activities with.

All types of descriptions that are the results of interviews are interpretations
made in specific contexts and the results are a third interpretation in the form of a
research text. My own particular research interests framed and, in part, guided the
interviews themselves and the mode of questioning with its research interest in
information seeking, also framed the ways in which interviewees could respond and
thus the progress of the dialogue. Even though interview questions were designed
to be ‘open’, total openness is something that cannot be achieved in an interview
situation, or in any situation between two people. Experiences are always described
by someone from within a social, historical and dialogic context. Given these
conditions, I saw ‘open’ questions as a means of offering participants the
opportunity to define the phenomena, situations or events that they talk about,
themselves. In this way, I hoped that that the participants could choose and control
what they wanted to talk about and how they talked about it within the research
context. Conversation is, in many ways, the foundation of human interaction and it is through it we learn to know other people and something of their experiences, feelings and hopes concerning the world we live in. This, in turn motivates qualitative interviews when interest lies in how people create meaning, their experiences of reality and how they reflexively deal with these experiences.

In preparation for the interviews I had read extensively on study and career choice, in general, and on young people’s situation in contemporary Sweden in order to better understand participants’ situations and enable me to design interviews that participants would find relevant to their own experiences. As a researcher, I felt that this type of orientation was a prerequisite that would better enable me to recognise experiences, situations and the connections between them, which in turn would contribute to a better understanding of the content and meaning of the stories told. However, this type of familiarity can also limit the critical analysis of the data by creating assumptions about what to expect from the stories told. For example, important features in narratives may go unseen, blocked by my assumptions of what is significant. One means of counteracting this risk was to invite all the participants to read and comment on the summaries of their own interviews. The information horizons were also useful in this respect as in recapitulating the interview itself participants were afforded the opportunity to change, further discuss and/or refine what they had talked about earlier. Being aware of the influence of prior assumptions also encouraged an openness to the transcript material itself.

There are of course, other risks involved in narrative inquiry. Clandinin and Connelly (2000:181) take up the risks of intersubjectivity and ‘narrative smoothing’. Intersubjectivity concerns losing sight of the social structuring of experience and slipping into an ‘insider’ viewpoint without appropriate reflection and analysis. Narrative smoothing is a tendency to invoke a positive or static result suggesting the ‘end of the story’ rather than the tentative conclusions that are more appropriate to ongoing stories in a changing world for both participants and researcher. Ways of countering the risks of intersubjectivity and smoothing are through acknowledgement of the risks and alertness to the possible alternative interpretations which, in turn can be taken up and discussed in the text (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000).

The research process itself has taken five years and has influenced my own views of the work and shifted my research focus from what was originally a phenomenographic perspective towards a narrative perspective. This shift in perspective was occasioned by a growing interest in the relation between personal and social experience and information related activities and that was not within the scope of a phenomenographic study. The shift entailed a time-consuming process of reorienting the study but as the main focus in both phenomenographic studies and narrative studies lies on descriptions of experiences based on common ontological assumptions the adoption of a narrative perspective felt more like a widening of perspective to include social aspects than as the adoption of a different or new perspective.
5 Methodology

5.5.1 Ethical considerations
From an ethical point of view, it has to be considered what the individual participant may gain or lose through participation in a research study. There is no doubt that in agreeing to take part in the study the participants were offering me insights into their private lives with the risk of being misconstrued and unfairly treated. They were asked to engage in an activity that, in theory, could bring about unexpected insights which could both dishearten them and empower them. It is likely that new insights gained through the telling of their stories may have led participants to change their views of past experiences and/or to reconsider future plans although it can be argued that people often change or modify their viewpoints as a result of any type of discussion. Kvale (1997) argues that the interview situation is always a moral responsibility because the interviewee is always influenced by the interview while, at the same time, the knowledge that results from the interview contributes to our understanding of human situations. On the basis of their position as citizens and members of society it did not therefore seem unreasonable to invite young people to describe their experiences while at the same time keeping in mind dialogic effects on accounts.

At our first meeting I described the study and what their involvement entailed and tried to ensure that they knew what I was doing with our conversations. From their comments it seemed to me that they understood what they were consenting to. I emphasised that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time.

In order to protect the anonymity of the participants pseudonyms have been used and changes have also been made to some of the details referred to by the participants that might have made them identifiable. I have also refrained from disclosing certain details in the participant’s stories that might have added to deeper understanding of their actions but that were highly personal in nature. In our brief discussions on the issue of anonymity the participants themselves, on the whole, were not adverse to the idea of being identifiable, as one pointed out; the interview material was not, in his view, controversial nor had the potential to be personally harmful. Mishler (1986), in his chapter on the empowerment of respondents, takes up this subject in a particularly sensitive way pointing out that by making participants in research studies unidentifiable we deprive them of their own voices and that we do them a disservice by not allowing them to be credited for their ideas and views. However, this is a controversial issue and I prefer not to take the risk, in any unforeseen way, of embarrassing the participants and have followed the ethical principles for the Humanities and Social Sciences recommended by The Swedish Research Council (1994).

“The transcript is a translation from one language to another”, says Kvale (1997:153) referring to the transformation of living conversation to dry text and in this study it is more than this transformation that is at issue. The interviews were conducted in Swedish, in which I am fluent, although my own mother tongue is
English. The question thus arises if something may be lost or manipulated in the process of translating quotes. As I see it, young people from Sweden and The United Kingdom, through globalisation processes, have multiple meeting points across the national borders in terms of fashion, music, film, art and youth trends which gives them common reference points and ways of speaking about cultural phenomena despite the different languages. There are, however, differences in traditional family and class perspectives, in social and educational frames of reference, in the ideologies that inform them and in the institutionalised solutions that arise from them. At the same time, the ideas concerning the Risk Society, the knowledge economy, higher education, employment, globalisation etc are prevalent in both countries, and the discourses are similar although experiences on a personal and national level can be expected to differ. From this point of view I have tried to retain quotes within their temporal and sociocultural contexts. I do not mean to suggest that meaning can be transferred from one language to another without complication. However, I do not think that the translation from one language to another has distorted meaning out of recognition. In translating the participants’ comments I have tried to formulate them in harmony with the ways in which participants expressed themselves in Swedish. A disadvantage is that quotes lack the colour of dialect, evidence of idiosyncratic pronunciation and slang; on the other hand, the reader need not be distracted by them. This is not an insignificant problem and when accounts and quotes from the material have been presented and discussed at both research seminars and in the field of practice it has been commented that the participants seem to be ‘special’. In thinking through this observation, I have reached the conclusion that everyday jargon and slang tone down or ‘lighten up’ what is actually being said; inversely, young people’s capacity to be thoughtful and reflective is more obvious when spoken language is adapted to written language. In my own opinion, the participants were special to me, but otherwise no more special than any young person is. The final test lies, of course, in the reader’s evaluation, if in placing themselves in imagination in the same circumstances as the speaker, they can identify with what is being said. In his discussion of language as the medium of hermeneutic experience Gadamer takes up the issue of translation. He argues that;

The situation of the translator and the interpreter are fundamentally the same. (...) The translator’s task of recreation differs only in degree, not in kind, from the general hermeneutical task that any text presents. (Gadamer, 1975:387)

Translation and editing can of course create a problem of validity, however the analysis is not on a sociolinguistic level and the discursive level is limited so I do not consider it to be a great problem.
6 Setting the scene

In this chapter the scene is set for the study by describing the participants as a group, the upper secondary programmes they attended, the career guidance system they had access to and the chapter also includes a minor analysis of a selection of the study and career literature available to the participants. With an understanding that experience is both personal and social the chapter is an attempt to portray the career guidance setting of the study and its implications for how the participants in the study might relate to it. The section on the resources of career guidance is interspersed with participants’ comments on counselling. This is followed by a section which is in essence a minor study of the discursive aspects of career guidance literature. Publications produced by three of the major actors in the career and study guidance field are taken up. This study has been included in order to lift forward the policies and expectations that at this particular time were directed at young people and embedded in the language of the literature and which to a certain extent contextualise some of the information seeking activities of the participants in the study.

6.1 The participants
Twenty-one young people took part in the study, ten men and eleven women. They were 18 or 19 years of age, and all in their last year at school. The participants were a homogeneous group in the sense that they were selected because they were in a situation where they were expected to make choices and decisions about what to do when they left school and all of them were expected to complete their upper secondary programmes.

All the participants were born in the same year of the 1980’s. Most were born in Sweden, and had middle or working class Swedish parents, two were born in Middle Eastern countries (Ilona and Shirin) and one participant was from one of the Balkan states (Michael). Two participants had one parent from another country (Max and Ben). One participant had lost her mother some years before the interviews (Emma) and three other participants lived with one parent (Andreas, Anna and Bea). One parent was unemployed, the others were either in employment or had their own small companies. The participants were a group of ‘ordinary’ young people with working class or middle class backgrounds and they all completed upper secondary school programmes more or less successfully during the interview period. Taken together the social spread of the data material is quite
wide although it might be argued that the material would have been more interesting if it had included participants that ‘dropped out’ of school or failed to graduate. At the time of selection, I could not know if participants would complete their programmes or not, although I was aware that this was unlikely to happen during the third and final year of studies. Study and career information was also directed specifically at young people registered in the third year of programmes. With a departure point in the research questions and in an interest in how young people deal with career and study information it was also important to me that the participants had, in practice, as wide a number of options to choose from as possible. It was therefore not within the scope of the study to take into account young people who were not registered in the final year of programmes. The participants, the upper secondary programmes they attended and their parents’ occupations are summarised in Table 1 below. Parents’ occupations have been included as much research has shown that parents’ occupations influence children’s dispositions towards different types of work (Willis, 1977; Valdermarsson, 1985; Dryler, 1998; Furusten & Zune, 2004).

Participants were selected from the following upper secondary programmes; Social Sciences, Natural Sciences, Entrepreneurship, Economics, Technical Studies, International Baccalaureate (IB), Media, and Arts Studies. Completion of all of these programmes give students the basic requirements for entry to higher education. The Media and Arts programmes are primarily vocational while the other programmes are more specifically oriented towards higher education. The programmes are all three years long, as all upper secondary programmes are in Sweden at this time. Taken together these programmes are chosen by a majority of Swedish students, the most popular choices being Social Studies and Natural Sciences. The IB programme, although not an uncommon programme in Swedish schools, is not as widespread as the others. It was included because as an international programme it gives its students a potentially larger array of study options and choices than the other programmes do.

Each participant was informed of the nature of the study; that the interviews would form the basis in a Ph.D. thesis on information seeking in relation study and career choice. They were guaranteed anonymity and confidentiality. They have been anonymized in the text through the use of pseudonyms and given a name the first letter of which corresponds to the first letter in the title of their respective upper secondary programmes. Pupils from the programme for Entrepreneurship have been given names beginning with the letter B in order to avoid confusion with the Economics programme.

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15 See Descriptive data on childcare, schools and adult education in Sweden 2004 published by The National Agency for Education (2005b) which contains statistics concerning the percentages and numbers of pupils on the different upper secondary school programmes.
Table 1 Participants, domicile, upper secondary programmes and parents’ occupations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant and domicile*</th>
<th>Programme</th>
<th>Parents’ occupations, mother/father</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andreas V/h</td>
<td>Arts Programme</td>
<td>Nursery teacher / local journalist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anna T/a</td>
<td>Local government clerk / unknown</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bea S/h</td>
<td>Entrepreneurship Programme</td>
<td>Buyer in textiles / director of security firm</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bella T/a</td>
<td>Sales manager / executive in textile company</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ben C/h</td>
<td>Entrepreneurs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily V/h</td>
<td>Economics Programme</td>
<td>Receptionist / warehouse worker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma C/h</td>
<td>- / unemployed</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ida S/h</td>
<td>International Baccalaureate</td>
<td>Nurse / train conductor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ilona T/a</td>
<td>Hairdresser / computer technician</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madeleine S/a</td>
<td>Media Programme</td>
<td>Primary school teacher / local photographer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Max S/a</td>
<td>Office clerk / typographer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael T/a</td>
<td>Seamstress / owner of small advertising agency</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neil V/h</td>
<td>Natural Science Programme</td>
<td>School administrator / builder</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nina V/h</td>
<td>Occupational therapist / Sheet metal worker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nora C/h</td>
<td>Nurse / secondary school teacher</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam S/h</td>
<td>Social Science Programme</td>
<td>Accountant / dentist</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean V/h</td>
<td>Nursery teacher / telephone engineer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shirin T/a</td>
<td>Home language teacher / taxi driver</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon S/h</td>
<td>Nurse / school inspector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen T/a</td>
<td>Physiotherapist / textile engineer</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tom S/h</td>
<td>Technical Programme</td>
<td>Staff manager / divisional head of logistics company</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Domicile: C= Countryside, S= Suburb, T= Town, V= village, a= apartment, h= house.

All of the participants had experience of work, either on a summer-job basis or on a part-time basis or both, a fact which is perhaps surprising in view of the mass-
media picture of young people as lacking in work experience and the call from commerce and industry lobbyists for young people to get in touch with ‘real life’ (Lundgren, 2002). Between them they had experience of work in call-centres, shops, warehouses, a building site, a zoo, offices, cafes and restaurants, advertising agencies, healthcare, post-order companies and a telecommunication company and this is aside from work-practice periods organised by schools.

6.2 Place

Geographically the study is confined to one of Sweden’s regions and the participants attended one of three upper secondary schools (X, Y and Z) in a larger town in the region. The schools had different profiles. X was built in the early 1900’s and hosted programmes in the Arts, the Natural Sciences and the Social Sciences. According to the participants, it was ‘freer’, ‘a bit bohemian’ and a place where “you can be yourself”. Y had a technical profile and included the programmes in Economics, Entrepreneurship and The International Baccalaureate programme. Participants described it either as a good school or as a school where you “are judged by the clothes you wear”. Z offered vocational programmes including the Media programme, the building was a renovated factory and the school was highly modern in its physical amenities and resources. Participants who attended Z described it as up-to-date, attractive and “like a real workplace”. The catchment area for the schools is regional and each school is located centrally in its main town, i.e. none of the schools are located in areas characterised by any particular socio-economic status.

The region in which the schools lie is known for its textile industries and this is reflected, for example, in some of the interviews where there is a greater orientation towards the textile industry than might be the case in similar studies in other regions. There is also a higher percentage of people working in manufacturing and trade than the national average although average incomes are somewhat lower than in the country as a whole, as is the general level of education; 29% of the local population have post-secondary education compared to the national average of 34% (Statistics Sweden, 2007). The participants themselves lived in different areas in the region. Seven participants lived in suburbs in houses or apartments, six lived in apartments in town, five lived in villages, and three lived in houses in the countryside. Place is not regarded as insignificant to the experiences of the participants but as something they relate to and that shapes experience. The participants, with their different backgrounds, domicile and choice of upper secondary programmes had, in Bourdieu’s terms, different combinations of ‘capital’ and I expected that the characteristics of the region and the places where the participants lived would interact with the personal and social in shaping perspectives on the relevance of information.
6.3 Upper secondary school programmes

The young people who participated in the study attended three different upper secondary schools on eight different programmes all of which gave a broad basic education and opportunities to specialise in an area of interest. Successful completion gave school leavers the basic requirements for higher education and also the special requirements if they wished to further develop their specialities at the level of higher education. Where young people felt they had made the wrong choice of programme or failed to complete courses satisfactorily there was also a possibility of complementing upper secondary level later in life at municipal colleges of further education.

All programmes include obligatory core subject courses in Swedish, mathematics, English and social studies and history to a certain level. Students wishing, for example, to study applied chemistry would need to have studied mathematics on a Natural Science programme which offers higher level mathematics than, for instance, the Arts programme does. The programmes are distinguished from each other through ‘profile’ subjects. The participants in this study were in the final year of one of the programmes which are briefly described below:

- The Natural Science programme offers a broadly based education in preparation for academic studies and is focused on the natural sciences at an advanced level. It includes modern languages and social studies at a basic level. *Nina, Neil and Nora participated in this programme.*
- The Arts programme has a vocational character although it also prepares its students for higher education by including basic courses in the natural sciences, social studies, and English together with a focus on cultural sector studies. Participants in this study specialised in theatre or music. A specialisation in theatre entailed, for example, courses in theatre theory, collaboration, voice and movement, classical literature, and physical training. Specialisation in music entailed courses in song technique and/or a major and minor instrument, theory of music, choral techniques and music analysis. *Anna (theatre) and Andreas (music) participated in this programme.*
- The Social Science programme focuses on languages, culture and the social sciences. Mathematics, geography and history are also included. The programme prepares pupils for academic studies. *Sam, Sean, Shirin, Simon, and Stephen participated in this programme.*
- The Economics programme is similar to the Social Science programme but with a greater focus on economics and mathematics in a social perspective. The programme prepares pupils for academic studies. *Emma and Emily participated in this programme.*
- The Entrepreneurship programme specialises in business economy, mathematics, information and communication technology, and leadership. The programme also prepares pupils for academic studies. *Bea, Bella and Ben participated in this programme.*
• The Technology programme focuses on technology together with mathematics, physics, chemistry, information and communication technology. The programme prepares pupils both vocationally and for academic studies. **Tom participated in this programme**

• The International Baccalaureate Programme (IB) is taught in English and is broadly based offering languages, natural sciences, social studies, arts and mathematics. It is a relatively new phenomenon in Sweden and its grading system was not entirely compatible with the Swedish system at this time. **Ida and Ilona participated in this programme**

• The Media programme specialises in photography, graphic communication, sound, video and text. It provides at least 15 weeks work practice and is vocational in character. **Madeleine, Max and Michael participated in this programme**

The procedures for application to upper secondary programmes allowed pupils to make three choices in order of preference. All the participants in the study except Bella were accepted on their first choice, which is not unusual as it is educational policy to accommodate pupils’ choices as far as possible provided they have the minimum entry requirements. In Bella’s case her first choice had too few applicants and did not run. Her second choice, the programme in entrepreneurship, was similar in structure and subject content to her first choice and she was satisfied with this solution.

### 6.4 Career guidance at upper secondary level

Developments in information and communication technologies as well as in the labour market have changed conditions for career guidance and the information practices associated with it, where tools for online world-wide information seeking are accessible both from the home and from school. Traditional guidance methods of face-to-face counselling have nowadays a greater focus on instruction in gaining access to and using digitalised information sources. The schools that participated in the study were all municipal schools. All three had one career guidance counsellor and each had offices on the school premises. The counsellors served just over 1000 pupils each. I conducted an interview with one of these counsellors who described a heavy workload which included not only counselling but marketing of the school to secondary school pupils and their families, and the organisation and administration of career guidance activities such as lectures and study visits. Individual counselling was restricted to 15 minutes at a time, and pupils were invited to book meetings by signing their names on a schedule pinned on the counsellors’ doors. During my visits to the schools, I observed that these lists were always fully booked. In practice this meant that pupils were not encouraged to consult counsellors on a personal basis before their final year at school although the counsellor maintained that they were not turned away if they did sign up for an earlier meeting. The counsellor whom I interviewed described her activities as
based on promoting self reliance by “teaching them how to find out things for themselves” through use of the career guidance literature and Internet resources, personal contacts and other potentially useful sources.

Not all pupils consulted counsellors. Of the twenty-one participants in this study, seven had had individual interviews with a careers counsellor. Of these seven, one had contacted the counsellor in the final term of school (Sam). The other seven, all young women, had more or less intensive contact with careers counsellors, sometimes booking counselling, and sometimes dropping in ‘for a chat’ for five minutes (Anna, Nina, Nora, Ilona, Emma, Shirin). Participants’ views on counselling varied. Most took the view that the careers counsellors “have the facts”, but that there was no point in consulting them if you had no definite plans or strategies: “No, I’ve never got round to talking to any of them, I mean, it all feels very far off, whatever it is you’re going to do” (Bella, 1). On the other hand, some meant that they did not consult the career’s counsellor because they already knew what they were going to do, as Neil’s slightly defensive account reveals:

F.H. Have you had any contact with the careers counsellor?
Neil : No, I’ve had no real contact with her because I’ve more or less known what I’m going to do. I haven’t felt the need. She’s come in to see us, and said where things are and when to apply for things. That’s been enough for me. I’m, you know, … if I need to know something then I find out about it. Maybe it might have been a good alternative to go and see her but I skipped it and I don’t think it would have made any difference if I had talked to her. (Neil, 2)

According to Bella, the services of career guidance were directed towards those who failed to get their grades. As she herself participated in the Entrepreneurship programme, which was something of an elite programme, she claimed that her teachers had said to them not to bother with career guidance: “because none of you will fail to get your grades”. Three participants (Tom, Max and Michael) claimed that they were not aware of where counsellors’ offices were located in their schools and had never felt a need to find out. Max underlined, that in his opinion, careers counselling was “for people who can’t find out things for themselves” (Max, 1). These assertions of self reliance can be interpreted differently; they were made by young men and being seen to need support in seeking information is perhaps a gender issue. They may reflect a view of career counsellors as unnecessary intermediaries between the individual information seeker and the facts, which suggests that information seeking in careers and study contexts is viewed as an intuitive skill or a skill that one is already in possession of, or perhaps they were simply a response to the idea that they might not be self reliant. A further possible interpretation is that they did not think in terms of future studies and careers on leaving school but had other priorities, such as having time for travelling and enjoying the freedom of ‘after school’. Bea described being “put off” by her first
encounter with a counsellor: “I went there in the second year but she just said that I was welcome to come back some other time because she hadn’t time!” (Bea, 2). She never went back.

Those that had consulted careers counsellors evaluated their services a little differently. Some saw them as helpful on a factual level, “I see her as a tool” (Andreas, 1); “she helps you fill in the forms and shows you all the places on the Internet” (Ilona, 1). Some corroborated information from other sources with the counsellor; “there was this teacher who said you had to have special requirements so we all rushed down to [the careers counsellor] and she said “No, no, that’s not true!”” (Anna, 2). Some of the participants appreciated empathy and encouragement. Sam, for example, visited the careers counsellor for the first time halfway though his final school term:

F.H. : Have you been to see the careers counsellor?
Sam: Well, I was thinking of applying to Stockholm’s University. I was really thinking about studying straightaway, but I couldn’t find anywhere to live in Stockholm, so I started having doubts. It’s a drag when you apply to university and you don’t have anywhere to live (deep sigh) so I tossed the idea.
F. H.: Oh, … could the careers counsellor help you at all?
Sam: Yeh, we talked a bit about accommodation but she really encouraged my plans [for studying] and she’s actually been a great help (…). We’ve talked, like we’re doing now mostly, and she’s like, suggested, different courses and programmes. I didn’t really know what there was and now I feel I know a bit more. (Sam, 2)

The participants had all been introduced to their school’s counsellors in a general lecture during their first year at the schools and informed about their activities as well as being guided through Internet resources. The interviewed counsellor emphasised that the counsellor’s job was not to tell pupils what to do, but to help them find out things for themselves.

During the participants’ second year at school, they were given the opportunity to meet with representatives from an occupation of their choice but few of them had taken this chance. The reason for this seemed to be based in a feeling that it was difficult to connect personally with occupational representatives if you knew very little about their occupations; one participant pointed out that if people take the trouble to meet you “you should have initiated questions to ask”. Others felt that it was “too early,” for them, as they had not, at that point in time, developed any ideas of what to aim for. Of course, making the effort to meet a representative depends to some extent on what it is you want to know. Ilona, for example, who was very unsure of what she wanted to do in the future, was primarily interested in what motivated people in general to study for any kind of profession and chose to meet with a psychologist:
Ilona: I chose a psychologist in the end, but I don’t know, I don’t think that’s what I want to be.
F. H.: What did you ask about?
Ilona: If it was fun, if they found it interesting, and what made them study for it. I don’t know anything about what psychologists do, but, … it seemed to be fun! (Ilona, 1)

Those who most appreciated meetings with occupational representatives were those who were already quite knowledgeable about, and interested in, particular occupations, and who did not have their own personal connections. Information-seeking as an activity which is driven by an already established interest is perhaps a facile observation (Dervin, 1983) but it also suggests, at least for some of the young people in the study, that lack of knowledge of different professions and occupations might account for the lack of enthusiasm for, or diffidence towards, this opportunity. In general, participants’ approaches to career counselling were varied but common to most accounts was the perspective that careers counsellors were, or could be, helpful when you needed facts and knowledge of procedures.

6.5 Study and career literature
The Swedish career guidance system makes available a great deal of information for school leavers in print and electronic formats and its material is further presented, commented, discussed and analysed in the mass media particularly around deadlines for university applications. What is of interest in the thesis as far as textualised information is concerned is twofold: one is its potential to position the reader and its power to address or exclude readers. Further aspects on a discursive level are the ways in which higher education, the labour market and its needs are constituted through them. The relation between text and the individual is both simple and complex. Simple, in that texts have to be sufficiently ‘attractive’ in order to attract attention in the first place. Complex, in the sense that the competition for our attention is so intensive in general that attention is seldom undivided (Silverstone, 1999). Giddens (1991: 26) refers to the ‘collage effect’ of modern media where stories and news items are juxtaposed although they share nothing in common but their timeliness. For school leavers, the collage effect is manifested in an information intensive environment with the various actors competing for their attention through the myriad forms afforded by the media, in their final year of schooling. An important aspect in attracting attention through text lies in its mode of address and the degree to which it offers the reader something to identify with or makes them feel especially chosen. Institutions, through texts, may offer particular identities to school leavers which in turn may function by producing the "appropriate individual" and hence to steer their

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16 This is taken up in greater detail in 8.2, Shirin’s portrait.
17 Text includes both print and electronic formats
activities. Alvesson and Willmott (2001) argue, for instance, that identity in this respect is increasingly constituted by public, profit-driven, and institutionalized discourses. I found this point of view of interest when I examined how young people are constituted in the literature as it seemed likely that the adoption or rejection of such identities had implications for information seeking activities.

In connection with this idea and taking a consumerist perspective, youth researcher Steven Miles (2003: 176) suggests that consumption (which I assume can be extended to study and career information) represents “an arena within which the individual negotiates the structural”. Selecting or choosing not to select from the range of informational texts is therefore not just a case of informing or neglecting to inform oneself but may also reflect symbolic claims to different identities. Miles argues that being addressed as a potential consumer gives young people a sense that they are actively part of a society where consumption can be used, for instance, to assert independence from parents or to demonstrate lifestyle. The point Miles makes in relation to youth consumption, and which I have found of interest to the work at hand, is that he brackets the idea of approaching the study of youth as a state of aspiring to be adult and finds it more relevant to define youth as a phase in which the individual tries to maintain a sense of stability before the inevitability of adulthood:

It is irrelevant whether or not young people can command the resources necessary to partake in this world. What matters is that they can imagine the world in which they live as a cocoon, in which they are in charge of their own destiny, and a life in which they are in control enough to make their choice of a new pair of trainers (Miles, 2003:177).

In this respect, accounts relating to the selection and use of career information services and literature can be interpreted as statements that illustrate the ways in which young people deal with the demands of the social world. Miles (2003:11) advocates a sociocultural interpretation of youth, “that sees the process of youth as being dependent upon the active endowment of meaning within it by young people” rather than as part of the life-cycle though which the young person passes on predictable routes to adulthood. With this departure point in mind I found it interesting to look at the literature produced for school leavers in order to investigate the social forces at work within it before going on to examine how young people negotiate and interpret the different claims on their attention.

For the purposes of this study, I have examined three brochures from three major actors from a discursive perspective. This is not to suggest that discourses embedded in such documents have the power to steer their helpless readers nor that they are the dominant discourses in the everyday lives of young people: my intention was more to see what there is, and to characterise the discursive ideas that young people meet in this particular arena, on the assumption that discourses
bear implications for action by recommending certain ways of thinking, activities and practices over others (Bergström & Boréus, 2000).

This analysis was built on the assumption that the discourses manifested in the brochures are not isolated or particular to the brochures themselves but are reflective of the institutions in which they have been constructed and the social forces at work within and between them. The brochures were of a general character and were in wide circulation. They were examined in an earlier study (Hultgren, 2006). They were published by The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise (CSE, 2003), 18 at last!, The Swedish Confederation of Professional Associations (SACO, 2003), Choose an Occupation, and The National Agency for Higher Education (2002), The Student Handbook. CSE is an organisation dedicated to furthering the interests of Swedish entrepreneurs, trade and industry while SACO’s role is to safeguard and further the interests of academic professionals on the labour market. The mandate of The National Agency for Higher Education is to implement government education policies, which in turn are oriented towards the creation and development of a knowledge economy (Ministry of Finance, 2004).

On a general level, the brochures share a common departure point in projecting the idea of the transformation of the Swedish labour market. They describe a dynamic society under transformation on economical, social and cultural levels where the borders between society and the labour market are unclear. These transformations are generally summarised under the themes of processes of globalisation, internationalisation and technical innovation which together shape the specific requirements to be met by young people if they are to survive in modern society. The information in the brochures is also contextualised in terms of Swedish national economy and labour market and educational policies. Each brochure has its own distinctive interests, and therefore different recommendations for how young people should meet the challenge of a society in change but they all relate to the idea of a ‘new careers’ discourse which both interplays and clashes with a ‘traditional career’ discourse. The new careers discourse conceptualises career in terms of a portfolio comprising a variety of self-managed and career ‘appropriate’ work and educational experiences (Cohen et al, 2004). The latter represents a traditional view of career where there is a greater emphasis on the idea of education as the first step on an upward progress through a profession and also implies that education empowers the individual in society. The brochures are presented below and all three are discussed in the chapter’s final section.

6.5.1 “Eighteen at last!”

CSE’s (2003) glossy and attractive brochure was delivered, personally addressed, to pupils in the final year of upper secondary studies as a “guide to life after school”. The first sentences in the brochure clarify who the sender is; an association that “strives towards making Sweden the best country in the world in which to run a business”. With its mission declared, the brochure then explains why young
people are targeted: “In order to implement change and improvement you need faith in the future and enterprise, not only among politicians and companies but from everyone!” This invites readers to become aware that as young people they are the agents of transformation and change and co-responsible for future entrepreneurial development. An entrepreneurial identity is constituted as “enterprising people who all want something and who get it” and as the major means of implementing change. Throughout the booklet young people are encouraged, through exemplary stories in the form of embedded interviews, and visual images of successful young entrepreneurs and people who have had a variety of work experiences, to experiment, to try their hands at different types of work, work abroad, and “have fun”, thus tapping into the idea of a youth period but suggesting it be used as a period of ‘aspiring adulthood’ (Miles, 2003) where young people fruitfully make use of their time by collecting a portfolio of experiences that will enhance future employability. The text also opposes the idea of “occupational identity”:

‘…and what do you do for a living?’ must be the most common question when two people meet for the first time. It’s as if a person’s occupation says something about their personality. It was probably true a long time ago; you started work when you were 15-16 years old and stayed there until you were pensioned. Think about it, 50 years, 8 hours a day at the same place. No wonder you ‘became’ your job.

Things are different today; nowadays you can try out different jobs and alternate work with [study] cramming without anyone thinking that you are unstable. Just the opposite, many employers prefer employees with experience from other branches than their own, it shows that you are curious and flexible. (CSE, 2003:58 my translation)

The above statement also reflects Giddens’ (1991) suggestion that in late modern society older certainties and collective identities have weakened and Beck’s (1992:89) argument that the diversification of life-styles have replaced older traditional social relationships thus making “the individual himself or herself, the reproduction unit of the social in the life-world”. Both Giddens and Beck refer to this transition as ‘individualization processes’ which create new social identities that will play a role in the transformation of society, although it is not clear how widespread or fundamental this transformation is. The statement above plays with these ideas, enhancing the idea of individualisation at the expense of the traditional through the use of a ‘new career discourse. It asks for an appreciation that modern careers involve a series of transitions, sometimes breaking with previous experiences and sometimes progressive, and suggests that careers are less predictable, less organisationally dependent, more self-driven and entrepreneurial than traditional concepts of career (Dany et al. 2003).
Emphasis in the brochure is placed on ‘flexibility’, ‘creativity’ and successful young people are described as ‘adventurous’, ‘enterprising’, ‘socially competent’, ‘willing to learn new things’ and who ‘develop all the time’. Higher education is dealt with summarily; “why study when that’s all you’ve done so far?” “Passion before an examination!” titles one section. Catch phrases such as these are used emotively to inspire the reader or to detract from the idea of higher education. Higher education is described as “an investment – in time and money”. Studies are consistently referred to as “cramming” (Swedish term, ‘plugget’) or, as one chapter is headed: “The study jungle”. The advantages of higher education are listed but qualified; for example: “and of course we have our adult responsibility – it’s good for you. It’s good to BECOME something – and they have a point (…) but it is not the best reason in the world for studying something” (CSE, 2003:28). “We” seems to refer to CSE together with young people while “they” are on the other side of the fence together with things that are ironically described as “good for you” implying that CSE has better suggestions. Not all education is treated disparagingly, however, Qualified Occupational Education (KY), a short-term form of education and training designed to fill specific gaps in the labour market is described as a “smart” solution and “about 80% get a job within a few months”. This particular educational form was in fact the outcome of collaboration between governmental institutions and Swedish Trade and Industry. Terms such as self-development, willingness to learn, flexibility are used in conjunction with the idea of enterprise, social transformation and individualised career pathways. Young people are constituted as entrepreneurs and consumers. Descriptions of higher education include implications of high costs, ‘old things’, ‘cramming’ ‘a jungle’ and ‘them’ as opposed to “we”. Learning itself is reduced to “learning new things”. Higher education is thereby challenged by CSE as a means of instigating change and improvement in Swedish society. It does so by consistently applying a new model of career positioned within what might be described as a functional learning society characterised by the idea of lifelong learning. It enhances the idea of ‘functional’ education for a modern world and, at the same time, challenging what it views as traditional and static occupational roles and higher education per se.

6.5.2 “Choose an occupation”
SACO’s (2003) brochure is specifically addressed to people “who want to know more about occupations associated with higher education”. The emphasis is primarily on occupations where education is defined as a means of getting there. The booklet provides an overview of different professions, educational pathways towards them, as well as prognoses of the future labour market for each profession. It includes short embedded interviews with young people on why they chose a particular profession. SACO is described as the union for professionals and information in the booklet is therefore constituted as facts and prognoses from the “absolute best authorities”. It also emphasises the value of the collective as a means of support for the individual both in professional development and in practical
matters connected with work conditions. As in CSE’s booklet SACO also promotes education as ‘an investment’ although in its structure it implies that higher education is the only realistic alternative in a knowledge economy. Unlike CSE, it endorses the idea of occupational identity by devoting a section to it in each description of occupations, entitled: “This is how you become a [profession]”. On one level it suggests stability; “As you probably choose an education for the rest of your life, you ought to choose something you are interested in” (SACO, 2003:5). It also presents a view of the professions as collective areas of expertise that develop in harmony with technical innovation and social change. On the other hand, there are also recommendations to look ahead, to gauge the labour market and the chances of getting a job on completing an education both at home and abroad, to be prepared for further education and even to create themselves to fit a particular career image, as ‘Moa’ touches upon in the following:

It’s not looking so good at the moment, but I hope things will change so that there are more jobs when I finish. Companies are not exactly searching for computer linguists so it’s up to me to show employers what uses they can have for my knowledge. There are opportunities here and there, but it’s up to me to find them. (Moa in SACO, 2003:49).

In this statement there is a shift from the idea of traditional professional careers to the idea of career as ‘boundaryless’ (Cohen et al., 2004); career becomes what we ourselves make of it through self-management. As in CSE’s brochure, learning is constituted as “learning new things about the world and being curious” and objectified as something to be personally marketed to potential employers. It is also constituted as a tool: “learning to think in a completely different way and to build arguments” (Ylva, in SACO, 2003:105). Academic qualifications are described as a “green card that opens doors”. Using the idea of the transformation of working life young people are construed as the bearers of new knowledge and unique education and whose responsibility is to make employers and companies aware of their resources.

The brochure also draws on the idea of education as life enrichment which will enable the individual to develop his/her own potential in society and to contribute in democratic development. This more traditional view is harnessed to a functionalist view of education: “It is important that you educate yourself for your own development, for your potential in society and to provide the possibility of choice on the labour market” (SACO, 2003:6). It is, however, seldom, in any of the brochures that society is referred to as separate from or other than the labour market.
6.5.3 “The Student Handbook”

The booklet *The Student handbook* (SH) from the National Agency for Higher Education focuses entirely on higher education and conditions of study; it opens declaring that university studies are “a way of life” and that “you will look back on it as one of the most enjoyable periods in your life” (SH, 2002:3). The book is organised in the alphabetical order of the universities which each present their own profiles. In the introduction, the individual is constituted as responsible for his/her own choices in a kind of disclaimer: “You are the only one who can know why you want to study. It can only be you that bears the answer to the question – what is a university education good for?” (2002:3). The sender is established as a public authority that quality assures courses and programmes at university level and whose task it is to provide information about universities and the education they offer (SH. 2002:3). Each university profile is complemented by statistics that draw attention to the numbers and gender ratios of the total number of students, and the qualifications and gender ratios of faculty members. These statistics are not related to the universities’ different institutions. The number of reading seats in the libraries is included as well as the proportion of university resources invested in libraries. There are no comments on the statistics, leaving the individual to draw his/her own conclusions. The selection of statistics seems somewhat arbitrary, but their inclusion suggests that these variables are something that readers ought to pay attention to in assessing quality.

The idea of the dynamic and changing nature of the labour market pervades the document and is somewhat ambivalently referred to at times: “The situation on the labour market changes rapidly. If it is difficult at one time for a specific occupational group to find work, that situation may well have changed a few years later” (SH, 2002:25). It suggests, in fact, that the situation on a future labour market is anybody’s guess. With a departure point in the assumption that the labour market is undergoing transformation, the profiles themselves suggest how these challenges might be met and a number of themes run through each profile. These include the importance of creating individual and unique education: “specialised courses are offered on Master levels and at the end phases of programmes. This will give you a unique education with a unique competence for future work” (Goteborg University in SH 2002:67) or “You can tailor your education to your own personal profile (…) At Lund’s University you can “participate yourself in developing your education”. (Lund University in SH 2002:140). Opportunities to make individual choices are emphasised in all profiles. Another pervading theme is that of cooperation with trade and industry (sometimes referred to as “reality”): “The University of Borås is strongly profiled towards trade and industry …it also offers nationally unique education” (SH 2002:75). A further theme is internationalisation; “experience of work abroad is increasingly valued and will be required more and more by future employers” (SH, 2002:129).

A less pervasive theme is that of pedagogical method and it is mentioned only in relation to innovative methods and student opportunities to influence their education: “Our university was the first in the country to apply and develop
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problem-based pedagogy” (Linköping University in SH, 2002:132). Higher education in itself provides:

…tools to tackle, structure and solve problems. No matter which education you choose it is always a good idea to acquire sound IT skills, languages, social skills and learn the art of how to learn. In order to continue to be attractive on the labour market you may have to further educate yourself or need to learn something completely new (...). With higher education in your baggage it will be easier to adapt to continual change on the labour market” (SH, 2002:25).

The brochure makes a case for higher education as a means of facilitating adaptation to change on the labour market. Learning is defined as problem-solving, and developing a variety of analytical, social and technical skills in readiness to meet the challenges of the labour market. On the whole, the themes in the booklet bolster the idea of ‘portfolio’ education as a means of meeting the challenges of the modern labour market. The management of a portfolio education is left to the individual, who is invited to view it as an exciting opportunity which will lead to an individually-driven portfolio career.

6.6 Implications for approaches to the future

The information in the brochures is shaped by different institutional perspectives and although all of them are characterised by the idea of society under transformation their emphases differ and this is manifested in the ways in which they negotiate between the new careers discourse and a traditional careers discourse. Describing a world in need of change and improvement, CSE’s brochure calls to young people to do their part through being adventurous and flexible, to collect multiple work experiences, and ‘go their own way’ thus contributing to the development of an entrepreneurial society which will per se transform the labour market. SACO’s brochure describes a relatively stable world with the professions developing in tune with challenges and developments on the labour market and with young people developing modern occupational identities. Collective security is afforded to some extent through the shared professional knowledge base of the unions and opportunities for learning in working life. The world depicted through the Student Handbook is one of inevitable change, transforming itself almost mechanistically to meet the challenges of globalisation and technical innovation. Challenges are to be met through increasing individualisation and specialisation and the creation and organisation of a learning society where members constantly learn and adapt in order to survive.

The claims and requirements embedded in the new career discourse may well be valid; that young people need to be flexible, socially competent, and entrepreneurial. They may need to construct an individualised education, acquire varied work experiences, be prepared to work abroad, know how to learn and
always be prepared to learn new things. However, the usefulness of a modern or portfolio view of education and career has been contested. Dany et al. (2003) argue that research on the new conditions for employment is limited and that the demise of traditional career pathways or careers within organisation is challenged by lack of evidence. In Sweden, Furusten and Zune (2004) argue that the rhetoric around ‘new’ types of careers obscures the fact that traditional careers and career pathways are still very much in evidence. A further point is that the idea of new types of career where education is positioned as purely functional may not necessarily appeal to young people. One reason for scepticism is that this view of the world can be interpreted as lacking in human meaning and as a mechanistic devourer of individual creativity, knowledge and accomplishments where individuals and their relationships actually disappear, despite the rhetorical emphasis on individualisation. This is because individuality itself is treated as a product among others to be used in the competition for jobs and in the rather abstract idea of ‘transformation’ which may not mean much to them. Some research has shown that young people in Sweden value aspects of working life that have to do with personal relationships, meaningfulness in relation to other aspects of their lives, and in terms of durability and geography rather than continual change and mobility (Furth et. al, 2002). The modern careers discourse which emerges so clearly in the brochures can be seen as a means of giving form to the political vision of a knowledge economy but with different emphases on how this is to be achieved. Study and career information is contextualised in perceived national labour market needs and educational policy rather than in the lives of young people. This does not necessarily mean a clash of interests and how the participants in the study relate to this discourse and to others will be taken up in the next chapter.

The background depicted here is brief and intended as an introduction to the analysis of the interviews. The participants enter the study with their different backgrounds, biographies, educational experiences and aspirations for the future, where career counselling plays a more or less conspicuous role. The life-worlds of the participants together with dispositions created through habitus can be expected to give them different outlooks on the future. There is a complex and shifting range of individual circumstances which circumscribe the material and social worlds of these young people. At the same time, the discourses of the public sphere concerning study and career choice and the nature of the labour market place options in a particular light and can be expected to mark young people’s assumptions and attitudes. The next chapter is based on an analysis of interviews with school leavers concerning the relation between their approaches to information seeking and plans for the future.
7 Approaches to information seeking

In the analysis four approaches to career and study related information emerged from the material which I have called; 1) active information seeking aimed at negotiating risk, 2) active information seeking towards an occupation, 3) seeking information for an extended transition, and 4) avoiding careers and study related information. The notion of approaches is used in the analysis in order to avoid categorizing people in groups. Instead my interest has been focused on the immediate social context of the narratives and connections to the broader ideological context (Stanley & Billig, 2004). In this view narratives are discursive resources which can be used by people to construct social identities which are not necessarily fixed and stable. The narratives are full of references to types of identity and while eschewing the idea that identities are singular to particular people, identity claims awakened my interest in what the participants were doing as they related stories of information seeking to the types of person they claimed to be. My interest in the analysis has also been on the strategies and tactics that participants give expression to in their accounts of information seeking together with the connections they make between who they are and the times they live in. Focus on a particular turning point in life, that of leaving school, has meant that the study is anchored to a point in time. In consequence, I did not take for granted that participants in the study had, in fact, engaged in career and study related information seeking. I did, however, assume that they related to this type of information even if it was to ignore it or defer dealing with it.

As will become apparent in the results, participants do not tend to reflect on information seeking as a discrete activity in itself; it is an activity that is enacted “for purposes beyond itself” as Sundin and Johannisson (2005) so aptly describe it. As such, descriptions of information related activities flow into accounts of discussions, analyses of career and study literature and media reports, and of visits to likely ‘information grounds’ (i.e. physical locations that promote the exchange of information, Pettigrew, 1997). On a discursive level, participants also use accounts of information seeking to make claims about themselves as individuals, positioning themselves either as active information seekers or providing reasons that made active information seeking inappropriate or difficult at this time.
7 Approaches to information seeking

The first approach, active information seeking aimed at negotiating risk, describes a strategy oriented towards making sense of the future labour market in relation to one’s own interests and higher education programmes. The second approach, active information seeking towards an occupation, describes goal oriented strategies where information seeking involved not only information on pathways into an occupation but also information on a variety of different aspects of the work itself. The third and fourth approaches describe strategies and tactics for dealing with careers and study related information which in practice meant deferring and avoiding careers related decision making. In the third approach participants accounted for an interest in higher education as such, while in the fourth approach participants were interested in getting jobs but had not in practice devoted much attention to looking for work.

In the following the results are presented with departure points in information seeking activity; that is in terms of the degree to which participants presented themselves as active seekers of information concerning study and career choice. Four participants, Shirin, Neil, Nora and Emily are portrayed in greater detail in the Chapter 8.

All of the participants had gathered some information on possible alternatives for action on leaving school. All of them had been to introductory lectures given by careers advisors during the first year of upper secondary school and several of them had consulted careers advisors on an individual basis, sometimes on more than one occasion. They were also aware of careers guidance services on the Internet and all had received brochures from different institutions of further education, although the quantity and profiles of such brochures varied depending on the upper secondary programmes taken by the participants. Some of the participants had been on organised visits to universities and most of them had had the opportunity to meet practitioners or professionals of their choice on a scheme organised by careers guidance during their second year although not all availed themselves of this opportunity.

7.1 Active information seeking aimed at negotiating risk

In this approach participants represented themselves as active information seekers and primarily concerned with connecting their interests with programmes in higher education and the future labour market. They were uncertain about what kinds of jobs might be available to them in the future and they perceived potential problems in the unpredictability of the labour market and in evaluating the strength of the connections between higher education and work. They referred to the transition from school to work via further education in terms of individually constructed pathways to the labour market: “You have to find your own niche” (Nora, 1) “You have to offer something special, something extra” (Andreas, 1). Interest in choosing a unique programme or in devising unique routes through education reflects a suggestion by Furlong and Cartmel (1997:7) that in the face of the greater diversity
of educational courses and programmes young people develop the impression that the routes they take should be unique, “and that the risks they face are to be overcome as individuals” which in turn increases subjective feelings of risk and insecurity. In this approach, participants emphasised a need to plan strategically for the future, for instance, by seeking and using information in order to evaluate the consequences of different alternatives. The new career discourse underlines the idea of personal responsibility in willingness to commit to a course of action to achieve specific goals. De Certeau (1984: 148) argues that creditable discourses give rise to practitioners; “to make people believe is to make them act”. This discourse, which can be discerned in formal study and career information as well as in the career and study guidance goals of the National Curriculum, is closely related to ideas of the increasing individualisation of career choice in modern society and it can be described as mediating a particular approach to career and study decision-making. This in turn implies that information seeking is seen as a tool for making sense of the future labour market so that the young person can shape his/her education accordingly.

The need for higher education was taken for granted and, common to this approach, was that participants identified themselves not only as active information seekers but also as ‘learners’; they viewed education as a pragmatic investment for a future professional life:

You have to have an education in Sweden to be able to…I mean you won’t get very far with qualifications from upper secondary school, will you? (Bea, 1)

In addition, Bella commented that higher education was “a must” for women and the only way of gaining a competitive edge over men. A pragmatic view of education, termed by some as the human capital rationale for learning (Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), is promoted in the National Curriculum as well as in two of the most widely circulated brochures directed at school leavers; Choose an Occupation (SACO, 2003) and The Student Handbook (The National Agency of Higher Education, 2002) in their advice to school leavers to be prepared to adapt quickly and competently to the ever changing demands of the market place and the effects of an ever increasing pace of technological innovation. Participants described their information related activities in terms of examining different options and preferences in order to minimise risk-taking and to personalise routes into professional life. Information seeking and use in this light was given meaning as a way of negotiating the risks participants perceived in opting for higher education. The participants referred to a number of sources of information, these included:

- University produced information both in the form of brochures and web sites
- Labour market statistics embedded in mass-media reports on the labour market and higher education
7 Approaches to information seeking

- Human sources such as careers counsellors, teachers and mentors in their professional capacities
- Insiders such as friends or acquaintances at university
- Family members

The degree to which participants had access to these different sources and the degree to which they were trusted and used varied, of course, depending on differences in individual social and cultural capital. They were used in a process of complex interaction with each other often as a means of verifying, supplementing or corroborating information and in simultaneously seeking personal advice and encouragement.

The idea of individual path construction suggests that participants had clearly defined departure points for their information related activities. In this approach, departure points were based on participants’ own subject interests that they intended to build further on, although they had not as yet defined any specific occupation or profession to aim for. Bella, for instance, wanted to build on what she had learned on the Entrepreneurship programme:

When I started on this programme I felt that I’d chosen a track that I want to go on with. I mean, you carry on studying subjects you find interesting. I think I know something about this [marketing] now and it makes me want to build on it (puts tips of fingers together in an upward motion to suggest a focusing of interests). (Bella, 1)

A problem which participants in this approach had in common was that the subjects they were interested in could not automatically be connected with specific careers or occupations. This meant that searching for information was focused to those institutions that offered specific subjects in combination with information concerning graduate employment prospects. Other criteria that interested participants included teaching methodology, the reputation and location of universities including locational characteristics, and student life and accommodation.

In the following, accounts of active information seeking are described as part of coherent strategies for making meaningful connections between interests and future work opportunities with departure points in what participants sought information about, the sources they used and the ways in which they made use of information. As participants were focused on higher education, a departure point is taken in their use of university produced information. This information was gathered in the form of brochures that were sent home to participants, brochures they sought themselves either through the career guidance services at their schools or by ordering it through university web sites, or/and information collected directly from university web sites. In participants’ accounts, seeking and using careers and
study information emerges as a complex process of informing themselves through social interaction and as parts of personal narratives. Towards the end of the section I exemplify by relating information seeking and use to the contexts of individual lifeworlds.

7.1.1 Using university produced information
Participants with a pragmatic approach to education searched for detailed and current information from a number of sources in combination with each other in order to minimise the risk they might take on embarking on a long educational programme. Given that the labour market is portrayed as unpredictable and that prognoses are difficult, at best, to interpret, together with the proliferation of information about university programmes and courses that school-leavers receive in the form of brochures and web-portals organised by the different actors in the career guidance system; it is not an easy task for the individual to make sense of it all in terms of their own interests and ambitions. In addition, the income of institutions of higher education in Sweden is funded to a large extent through the registration of students which may have the effect of blurring the line between impartial information to potential students and marketing. They described the information they had collected in terms of ‘piles’ stacked “under my bed”, on kitchen worktops and in “four carrier bags”. However, participants seemed aware of what was required of them; Bella, for example responds to my question in a brochure-like language:

*F.H.: What do you look for when you read the catalogues?*
*Bella:* The subjects, I look for the subjects they read on the programmes, if they include the subjects that interest me or could interest me. That’s what I look for, mainly. Then I think about what they lead to. Will I be able to get a job? What’s the salary? Is it worth taking a study loan if the salary is low? (…)Where is the best programme? I haven’t fully decided which programme to read but I’m leaning towards marketing from an economic perspective. Then I have to find out where the courses are and which the best places are. (Bella, 1)

This awareness of the correct procedures according to the information seeking discourse of the career guidance system was general among participants. However, although Bella lists what she ‘ought’ to find out, she is vuger about how to go about it, saying “Well, I’ll read all the brochures!” None of the participants, in fact, demonstrated such a systematic and objective process of information seeking in practice. One explanation is that they were uncertain about the occupations university programmes might lead to, they hoped they “would find something along the way” (Tom, 1) as they progressed through their studies.
The major source of information about connections between higher education and the labour market used by the participants was university produced information on programmes and courses. However, none of the participants with a pragmatic approach relied entirely on this information but used it to scan their options and as departure points for discussions with family, friends and careers counsellors. They tended to view information of this kind as consumers choosing from a range of products. Tom, for instance, turned to his older brother who had recently graduated from university for help in analysing university brochures from a labour market perspective:

He told me to read carefully, for example, if it says ‘this is still an expanding area’, that means no jobs yet and not certain there will be. But if it says ‘according to Statistics Sweden’s prognosis, demand for these qualifications will increase a great deal’ then you can trust it more. (Tom, 2)

In the above excerpt Tom and his brother question the neutrality of university information by reading ‘between the lines’. Statistics Sweden is generally acknowledged as an authority in predicting labour market needs thereby endorsing some of the information in the brochure. With his brother’s support, Tom reads programme descriptions using awareness of the difference between marketing and information as an analytic tool. He describes another method of evaluating the labour market relevance of programme information:

F.H.: When you searched for a programme were you thinking about the labour market?
Tom: Yes, I checked what jobs they led to and if they thought there would be a lot of that kind of work in five or six years time.
F.H.: How did you check that? Did you ask anyone?
Tom: No, I just looked at the job lists in the programme descriptions and I chose those that led to a lot of different jobs. (Tom, 2)

With a departure point in his interest in mathematics and computer technology, Tom took the job lists at face value, relying on the length of lists as a gauge of programme relevance to potential employment areas; the longer the list the greater the chance of a job on qualifying.

Nora noted that it was difficult to assess the market value of new programmes; “Mm, the thing is that this programme, it’s only existed,…this is only the second year, so no-one has become anything yet, so I don’t know what the labour market is like” (Nora, 1). This comment suggests a fear of coming out into the world of work with irrelevant knowledge and skills through having made a choice based on
insufficient information. On one hand, Nora viewed herself as a potential supplier of skills to meet labour market demand and, on the other hand, as an informed and responsible consumer of higher education:

I checked a programme at Uppsala University, something that included environment, water power or wind power. ‘Oh!’ I thought when I read the introduction: ‘Do you want to work with environmental issues abroad?’ It sounded so good, it’s just exactly what I want to do! Then, much later on it says, ‘this is for people that have studied a lot of physics and technology,’ That’s not what I want to study! But you don’t notice that at first, you really have to read every word if you’re going to choose something. You can’t just think ‘that’s what I’m going to study!’ You have to look at the details and not let yourself get fooled by the headings. (Nora, 1)

In the above, Nora expresses awareness of her power and of her own responsibility as a consumer to make informed choices by paying attention to detail. One problem connected with the evaluation of programmes was the perceived unpredictability of the labour market. Emma, who was interested in economics, voiced her anxieties in terms of risk:

Well, when you look at the labour market for people that have studied economics then what’s really scary is that the programme is four, maybe five years long. I mean if you go for something like that you have to be sure that you’re going to get a job afterwards. (…) Of course you know it’s an unstable market; economics, it goes up and down so much. (Emma, 1)

Awareness of higher education as a risk-filled project as well as of the likely bias in university produced information in a long-term perspective guided information activities in particular ways: Emma searched programme information for signs of flexibility, the inclusion of international studies and the existence of options where she could tailor her education to meet the requirements of the future labour market:

Well, I discovered that it’s good if you study something abroad so I search the brochures looking for that kind of thing. I know that you can do it in Gothenburg [University] and Jönköping [International Business School]. They have agreements with other countries. It’s not the most important, the most important is that it leads to a job but it’s good if you can show that you’ve been abroad. (Emma, 1)
Encouragement to study abroad can be traced to political documents such as The Bologna Declaration (1999) and is manifested in the study and careers literature through the inclusion of chapters or sections containing information about studying abroad. It is perhaps noteworthy that Emma does not refer to an interest in studying abroad but to what she perceives as a requirement; as De Certeau (1984) points out, creditable discourses produce practitioners. Emma attempted to validate university information by continual alertness to job prognoses in the mass media; “you keep your eyes and ears open all the time. You have to think about getting a job afterwards” (Emma, 1). A radio report during her final year made her reconsider her choice of economics:

Emma: I’ve just heard on the radio that those who have just graduated, that there are only a few who get jobs afterwards.
F.H.: In economics?
Emma: Yes, because it’s so popular, so now I’m wondering (pause) maybe it’s stupid? (Emma, 2)

Here, Emma touches on a significant structural problem; the reflexive effect of popularity trends in education as well as on personal responsibility for keeping abreast with developments on the labour market. The effect of the radio broadcast was to make her change her plans, at least for the time being, and illustrates how contingency brings to bear on individual strategic planning.

Other ways of using university produced information included scanning its contents to see how often a subject recurred in different programmes. This involves an assumption that there is a connection between the number of courses on offer and labour market demand. These observations could be authenticated in discussions with others who could be assumed to have an expert viewpoint. Bella’s interest in marketing, for instance, was encouraged by others:

Bella: Well, there are a lot of programmes that include marketing and that says something. And then I feel that in marketing especially there’s a future wherever you are, there’s a market for it.
F.H.: Have you checked that out?
Bella: Yes, a bit, with people who live in the business world. They say that marketing is always worth investing in. (…)
F.H.: What kind of contacts do you have in the business world? Bella: I have an advantage in my father. He works all over Sweden, and lately, internationally, with clothes and things. And then I have contacts in the company we’ve done our projects in. (Bella, 1)
Bella positions her father as particularly knowledgeable because he had international experience as well as experiences from “all over Sweden”, and furthermore, he was knowledgeable about the textile trade, the area in which Bella was particularly interested. Several participants were members of families who shared and encouraged their interests and with whom they discussed university produced information. Bella and a school-friend had also conducted a market survey for a company as a school project. Their mentors had been pleased with the results and had encouraged Bella and her friend to study marketing. This kind of positive reinforcement and interest both from home and the workplace combined to strengthen dispositions to study and/or work in particular fields in unremarkable, everyday social interactions.

Participants also used university produced information to investigate teaching methods and educational standards in the programmes that attracted them. They described this type of information as a part of the overall picture they were in the process of constructing or as a “piece in the puzzle” (Nora, 1) rather than as a primary concern. Anna compared the information in brochures to find a programme that would suit her. She wanted to work within the cultural sector: “I was thinking of something like administering cultural events in a town or something like that” (Anna 1). She was torn between two programmes, one that had, in her view, a more interesting subject content; “they have courses in drama, theatre and film, I’m really tempted by it” and one that offered the stability of a membership in a class throughout the programme with teaching in small groups as well as work practice. She opted for the latter programme after consideration:

you have to lay it out all before you and think about it (…). One of them leads to a job and there’s the advantage of being in a class…for me at least, I need that kind of stability. The other is really far away but it offers the programme I’d really like to take…but it doesn’t lead to a job! (Anna, 2).

Tom used university produced information to ascertain the level of mathematics required for the different programmes in civil engineering he had under consideration: “I’ve made sure that the maths is on the highest level; I don’t want to have to study the same things again, and it says something about the standard [of the programme], if they require the highest level18”. (Tom, 2)

Seeking to become well-informed through university produced information had its limits and it was largely used in combination with other sources of information. Several participants said that it became really interesting once they had chosen a university: “Then you really read them [brochures], to see what else there is and what it’s like” (Tom, 2). A more effective way to find out more was to visit universities and this will be taken up in the next section.

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18 Mathematics is offered in progressive modules in Swedish upper secondary schools from A to E where E is the highest level. Programmes differ in the levels they offer.
7.1.2 Visiting ‘information grounds’

Invariably, those who visited universities had friends there. Some participants had visited universities on ‘open days’ but these had been large-scale affairs visited by hundreds of school leavers at the same time. As one participant commented “you don’t get any real contact, it’s more like a fairground”. Knowing an ‘insider’ was considered particularly helpful if they also shared participants’ subject interests. Bea, for example, was able to visit a student friend whom she had known ‘since nursery school’ and who was currently studying business economics:

I asked him about the maths and how difficult it is. He let me look at his books and I thought ‘I should be able to manage that, and if he can do it so can I!’ He said as well that you have to take a lot of responsibility for your work, there’s no-one pushing you to go to lectures or leave in assignments on time. I think that would suit me really, I mean, I’m not a kid anymore. (Bea, 1)

Bea’s comment illustrates Bandura’s (1994) theory, that individual’s beliefs about their self-efficacy are supported by observing people similar to themselves succeed in their endeavours. In the above, the exchange of information took place in a typical ‘information ground’ or socio-physical location which not only facilitated the flow of information (Fisher & Naumer, 2006) but also makes it real and relevant in personal terms. Bea and a friend made the most of their personal connections in order to put themselves in the picture of university life: “It’s fun, we have friends at Linköping University and in Copenhagen and when you visit them, you can see what it’s like and you can see yourself being there, too” (Bea, 2).

Not all participants had friends at university that could give them inside information on student life and studies. Tom, however, managed to forge contact with students through his membership in an online computer games club. He discovered that one of the teams his club played against included technology students with interests similar to his own. Together with other members in his team he was invited to visit the student team at their university. The second time we met Tom described his visit:

Tom: Yes, I’m in a team that plays Counterstrike on the net. We’ve played a lot against a team of students from Lund and when they heard we were interested in the university they asked us down for a weekend. That was great! We saw how they lived and I really liked the town, I wouldn’t mind living there at all
Tom’s visit can be understood in part as an intensive information seeking occasion that confirmed his sense of affinity with the students he was able to meet, person to person, and which contributed to his decision to formally apply to the university. Actively connecting with identified sources in a specific information ground is a mode of information seeking identified by McKenzie (2003a) as particularly effective because it not only facilitates information seeking but also places the actor in a position where he/she can be readily identified by others as potentially interested in information. For instance, Tom was offered information by others: “One guy told me that it was fairly easy to change programmes once you’ve got in if you’re not happy with what you’ve chosen” (Tom 2). Another new acquaintance told him not only how to register for student accommodation but also which student accommodation was considered most attractive: “he said put your name down for XX because it’s really central, five minutes walk from the institution and it has the best parties”. (Tom, 2)

Participants described visits to universities as important to them not only because the place in itself facilitated the exchange of factual information but also because meetings with ‘insiders’ allowed them to position themselves within the picture of university life. Participants’ knowledge ‘about’ university studies and life could be contextualised and tested giving them an initial insight into its cultural patterns and ways of interpreting the environment that characterise a student identity.

### 7.1.3 Using university status as a criterion in information seeking

Participants restricted information seeking in various ways. One way was to use university status to limit the number of options they needed to consider:

If there’s a university that has a special programme that no other place has, a special niche, then I’d choose that because it’s unique in Sweden. But if you want to study some special kind of technology and you can study it both at (X, a renowned Swedish university) and some little regional university, then I’d choose X, I mean, it makes a difference on the labour market if you see what I mean? (Nora, 1)

A potential dilemma arises between constructing a unique education and implementing a practical class knowledge of the world of education and university status. For Nora, the solution is obvious and she allows university status to determine her choice. In a similar manner, Tom prioritised status as he considered his options:
Tom: I think it’s [Y, regional university in Northern Sweden] too far away and anyway, it doesn’t have a good reputation.

F.H.: How do you know that?

Tom: I’ve heard it, or rather, it’s the other ones you hear about. It’s Lund and Chalmers that are on TV, that’s where the research is, hardly Y! Anyway, everyone knows about Lund.

F.H.: How do you mean?

Tom: Employers, they know about Chalmers and Lund, they’ve probably gone there themselves (Tom, 1)

In the above excerpt Tom contrasts universities on the basis of their visibility in the media. Tom’s references to “you” and “everyone” emphasises that it is not whether or not universities carry out prominent research that is important, it is what “everyone” believes to be true. Tom also related his evaluation of universities to his assumptions concerning potential employers; that employers favour students from high status universities, particularly if they have attended those universities themselves. That he does so was related to his uncertainty about where his studies might lead him in terms of a specific occupation and if his education would be of real use to him on the labour market. This implies that the number of universities which hosted programmes that Tom might be interested in were restricted from the outset, reducing as a matter of course the amount of information he needed to consider and, in his view, reducing risk through his choice of a high status university.

Both Tom and Nora came from families of academics so it is not surprising that they use university status to limit the number of information sources they connected with. In contrast, Emma used physical location as a choice criterion. With a focus on economics programmes, she had collected university brochures from all over the country and thereafter selected universities on the basis of their geographical position:

I looked at Uppsala and Stockholm but no, I decided that I want a nice, small town, I don’t want there to be too many people that press in on me. I live in the countryside now and that’s what I like. I want to be able to walk in the forest. There’s no possibility of that in Stockholm or Lund. (Emma, 1)

Emma reasoned that high status universities were not of particular interest to her, because “I’m not that kind of person; I’m not looking for a top job, I want a secure job, like in a bank” (Emma, 1). Using the Internet, she had researched the physical environments of different universities via her school’s computers not only looking for universities in smaller towns but also for towns with stated environmental policies: “I’m on the look-out for towns that are environmentally friendly, (laugh)
it’s not that easy to find!” Emma’s comments here can be described as a justification strategy because she was aware that economics was a popular and major subject at the large business schools. She justifies this restriction of her options in the interview by refusing to identify with the kind of people that she assumed studied at these institutions and by prioritising her personal preferences even though she insisted what was most important to her was that her studies would lead to a job. This might seem paradoxical but seen within the context of individual life-worlds it is understandable. In the next section I take up the family contexts of information seeking in order to highlight its relation to individual action.

7.1.4 Family contexts of information seeking and use

Cornelius argues that anyone who “is using information is participating in a practice, is part of a social life” (1996:18). In their accounts, participants contextualised the seeking and use of information to different interlinking arenas; the family environment, the institutional environment of school and to leisure environments with friends. Participants in the process of making strategic decisions emphasised interaction within their families as a major part in the process and as the main forum in which information was referred to, examined and discussed. Although the media and, indeed, many research studies, portray conflict between young people and their parents as part and parcel of the young person’s struggle to develop an independent identity the participants in the study, in general, described their parents as supportive and interested in their well-being and plans for the future. Choice of studies and careers was often, but not in every case, described as a family project where information was generated, negotiated and discussed in the normal course of everyday life:

Nora: I talk a lot about it with Mum and Dad
F.H.: And what do they think?
Nora: They think that this is my own choice and that I should do what I think is right for me and they can give me advice but it has to be me that makes the decision and that I’m satisfied with whatever decision I make. I’ve talked to them about taking a year off (…) but Mum thinks that I might as well go straight to university, seeing as I haven’t tired of studying. They think it would be good for me to move away from home, you know, things like that, we talk about it all the time (Nora, 1).

Participants, in general, emphasised that the major responsibility for seeking information and planning for the future was theirs alone, an idea which was endorsed by their families. In an American study, Schnieder and Stevenson (1999) found that some parents believe that encouraging “adultlike” norms and behaviour
in their children is all the help they need to find a realistic path towards adulthood and for this reason they allow their children to take the major responsibility for planning their own futures. In a Swedish context I think it is fair to say that the idea of individual responsibility for study and career choice is thoroughly grounded in official policies and documents; it is not a case of ‘allowing’ young people to take responsibility, it is taken for granted that they will do so and that parents will support their endeavours. The idea of coercing young people (or exerting more than mild pressure) to go to university or follow a specific career path is more or less taboo. However, although a discourse of personal responsibility was prevalent in participant’s accounts, at the same time most participants who were planning strategically for the future emphasised the significance of discussion within their families. Family discussions, are of course coloured by the norms and values mediated within the family itself, where each family is a product of its social situation. Tom, for instance, came from a middle-class family that can be described as rich in social capital and where it was naturally assumed that he would go to university. He described a discussion around his final school project:

I made a programme that rendered a picture of our school where you could go in and feel you were walking up the stairs (…). Mum thought it was really good, she thought it would be a useful thing for architects. I don’t know if I want to be an architect, they say it’s really difficult to get work these days but Dad said I should think about doing that kind of thing at university, so that’s what I’m looking for. (Tom, 1)

Bea, Bella, Nora and Tom described numerous occasions when they talked about their plans and hopes for the future with their families, for instance, around the dinner table, in planning final school projects, in gathering information about studies and, in general, in ongoing conversations in the practice of everyday life.

Some participants came from non-academic backgrounds. Anna and Emma belonged to the first generation in their families who contemplated university studies. Emma described her family as working class, her mother had died when she was very young and her father was unemployed at the time of the interviews. She had an older brother who had dropped out of upper secondary education:

He didn’t care much about school and he didn’t make it either. He wonders why I want to study (…) but I’ve understood that it would be good for me to leave home, get away, and have my own life and education, I think, is the only way. (Emma, 2)

Her father was supportive to the extent that “he said ‘it’s your life, you can do what you want’. He doesn’t interfere with my choices” (Emma, 2). She was interested in
mathematics, economics and art and was attracted to the idea of working in a bank; “somewhere secure, where you work with other people”, although she was unsure in what capacity. Unlike most of the other young people in this group she had not particularly enjoyed school life and felt she was “not like the others” on her programme who joined in extra curricular activities such as writing for the school paper, or joining drama and film clubs or being members of student committees. Participation in these types of activities can be seen ways of developing social capital in cultural competence but Emma felt ‘out of place’ in these types of social constellations. This background suggests that Emma was not familiar with the ways of thinking about study and careers information that characterise middle-class approaches.

Emma had started making plans to study economics at university level already during the first year of the upper secondary programme and had examined her options and planned her strategy in detail, sometimes with the aid of her careers counsellor whom she had consulted on a number of occasions during her studies. She did so, because she could not “get that kind of help at home.” She emphasised that she had not discussed her plans with her family, and that her friends considered her plans to be “a bit strange, but I want to do things on my own; it’s the only way I can make things happen for me”. (Emma, 2) What she initially wanted to do was to qualify herself for work in banking by studying economics or accountancy. However, media reports in her final year that graduates in economics were having difficulty finding work made her uncertain whether or not to continue with her plans. The information concerning the relation between studies in economics and the labour market did not amount to more than an indication that students of economics were at that time having trouble finding work. How the situation would be in three or four year’s time was unclear to Emma and therefore, from her point of view, higher education in economics was too risky for her.

I met Emma by chance a few weeks after the second interview and her plans had changed radically. She had been offered a place at an art college, the application for which she described as a spur of the moment action initiated and strongly encouraged by her art teacher. It meant that she could move away from home and “give me some breathing space, do something for fun for a change”. Ball et al (2000) argue that each stage of choice processes involves negotiating a set of contingencies and the ways in which they are dealt with are related to the cultural, emotional and economic capital of those involved. Emma’s change of plan can be seen as a spontaneous response to an opportunity that solved some of her immediate problems, for instance, her need to live her own life by moving away from home.

Bea, Bella and Nora, who could discuss higher education and career plans on an everyday basis with their families also made use of career guidance but only in practical matters such as collecting application forms, university brochures and seeking help in navigating the Internet. Tom made no use whatsoever of the services of the careers counsellor, claiming he did not even know where the office
was located in his school. He added; “you should be able to do that kind of thing yourself!” suggesting that he viewed career guidance both as a support for those unable to help themselves and as purely filling an administrative function. Emma and Anna had a very different relationship with their career counsellors: “I pop in all the time and she asks me how things are going” (Anna). Emma said that she had been given so much to read by the careers counsellor that she was in a position to advise her friends and give them “tips”.

7.1.5 Summary

The major information issue for participants intent on constructing a strategic plan for the future concerned the future labour market and the nature of work in relation to participants’ interests. The young people in the study who wished to build further on interests developed during upper secondary programmes described themselves as active information seekers and intensive and extensive users of career and study related information. They focused on constructing individualised routes into the labour market on the basis of the interests they had developed at upper secondary level. They are also, with the exceptions of Emma and Anna, backed up by rich family resources readily accessible to them in everyday life. Emma’s ambitions, on the other hand, were a new experience for her family and she also described her ambitions as unusual among her friends. Participants like Emma, who did not have access to appropriate informal sources of information, were heavily reliant on formal sources such as those mediated by careers services and via the mass-media. Emma’s narrative stands in contrast to those of Nora, Tom and Bella; all of them were aware of the risk involved in choosing a specialised programme that might not correspond to labour market needs, but only Emma refrained from taking the risk by proceeding with her plans. While Tom, for instance, was prepared to embark on lengthy course of studies towards an undefined career with undefined work tasks and qualifications in technology, Emma preferred to wait and see how the job market for economics graduates developed.

Related to Kuhlthau’s (1993) model of the information seeking process (see section 3.6) participants in this approach could be placed between stages three and four. They had a departure point for information seeking in their interests but found it difficult to be precise about an occupation or the possible outcomes of their studies. This was due in part to inconsistencies in the information available and to their perceptions of a largely unpredictable labour market.

These descriptions of information related activities underline the significance of relevant personal networks and access to ‘inside information’ as well as to appropriate ‘information grounds’. The process of becoming informed emerges as highly interactive and socially situated. Within families, world views are shaped that, for instance, dispose young people to university studies. Through visits and meetings with university students, dispositions towards and images of student life can be contextualised and models of ways of solving problems in these particular
social settings can be observed. Bea, Tom and Nora all emphasised the significance of family discussions in the planning of their strategies for the future where information was exchanged, supplemented, verified and approved. Uncertainty regarding their career prospects after university studies made them rely to some extent on their perceptions of the status of universities which helped them to choose between different alternatives. Emma, on the other hand, made intensive use of formal sources of information and, apart from consultations with her careers counsellor, was largely on her own in interpreting its meaning and relevance to her own situation.

In general, participants found it difficult to relate the system of higher education to the labour market.
7.2 Path followers: active information seeking about career pathways and occupational knowledge, skills and practices

Information seeking in this approach differed from that of the previous approach in that consideration of a future labour market was backgrounded by participants in favour of a marked interest in the practices, skills and knowledge of the specific occupations that attracted them and ways of entering these occupations. As in the previous approach they used a number of sources but there were differences in the ways in which they were used and in the relevance they accorded sources. They included:

- Information produced by universities and other institutions of further education regarding specific programmes and courses
- Experts or practitioners in specific occupations
- Careers counsellors, teachers and mentors in their professional capacities
- Insiders such as friends and colleagues at workplaces and in higher education
- Family members, particularly when they represented occupations participants were interested in.

Participants described their interests in specific occupations in terms of commitment to ideals. Translated literally from Swedish, they said they ‘burned’ for something; they were of the opinion that “everyone burns for something, you just have to find it” (Andreas, 1) or they described themselves as “looking for something to burn for” (Sam, 1). The ideals they committed to varied; Andreas wanted to be a journalist because journalism in his view gave people “an equal right to have their voices heard” (Andreas, 1). Nina wanted to be an interpreter for the deaf because she wanted “to help people less fortunate than I am” (Nina, 2) Shirin wanted to contribute “to building a just society” while Max wanted to use his “artistic creativity” by working with other people for common goals. These types of ideals were shared by many of the participants but in this approach participants had translated ideals to occupations which in turn gave them a focus for information seeking.

The formulation of a focus can be related to Kuhlthau’s model (1993) of the information seeking process (see section 3.6). The model was primarily developed in relation to work on problem-centred school assignments and later expanded to cover information seeking in relation to work tasks. According to the model, the formulation of a focus facilitates a more effective and efficient use of information systems simply because the individual has passed the stage when general information is interesting and they can concentrate on gathering information relevant to their focus. They have a clearer sense of direction which makes it possible for them to specify what it is they are looking for in information. In this
approach participants were interested in in-depth knowledge and information concerning occupations they were interested in which, in turn, furnished them with ideas on how to construct realistic plans through which to achieve their goals. The metaphor of path following is used to illustrate participants’ views of their activities as discerning various pathways to occupations and following them rather than the idea of constructing their own pathways, as in the previous approach. For the participants higher education was viewed as necessary insofar as it was required as a formal qualification for professions. The portrait of Shirin (see 8.2) depicts a young woman whose information strategy is particularly characterised by this approach.

In the following information seeking is described with departure points in what participants sought information about. In consequence, different types of information related activities are incorporated rather than described separately.

### 7.2.1 Information about pathways to occupations

Information was described as particularly relevant if it contributed to participants understanding both of the routeways into and the practices of specific occupations they were interested in. Participants sought ways of deepening their understanding of the nature of the work involved, of ascertaining and developing occupational skills and of generally widening their perspectives with respect to a particular occupation. Access to reliable information varied depending on whether or not participants had personal contacts within the occupations they aimed for. Andreas, for example, who aimed to become a journalist, had significant resources in colleagues on the newspaper where he did free-lance work: “I found out that you could do military service as a journalist, that’s what many of my colleagues did, and it’s a really good way.” A glance at Andreas’ information horizon (App.VII) reveals that his immediate family and social network included a TV reporter, journalists and an editor. In the following extract Andreas describes how he discovered a viable way of becoming a journalist. At the time he was working part-time on a youth scheme at the local newspaper:

When I found out something just casually through someone who worked at the newspaper who said ‘I think you can do military service’\(^\text{19}\) by being a reporter’(…). Then I went home and looked through the brochures I’d been sent about military service. I went through them but found nothing. Then I found a web address; lumpen.nu, so I went out on the Internet and checked it out and found my way to a page about the education of information soldiers. I read it through and what it meant and I thought, ‘yes, this is something for me’. Then I asked around

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\(^{19}\) All eighteen year old men were required to enrol for military service at this time (2003/4). To become an information soldier candidates were placed in a trainee programme which included work on the military newsletter
at the newspaper if there was anyone that had done it and I went and asked them about it. One of them was one of my bosses so I asked him ‘How was it? How did it work? Do you think it’s something I should go for?’ And he really thought I should, so that’s how I discovered a way. (Andreas, 1)

In the above excerpt Andreas refers both to being identified as someone interested in becoming a journalist at his workplace and being offered information voluntarily on which he immediately acted. Apart from seeking confirmation and factual information on the website he simultaneously related the information he found to his personal interests and ambitions. He describes an ongoing series of conversations over time through which he confirms his personal suitability for the work through asking experts such as the journalists whom he worked with and his boss who were all familiar with his work. And he concludes: “This [training and work experience on the military newsletter] can be a little VIP lane where you can get a foot in and that feels really good.” (Andreas, 1)

Several of the participants with clear occupational goals referred to these types of ongoing conversations particularly when members of their families were also practitioners in the fields they were interested in. Madeleine, who wanted to be a photographer, had a parent who owned a small photography studio. Max’ father was a typographer and Max was interested in graphic design. Michael’s father and brother owned and ran a small advertising agency in which Michael hoped to become a partner. He described his interest as rooted in his family background and as something that had become a family project:

F.H.: How do you think people get the jobs they get?

*Michael*: Well, in my case it was the family, I remember since I was little, I used to watch my father working and it interested me. (…) My dad says that I can go further than him [his brother]; he thinks I should study first and then see what options I have. (Michael, 1)

However, not all the participants aiming for specific occupations had the advantage of its being in the family, though these advantages were, in fact, considerable. They had, for instance, everyday access to practitioners whose knowledge, opinions and advice guided them on a personal level on how best to proceed in realising their ambitions. They were accustomed to everyday talk concerning the occupation and they were fairly familiar with its culture, practices and skills. Formal information could be corroborated, explained or legitimised in interpersonal social processes with practitioners who could help participants to evaluate information from their own perspectives, offer them information and encourage further action. Max, for instance, discussed brochure information on different types of courses with his father:
Well, at one point I thought of going in more for printing techniques, the technical side of things, I showed my dad [course information on the Internet] and we talked about it. He said that I’d be better off working on the visual side, on visual effects, because he thinks I’m good at that, that I have an ‘eye’ for effects. That’s why I’ve been looking for courses in illustration and in digital illustration. (Max, 2)

Max describes a process of interaction through which his focus becomes more personalised as he discusses his options with his father in relation to the available information.

In contrast, Shirin describes her family’s scepticism towards her ambitions to become a lawyer, an occupation they were completely unfamiliar with: “they think it’s stupid to struggle for something, to fight for something that I might not be able to reach”. Not being able “to reach” suggests that her ambition was not only too high above Shirin but also far out of the family’s reach. It is mostly in participants’ lack of reference to personal contacts in occupations that the significance of such sources emerges in the data material. The young people in the study who had formulated occupational goals but who did not have easy access to practitioners actively sought information and support from teachers, career counsellors and formal information sources such as web-sites and brochures. This in turn required the ability to discern and connect with relevant human sources of information such as teachers, and was not always easy to do.

Nina discerned a number of useful contacts and sources at her school and used brochures and the Internet when she wanted to find out all she could about becoming an interpreter for the deaf:

_Nina:_ Well, I’ve talked to the careers counsellor and my sign language teacher. I have loads of books and then there’s the Internet (…) I’ve talked to my aunt who works at a university [as an administrator], we’ve talked a lot about how I should choose and how to find a way.

_F.H._: So she’s been interested?

_Nina:_ Yes, she’s really good, she knows what she’s talking about. She gives me a lot of tips and things and then I’ve talked to B, the careers counsellor.

_F.H._: Has there been anything that you wanted to know about that has been difficult to find out about?

_Nina:_ Not that I can think of, everything has run so smoothly and my sign language teacher knows just about everything. (Nina, 2)
In the excerpt above it is clear that Nina experienced no great difficulties in gathering relevant information from a variety of sources or in effectively making use of the human sources within her reach. As in Andreas’ case, she describes in a matter of seconds a series of interconnecting conversations and activities on a variety of aspects of becoming an interpreter for the deaf. Her aunt, teacher and careers counsellor contributed with information and advice on different aspects of studies and work:

The careers counsellor says things like ‘choose something you think is fun’ and my cousin says ‘study something for fun but make sure you move away from home because that’s the best part’. Some think the social side is most important; others make me think about study loans. They go in different directions but the main thing is that nobody says, ‘you’re making a bad choice!’(Nina, 1)

However, one problem did emerge in connection with Nina’s choice and this was her apprehension in moving away from home. Having a chronic illness made it particularly worrisome for her to be at a great distance from home. An overnight visit at a student hall of residence\textsuperscript{20} was organised for her by her sign language teacher and this experience together with conversations with her cousin, who was a student, resolved this potential hinder: “The brochures are okay but it’s a bit better talking to her because she’s studied in loads of different places and she’s had the courage to let go of her parents.” The visit to this particular ‘information ground,’ the school, gave Nina further opportunities to find out more about studies as she was allowed to join a class for a day: “I was put in a group of students and at first I thought ‘Help, they’re all much older than me!’ But then when we discussed things I thought ‘they’re nice’, and the teacher said afterwards that I fitted in really well” (Nina, 2). Another problem that emerged incidentally during this visit was that she found she was not eligible for a study loan for this type of education until she was twenty years old:

I asked the school director and she said ‘Well, I think you might be able to get a dispensation, why don’t you talk to the social welfare officer at your school? You might get some help there’. So I did, and it turns out that I can apply for a dispensation because I have a handicap! [big smile] (Nina, 2)

These comments illustrate that factual information is seldom sufficient as it stands but comes to life in interpersonal interaction where it becomes imbued with personal meaning. Having found a focus for her study and career planning Nina

\textsuperscript{20}Nina visited a ‘folk high school’, a Swedish form of adult education often characterised by liberal pedagogic ideals.
expressed increasing confidence and purposefulness as she sought meaning in the information by relating it to her personal interests and requirements. Nina’s story also reveals the significance of the professionals who engaged in her case such as her teacher and careers counsellor, a finding which corroborates Bandura’s (1994) argument that the development of a sense of self-efficacy is promoted by social interaction not only with significant others but is also dependent to some extent on the existence of supportive institutional structures.

### 7.2.2 Seeking information to develop occupational identity

Participants described occasions and situations where they not only sought or were offered information on pathways into specific occupations but also information relating to occupational skills and expertise, and job content. Below Andreas describes his efforts to appropriate journalistic skills:

> I work with journalists on the paper and you sort of examine their texts in the paper every morning very critically and you look through everything (...). I have the paper and I go through it, ‘Is this really well-written by him?’ I have a friend that freelances as well and we look at things together and question them, ‘What’s this, then?’ I look at everything that has to do with journalism, everything that’s written, everything that can make you think, ‘Is this good or bad?’ I read the newspapers on the Internet during the day instead of buying them and I try, because there are certain things there that I’m interested in that I try to have an opinion about or relate to... and then of course you know what’s going on. (Andreas, 1)

Keeping up to date in areas of interest, selecting, critically examining and discussing the ways in which articles are written, forming opinions, combined with access to and the effective use of a variety of sources, emerges as a fluent process of interaction. Information emerges and ‘becomes’ as Andreas interacts with the social and technological structures that facilitate the development of his interests. Solomon (2002:230) used the term ‘information discovery’ to describe “how stuff ends up becoming information and how information so discovered influences further action”. The excerpt above concerns part of a personal process of finding meaning in journalism and the practice of its skills. Several of the participants described similar experiences of developing expertise, of identifying with occupations and of their alertness to information that was useful in this respect. Bea described how her education in entrepreneurship and business studies stimulated her interest in her part-time work in a chain-store and vice versa:
Bea: At school we learn about perfect company organisation and now when I work there I see this type of perfect organisation. We have meetings about how we work and how we behave; it’s like a lesson from school that they’ve applied!
F.H.: You can see what you learn at school put into operation?
Bea: Yes, I’ve worked in two other shops before that have been completely different to what we learn at school so it’s inspired me a lot. (…). For instance; I watch Fame Factory\textsuperscript{21} on TV but it’s the marketing that interests me. I look out for how they market the singers, how they organise the programme, how things look, the milieu and everything. I always think about the marketing aspects of TV programmes (…). I use the Internet as well (…) I search for ‘businesses and marketing’ and I look at how businesses…I look a lot at how everything is marketed. I can’t go into a shop nowadays without looking at the layout, where they place things. (Bea, 2)

Bea’s description also indicates how her developing interest in business organisation and marketing facilitate the emergence of information that is relevant to her in everyday contexts. Both Max and Michael related similar experiences where they had developed habits or routines of examining advertisements and graphics from the perspectives of their education in media, as Michael put it, “You see some terrible stuff and it makes you start thinking (…), I know I can do these things better myself if I get the chance”. Nina, who wanted to be an interpreter for the deaf, referred to her interest in developing her skills in sign language as a habit she engaged in everywhere, “I hear people talk and wonder how it would be in sign language, I hear a song on the radio and try to recount it in sign language”. The participants’ different experiences of what information is to them and the ways in which they recognise relevant sources as they move through life emphasises the dynamism in relevance evaluations as well as of contextual nature of information to the individual. I will return to this point in the discussion.

It is noteworthy that these goal oriented and ambitious participants seemed to have benefited considerably from their upper secondary education and/or from their earlier experiences of the occupations they were interested in; that is, they had quite a significant knowledge base as a valuable departure point for their information related activities.

One valuable source of information when it came to interest in appropriating skills and techniques was expert practitioners, that is, people with experience of the occupations that participants were interested in. Max ascribed his idea to study graphic design abroad to the outcome of conversations he had had with professional mentors while on work practice in an advertising agency. They encouraged him to “take the chance while he had it” in order to gain a competitive edge over potential

\textsuperscript{21} A televised talent competition for young singers
rivals because his skills at that time corresponded only to “what they’ve already got at the agency”:

*Max*: I mean, they say that there were 70 applications for the last job and only one person got it.

*F.H.:* So the course in Australia would be a merit?

*Max*: Yes, they have a good reputation in the world and techniques they don’t have here. (Max, 1)

Work experience in interaction with the advice offered by colleagues, Max argued, helped him to assess what skills might enhance job applications. As he talked about developing skills Max described an interactive process of informing himself where his initial reaction to information about a technique discovered on the Internet is processed through verification and corroboration at the workplace:

If, for example, I want to get confirmation about some technique, if it’s used, how to paint something or make something, I might find out about it on the Internet but then I have to check it out, see someone doing it, if he says he can do it then I watch how he does it. Then I test it myself. (Max, 1)

Lloyd (2006) argues that recognition of the information embedded in physical activity is an aspect of information literacy. In Max’ view, demonstration of a technique in the workplace setting that had caught his attention on the Internet increased its relevance to the point that he was encouraged to appropriate the technique himself as a personal skill. As he felt that demonstration of his own capacity and skills was the optimal way of securing a future in graphic design, “you have to show what you go for,” he took pains to acquire skills deemed relevant by those he judged were in a position to know.

Similarly, when Andreas was required to submit samples of his journalistic work with his application to do his military service as a trainee reporter it was natural for him to turn to colleagues at the newspaper where he worked on a freelance basis for advice:

They [colleagues] have experience both of the education and from the job and they have life experience in general. They’ve helped me with everything and said ‘That was a good piece you did’ and things like that. They really helped me to pick out samples of my work and said ‘send them this one, it’s good, and include that one’. (Andreas, 2)

Both Andreas and Max had access to practitioners that encouraged them personally and provided them with specialised information that could help them increase their
employability and, furthermore, discussing their work allowed them to identify with the occupation itself and to develop their skills in the context of the workplace.

Although other goal oriented participants did not have equal opportunities to work practice or access to practitioners, in some cases meetings arranged by career counsellors between pupils and representatives from different occupations were of some help. Shirin, for instance, had valued an opportunity arranged by her careers counsellor in the second year of her upper secondary programme, to meet representatives of the law profession and a law student:

It was really good, that’s what I think. (..) I asked about what a workday is like. ‘What do you do on a normal workday? What’s it like? What happens?’ And they explained and the best thing was they explained things from different perspectives. (Shirin, 1)

Her emphasis on “what I think” suggests that not all of her peers were equally satisfied with this activity. Neil, for example, also referred to this opportunity, but found it meaningless because he had no idea what he wanted to do at the time and could not therefore come upon any questions that were relevant to his own situation or interests. “I couldn’t think of anything to ask and anyway, it all seemed so far away, then” (Neil, 1). This reflects on the idea of the information seeking process (see 3.6) where the perceived relevance of information changes depending on what phase the individual is in. In Neil’s case he had not, at that point, developed a focus that made information seeking meaningful in this situation. Shirin’s interest in multiple perspectives on the practice of law indicates that she was beyond the stage of getting a general view of the occupation and was, at this stage, interested in information that would help her to develop her own personal point of view together with a sense of what it might be like to be a practitioner herself.

7.2.3 Information on work culture

Learning about the customs and conventions that bear up the values and traditions of specific occupations is also an aspect of developing an occupational identity. It is an aspect of what Lave and Wenger (1991) refer to as preparation for entering “a community of practice” or of “anticipatory socialisation” (Henslin, 2006). This was not something participants talked about explicitly but their descriptions of their information activities and of their interactions with others suggest that this was a process some of them were actively engaged in. Their descriptions reveal that they had built up expectations of the work they hoped to engage in and had actively constructed visions of ideal practitioners. It is particularly in the case of Shirin (see section 8.2) that this type of information activity is clearly visible in the study. Her
perspective as a “stranger”, or first-generation immigrant, brings into focus aspects of occupations and professions that tend to lie hidden or be taken for granted by those who are familiar with the cultural patterns embedded in different occupations in taken-for-granted ways.

Andreas, for example, who had grown up in a family of journalists, editors and reporters and, furthermore, had the advantage of part-time work on a newspaper together with his interest in journalism describes interactions with one of his mentors in the following excerpt:

*Andreas*: Yes, there’s a friend of the family that’s been an editor for a newspaper. I’ve talked a lot to him about journalism, in fact. He’s old, he’s worked as a journalist for about 50 to 55 years and he’s given me a great deal of encouragement. He really knows what it’s all about and he thinks it’s really great that I’ve chosen … he reads everything I write in the paper and he encourages me, that’s really good. Then, you know, everything is, well, journalism is… I mean that journalists, everything they see … everything I see, inspires me in some way, both the good pieces and the bad pieces.

*F.H.*: You mean you see things as a journalist would?

*Andreas*: Yes, exactly. Bad journalism upsets me; it makes me feel that I could really…there are a lot of really great journalists in Sweden who do very inspiring work and I feel sometimes ‘Wow! That article *really* has something to say!’ (Andreas, 2)

In the excerpt above Andreas first establishes his mentor’s expertise; “he knows what it’s all about,” he has “50 to 55 years” of experience and goes on to suggest that he himself, encouraged by this older experienced man’s appraisal of his work, is in the process of learning to discern good journalism from bad, and to see events from the perspective of a journalist. Some of the values embedded in journalism were mediated to him at an earlier age when he was allowed to accompany another friend of the family who was a television reporter to a much publicized trial and in the following excerpt he describes the vision of journalism he has constructed:

When journalists interpret something so that the public can, like, *understand* what happened. (…) To really be able to tell the different angles of a story, how something, en event, influences different people and each one of them has an equal right to have their voice heard (…) It really gave me an insight.

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*22 It is normal for Swedish school pupils to visit workplaces at this age (14-15 years) as a part of their school curriculum. It is common that they visit the workplaces of members of their own families or family friends.*
Andreas’ statement that “we still talk about it” reveals the ongoing, interactive and constructive nature of his developing image of and identification with journalists. In terms of discourse, Andreas uses the idea of commitment to journalistic ideals as a means of constructing his own growing occupational identity. In the discussions with his mentor, Andreas indicates how he processes, from a multiplicity of different impressions, what at first seemed to be the almost incomprehensible events of the trial to “insights in how journalists work”. Shirin did not have mentors as Andreas did and her image of lawyers was primarily built on the impressions she gained of them in television programmes. However, in order to validate her understanding of the profession, she attended weekly court sessions because “you can’t really get a clear picture on the basis of how luxurious and glamorous it looks on television (...) I wanted to see how the prosecutor spoke, the way he talked”. In this way she was not only able to gain insights into the content of the work itself but also to observe the outer attributes of its professional representatives, such as mannerisms and speech which can be said to symbolically signify values and occupational traditions. Max referred to his observations on work practice of how people work together within an advertising agency: “the best thing is you work in a group and form ideas together because then you can talk about other people’s ideas (...) you all have to feel a responsibility for each others’ ideas, that’s how things get done, that’s how a product takes form” (Max, 2). Here, Max emphasises his impressions of work culture and its social practices, of how one should behave in this particular work setting. Nina argued that “you don’t have to earn a lot of money to be happy in a job”, which is perhaps an appropriate attitude to a poorly-paid job as an interpreter for the deaf.

7.2.4 Summary

On the whole, participants with a formulated focus for information seeking had also experienced upper secondary programmes to be rewarding and to have contributed to their ambitions to aim for specific occupations. Their interests were either established very early on or even prior to upper secondary programmes. This meant that they had been seeking and evaluating information during the three years previous to the interviews. In terms of the information seeking process they had formulated a focus for information seeking which meant that they were not interested in general overviews of study and career options. Although Kuhlthau’s model of the information seeking process was derived from a study of information seeking in relation to well-defined short-term assignments, the process does seem to be applicable even over a range of years. These young people were at a stage where they were interested in the knowledge bases, practices and skills associated with chosen occupations. They were highly selective in their choices of information
sources, for example, they searched brochures and web-sites pertaining to specific programmes and courses connected with their occupational goals which they could compare with other before choosing the alternative that best suited them. The most important sources of information were practitioners. Participants who did not have relevant personal connections had to identify and connect with sources, both human and in formal systems, in order to inform themselves. In his study of doctoral students’ information seeking, Seldén (1999) revealed the significance of belonging to appropriate social networks in facilitating effective information seeking. His findings have some bearing here in that participants with appropriate connections felt little need of career services beyond gathering application forms or Internet addresses.

The major difference between this approach and the previous approach lies in the formulation of occupational goals. Participants did not discuss their futures in terms of risk or of individualised choices but in terms of commitment to ideals and of “finding a way”. Discovering and identifying with the ideals constructed within occupational groups was both an outcome of effective information seeking and a means of justifying choice. Their information related activities reveal the highly complex, situated and interactive nature of engaging with information and of making sense of it in personally meaningful ways.
7.3 Seeking information for extended transitions - careers related information seeking ‘on hold’

In the previous two approaches participants had fairly well developed strategies for the future and had sought information actively with foci on studying at university level and/or entering an occupation. In this approach participants expressed greater ambivalence. Although many had developed interests on upper secondary programmes they were not sure of which direction to take on leaving school. They spoke of ‘taking time-out’\textsuperscript{23}, ‘taking a sabbatical’, ‘getting out and seeing the world’ or alternatively, of ‘broadening their education’. These participants envisaged extended transitions which would give them an opportunity to develop greater self-understanding – “become more mature” and to discover relationships between personal aptitudes and interests as well as rewarding ways of living their lives. In terms of careers, participants spoke of needing time to find something to commit to and, at the same time, they wanted to take the opportunity of enjoying their own youth and to see more of the world after a lifetime behind a school bench. Sam puts it in the following way:

> Well, I work on the principle that you shouldn’t rush into these kinds of life decisions. I want to \textit{be} something, a journalist or something. But it wouldn’t feel right to realise \textit{after} you’ve studied journalism, and then maybe you’re travelling around in Thailand or somewhere and you see all the doctors and think ‘I should have studied to be a doctor, instead’. No, I have to look around a bit first before I really make a decision. (Sam, 1)

Much of the study and occupational literature emphasises the importance of choosing studies or careers on the basis of personal interest, as does the National Curriculum. Although all the participants in this study had interests they were not always of the type that had obvious connections to specific occupations or niches in the labour market. For many of the participants seeking, or further defining, interests they could relate to the labour market was a cause of some anxiety, in particular, in cases where they were inclined to, or felt pressured into, going directly into higher education after leaving school.

Participants expressed hopes that work experience or travels or shorter university courses (or a combination) would help them to formulate an interest with relevance for the labour market and strong enough to sustain them through a course of studies. They talked about taking time to orient in the world outside school, for example; by taking a job and saving up in order to travel, doing voluntary work, preferably abroad, or to taking shorter courses in higher education to test their aptitudes or the strength of their interests. In consequence, they described their

\textsuperscript{23} More commonly known as a “gap year” in English although it is usually referred to either as “time-out” or a “sabbatical” by Swedish young people.
information related activities as extensive but relatively unfocused with regard to specific studies and careers, particularly in comparison with the two previous approaches. The portrait of Neil in the next chapter (8.3) exemplifies the perspective of a young man endeavouring to come to terms with what was important to him as an individual before making career decisions.

Sources of information emphasised by the participants included:
- Direct experiences
- Family, friends and peers
- Internet sources on travelling abroad, studying abroad, and volunteer projects
- Insiders such as friends at universities and friends and family members who were backpackers, volunteers abroad or working abroad
- University produced information on short courses
- Overviews of careers and studies

Rather than describing strategies for their futures and related information seeking, participants were more active in seeking information for short term plans within an extended transition. They described an array of information related activities that in part concerned the search for a focus for study and careers and in part concerned creating or discovering opportunities that might allow career interests to emerge and develop, for example, by trying out university life, temporary work, studies abroad or work and travel abroad.

7.3.1 In search of a focus for information activities related to career and studies

Participants described themselves in search of a focus for information seeking with regard to long-term studies and/or careers. An idea that each individual has the potential to develop specific types of interest or commitment which were waiting to be discovered was expressed by several: “I want to do something I can really commit to” says Stephen (1), “but I haven’t thought it through yet, I haven’t arrived at that stage” and even if participants had not found something to “commit to” they felt it was meaningless to invest in a career or studies if they had not first developed a genuine interest in one or more aspects of the work or subjects involved. Narratives of information seeking in connection with personal commitment concerned, on one hand, existential issues on how to live one’s life and to realise one’s personal potential and, on the other hand, more pragmatic concerns such as finding ways of earning a living, as least in the short term, constructing flexible plans of action, which included enjoying the sense of freedom that comes from leaving school. At the points in time of the interviews, participants in this approach expressed both optimism and uncertainty. They looked forward to leaving school and envisaged greater personal freedom while their uncertainty was bound up with
a lack of knowledge of occupations and careers. They viewed extended transitions as a time of experimentation and as a means of discovering possible careers.

Simon, for instance, hoped he would be able to use a transition period after leaving school to further define his general interest in the social sciences. He assumed he would eventually go to university but first he wanted to travel and perhaps to participate in a volunteer project or studies in another part of the world. At the time of the interviews his information related activities were limited to scanning the Internet for volunteer projects and to discussions of tentative plans and dreams with family and friends. He describes in the following excerpt the difficulties he experiences in finding something to commit to:

Intuitively, I think the important thing is the courses you read, not where you study but if you are going to think it is fun, quite simply. That’s the most important and it’s very difficult to find out about because it builds on your own self. Really, you have to get some kind of experience from the work itself before you know if it suits you. That’s the most difficult. You can’t change that. You can talk to people about what they think, especially people that know you well and ask them what they think would suit you and that; if they have any experience of it, but it’s still very difficult. (Simon, 1)

Here, Simon describes both a process of looking inward toward the self and of interaction with significant others in the search for a departure point for career related information seeking. He experienced a dilemma because he realised that in order to get relevant experience in the area of work in which he was interested he would need to qualify himself first and that was a risk he was not willing to take at this point. Seeking advice or opinions from significant others was perhaps a less satisfactory way of discovering personal aptitudes or potential interests if they are perceived as lying latent within each individual but Simon’s comment also suggests that interest or aptitudes can be constituted through social interaction with older and more experienced people. This idea is reiterated by Stephen who commented on the influence one of his teachers had had on him in helping him to discover an interest in languages:

She showed me an interest that I didn’t know I had. You can have a career without being particularly interested in what you do, I mean, you know what needs to be done. But when you have an interest then you have something you can work on. And now, for me, it’s become the most important thing. I’m good at languages; I just have to find something to channel it into. (Stephen, 1)
Despite having interests, neither Simon nor Stephen had as yet made any real connections between their interests and the labour market. One reason was that participants did not know much about the labour market: “I wouldn’t know where to start looking” (Stephen, 1), “I haven’t a clue, I haven’t had time to think about it, yet” (Anna, 1). Another reason was the attraction a ‘gap year’ exerted on them. At the same time, the idea of an extended transition was justified as a time in which to discover personal aptitudes, different types of work and to develop useful skills.

Participants spoke of information seeking both as looking inwards to the self and as interaction with family and friends in order to test ideas of personal suitability and aptitude. Simon, for example, turned to his parents in his search for: “Something that I feel that ‘this is my thing’” (Simon, 1). He was interested in social issues and considered the idea of studying psychology in the future, as he describes in the following:

*F.H.*: What do your parents say?

*Simon*: Well, they ask and they think it’s just as well, or rather they think it’s fine that if I don’t know what I want to study, then it’s obvious that I shouldn’t study yet. They influence me, they both work in education and I hear what they think and what they experience, for example, my mother works in psychiatry and that’s nearly like psychology so I can ask her what she thinks, if I would suit that, and I can ask her about the programme and things like that, it influences me a lot. (Simon, 1)

Backed up by his parents it is “obvious” to Simon that the period after leaving school will be one of experimentation and orientation and this outlook together with his interests in the social sciences in turn frames his horizon for action and his approach to information seeking.

Ilona was in a different situation. She felt pressured by her family to go straight to university, even though she was uncertain of what she wanted to study. Without a specific interest or occupational goal it is difficult to have a focus for information activities. Ilona expressed her anxiety over her lack of focus in the following way:

I have to decide what to study, I think. It’s just to choose, search for what I’m interested in so I know what to study. It will be much easier to just have one thing to find out about. Now I try to find out about everything so I can’t really get deeply into anything. Internet is a great help, it saves me changing brochures all the time, I can just look at different web sites, university web sites, which makes it easier. (Ilona, 1)
A problem for Ilona was that, unlike Simon, she had not developed any particular academic or occupational interest while on the International Baccalaureate programme at upper secondary level: “I’ve been here three years and I still don’t know!” This situation may in part reflect the nature of the programme itself. It offered a wide range of subjects that were not linked as thematically as in the Social Studies programme but it qualified her for quite a wide range of university programmes. However, Ilona had not fastened for any particular subject area. She scanned university web-sites and brochures in the hope that one programme or occupation would appeal to her directly. She also described her method of sifting through careers and occupational information as a process of social interaction with her friends and family:

I was thinking of being a lawyer or a psychologist or a midwife, I don’t know exactly, or a doctor! Every day - and then a civil engineer for a while and an engineer too. I’ve changed so many times! I just cannot decide! Every time someone suggests something I check it out. Then they say, ‘Are you really sure you want to study this?’ ‘Well, maybe,’ so they check it out with me, my friends, ‘oh, I don’t know!’ I say, ‘But take something you like, something you’re interested in!’ So I don’t know. (Ilona, 1)

Here, Ilona suggests that it is in ongoing discussions with her friends and family that her own interests and aptitudes will eventually come to light. For participants with no specific study or career interests, as in Ilona’s case, general information about occupations and studies were used as a starting point for discussions with her family and friends where she sought help in discerning aspects in the descriptions that had “to do with my own personality” at the same time, it seemed to be a problem for her that they insisted on her choosing something “you’re interested in”. A part of the dilemma for Ilona lay in conflicting advice from those around her. While her mother encouraged her to focus on something that interested her, as did her careers counsellor: “Choose something you’re interested in, that you think is fun and that you feel like doing”, and her older brother’s advice in a similar vein: “take something you think is fun, don’t forget that!” However, her boyfriend commented on her idea to become a midwife in the following way: “When I say I want to be a midwife he says; ‘if you are going to study so long then why don’t you study a little longer and become a doctor?’” Similarly, her aunt advised against becoming a midwife:

_F.H.: You were interested in becoming a midwife the last time we met?
Ilona: A midwife? No! There are so many midwives and you have to work for a year as a nurse before you can...I heard it_
from someone…’oh no, not a midwife! Not a nurse! It’s such a bad job and so badly paid! No, no’, they say, ‘Don’t be that! It’s no good at all! It’s nothing to recommend!’

F.H.: What’s so bad about it?

Ilona: Everything! They work from…they work a lot and they get hardly any money. They didn’t think it was worth the education. ‘Do something you believe in, something else, law or something, anything, it’s much better paid!’

F.H.: Who told you this, do you know any nurses?

Ilona: Yes, my aunt. (Ilona, 2)

Ilona indicated that she was much concerned with how her career ambitions would be perceived by those closest to her. She was from an immigrant family, none of whom had had experience of higher education but Ilona described her parents as being ambitious for their children and how they encouraged them to go into higher education: “for him [her father] university is a must”. It was therefore important to her that her choice of studies conformed to her family’s expectations and did not contribute in lowering her personal position in the eyes of family and friends. In the above excerpt, Ilona describes how midwifery as a career was effectively removed as an appropriate option for her. The first time we met she had, in fact, been investigating the possibility of becoming either a doctor or a midwife by comparing information on programmes and by relating this information to her own aptitudes and interests. She told the following story to mark her interest:

When I was younger I watched TV a lot and, you know, series about doctors. I really liked them. I thought it was really interesting when they showed stuff like, well, operating on small children. They showed things like that and everyone said, ‘ugh, that’s gross!’ But I didn’t think so. I thought, ‘I could do that’, I’m not squeamish about blood at all. But a doctor! It’s too much to read! I’d never manage it. You have to study a lot to be a midwife, too, but not as much. I like children and that’s why it’s easy to see myself as a midwife. (Ilona, 1)

Although the views of her aunt and boyfriend, “really made me think twice,” a problem for Ilona was that she did not believe she would get the grades required for highly competitive programmes in higher education such as medical studies; she was also worried that even if she was accepted on such a programme she might not be able to keep up academically. In the excerpt above she equates midwifery studies with medical studies by adding her interest in children to the balance thus formulating a coherent and personal argument in favour of choosing to become a midwife. However, at our second meeting she had reconsidered, ostensibly as a reaction to the force of her aunt’s and boyfriend’s opinions.
Sounding out what peers and friends were interested in doing was a strategy also used by Ida to try and find inspiration and also to gather their opinions about her own ideas; “You listen to what others say they [her friends] want to do and what they think you should do” (Ida, 1). She questioned the adults in her family’s social network: “I pay attention when they start talking about work and I ask them ‘What do you like about your job?’ I usually ask them what they do” (Ida, 1). Stephen preferred not to talk to adults about career and study choice: “because they put so much pressure on you before you’re ready to make any decisions” (Stephen, 1). He preferred to talk to his friends at school: “[my friends] don’t influence my decisions much, but talking to them, they give you ideas, they’re in the same situation and that makes it more interesting to talk to them” (Stephen, 1).

Comments like these indicate not only the unobtrusive everyday nature of information seeking but also how participants negotiated feelings of stress by discussing the future in unchallenging situations. Below, Ilona sums up the ideal information source from her viewpoint at this stage:

If I want to be a doctor then I want a doctor to say to me … I don’t want someone with 20 years experience, I want someone that’s just come out and can tell you what she thinks, what it was like during the years she studied, if she thought it was worth it, you know, what it was that interested them? Like what it was that drove them to keep on studying. That’s how it should be. Okay if it’s someone with years of experience but I want someone young as well who can tell you what it’s like now. I mean, the experienced ones must have studied ages ago so there will be a really big difference in education, they change all the time. (Ilona 1)

There are two aspects in the above excerpt: on one hand, Ilona seems to be searching for the nature of motivation; what it is that makes someone so ambitious that it sustains them through long and demanding studies, and she is also looking for contact with someone she can identify with and who can inform her about “what it’s like” to study at an advanced level and whether or not it was “worth it”. The source in this case is positioned as a young woman, i.e. someone whose perspective Ilona might be able to relate to. In this approach, investigating ‘interest’ itself as a phenomenon included efforts to discover the nature of other people’s interests and thereby of discovering different ways of relating to ‘interest’ that might help them in making decisions about the future.

Another way of approaching career and study related information was to think of focus in terms of combining interests rather than choosing between them. Sam was very interested in the social sciences but was unsure of what area to concentrate on in a career perspective; he justifies the idea of an extended transition in the following way:
I’ve had such an awful lot of thoughts about everything so I have to have a time to converge everything together, to converge to a point, because I’m interested in so much and I think I can merge them. I think the Arts are the only way, you can get everything into that; you can fit in politics, an interest in society, culture, everything, philosophy, to one thing. I really look forward to just having one narrow area, I don’t want to have so much. And now there’s so much at school; I can’t focus on stuff outside school, it’s just school now. (Sam, 1)

Part of the idea of an extended transition is that participants hoped it would afford a time for reflection on experiences and planning for the future. At the same time, participants had to think about the immediate future.

### 7.3.2 Planning for extended transitions

Planning for extended transitions was based on assumptions that young people in general need time to get their bearings in the world outside school and that time well-spent would not only be personally enriching but also be seen as a merit by future employers: “My dad says you won’t get a job unless you’ve done something more with your life than just study” (Stephen, 1). Participants expressed views that taking a “sabbatical year” after school is something that is actively encouraged and generally endorsed as a sensible course of action in Sweden:

> There are only three in my class that are going straight to university. The others are going to do their military service or travel or something like that. I think Sweden is one of the few countries where you can take a sabbatical; in many other countries you have to start studying straightaway. (Nora, 1)

Taking “time-out” was not always associated with detailed planning, at least not as Sam expressed it; “I’ll just pack a bag and go!” (Sam, 1). The charm of the idea of a gap-year is perhaps that it has an aura of spontaneity and unforeseen adventure. However, even though some participants hoped they would be able “to take the day as it comes” (Simon, 2) it appeared that they did need some information. As they spoke of their plans and dreams in the interviews it emerged that participants’ horizons for action included thoughts and ideas concerning future studies and careers and which directed information seeking activities to some extent. It was possible to discern a number of tracks within this approach; for instance, some were more inclined to test university life than to travel, others had ideas that they could develop the interests they had through volunteer projects abroad, some had thoughts about improving language skills or picking up other skills that would be
useful to them in the future. Some were required by their families to draw up coherent plans thus creating a forum of family discussion over extended transitions. And of course, plans and ideas intersected and combined, for instance Ben wanted to travel in South America and “do something like volunteer work…to see things for real and do something good for society and to learn Spanish as well” (Ben, 2).

**Information seeking for travelling**

Information seeking in everyday life is not often an obtrusive discrete activity but enmeshed almost indiscernibly in other activities. When participants related their ideas concerning extended transitions, particularly when they dreamed of travelling abroad, they tended to project themselves as spontaneous ‘non-planners’ which precluded the idea of directed information seeking. Sam, for instance, was not interested in a linear transition from school, through university and into work but in an extended transition with its own economy and life-style. He was interested in social, cultural and political development in Europe since the fall of the Berlin Wall and was eager to be a “part of it” through direct experience and “living rough” but also through sharing the experiences of young people like himself whom he envisaged were at the centre of events in “a changing Europe”:

I’d like to go to Berlin and Prague and Paris, Amsterdam as well. Prague because it’s a cultural centre and I need to be around people that share my ideas. You can’t get that here in town; they don’t feel so strongly about culture here. I have a feeling that I would develop much more if I could experience what other people think about the interests we have in common (…) The people here, everything is so self evident to them. I can’t get…there’s no room for my personal expression. The town is too small. (Sam, 1)

He maintained that for this purpose he did not need to seek information in any formal sense. However, he had Swedish friends who were working in Amsterdam and Prague and with whom he was in contact through Internet services such as MSN and travelogues. For Sam and others interested in travelling the world was in many ways viewed as an extension of their own social worlds, where the Internet and mobile phones facilitated an ease of contact and of casual information seeking that was barely reflected upon in its everyday character. As Sam said, “You don’t need maps, you don’t need information, you just hitch-hike”. His friends assured him that once he arrived, there would be “no problems” getting work and accommodation (Sam, 2). Descriptions of conversations that appear to be ongoing in their generality nevertheless indicate that their focus is in fact information seeking on one hand and information provision on the other hand.

**Drawing up plans for extended transitions**
Although participants in this approach described themselves as averse to the idea of planning in the interviews, some of them had been required to draw up plans by their parents. Plans usually involved a strategy where time was to be spent not only travelling or working but also to acquiring formal qualifications or experiences that might prove useful for future employment. Information became relevant when it could be combined to cover several aspects at once. For example, Bea, who wanted some ‘time-out’, had been encouraged by her father to draw up a plan that included becoming more fluent in a foreign language so she had settled on applying to a language school in Italy preparatory to looking for temporary work on the Italian Riviera with a friend:

Bea: The main thing is not to start studying something before you know it’s something that you want to work with. It’s really hard.
F.H.: What does your father think?
Bea: He’s well… when I gave him my plan for life after school…
F.H.: Your plan?
Bea: Yes, because he’s been really worried, like ‘you can’t go round thinking life is a party, just travelling around, you have to have a plan in your baggage!’ So now I’ve made a plan that he’s satisfied with.
F.H.: Does he think it’s important that you have an education?
Bea: Yes, for example, if I go to Italy [to a language school and to work] he says it will give me experiences that will be useful for my future studies and then for my occupation. He sees the advantages of an education. (Bea, 1)

In constructing her plan, Bea had sought and compared various options for studying Italian via the Internet that she could present to her father. Her planning thus became a forum where her parents and others could interact with her in supporting her construction of a meaningful plan of action in the period after school: “My dad says ‘think like this, make a plan, make sure you have a vision for the future’, so he made me think again ” (Bea, 1). At the same time, Bea sought information on a number of aspects in order to find a suitable school:

F.H.: What is most important for you to find out about in relation to the course in Italy?
Bea: Well, in relation to the course, it’s foremost what it can give me later in life, if it’s a good school and stuff like that. But as far as living there is concerned then it’s really, really important what kind of neighbourhood it’s in, and of course the standard of the accommodation, I’m used to a high standard, so
it would be difficult otherwise. And of course the position of the school, it has to be in a town, not out in the countryside somewhere. (Bea, 2)

The excerpt suggests that for Bea factors not directly connected to future studies and occupations emerge as at least as important as the practical benefit of learning a language, reminding us that decisions and plans concerning future careers are made while young people are in the midst of living their lives on a myriad of levels and where career decisions constitute only one aspect of everyday life.

Taking the opportunity to learn or develop fluency in a foreign language was a qualification whose value was recognised by several participants and in this study several participants hoped to develop fluency in a pleasanter way than from the school-bench. Emma examined job advertisements in newspapers and drew the conclusion that fluency in English would be useful to her and therefore she planned to apply for a language course in New Zealand:

I sought information about it, that employers would rather have people that are good at English (…) it’s very advantageous, not only to be good at English but to have been in an English speaking country. (Emma, 2)

Both Scotland and New Zealand appealed to her because the language schools were in areas of natural beauty. In comparing information on the schools she found that New Zealand was a cheaper alternative:

I got brochures and checked the prices. It’s more expensive in Scotland because, well, it’s to do with study loans and materials and books that you have to pay for yourself. In New Zealand you can borrow quite a lot of books or they’re included in the package price and you live with a family. That makes it cheaper. (Emma, 1)

Others had intentions to construct plans but had not as yet engaged in seeking information that would facilitate detailed planning. Simon, for instance, was interested in doing volunteer work in order to put life into his theoretical knowledge of social and political issues before going to university; his parents were willing to support this idea but also required a plan:

Simon: I mean, if I say I want to do volunteer work and they [his parents] think that’s really frightening, that I might get shot, they say so; that they don’t like it but if I want to do it, ‘then we can help you’. They push me towards it because they see it’s what I really want. That feels really good.
F.H.: So they encourage you?
Simon: Yes! But they insist that I have a real plan, if you see what I mean. Not just that I say ‘I’m off to India now!’ They want it to go well.
F.H.: Have you made a plan, then?
Simon: No! I haven’t got that far. But they listen to me about that sort of thing. (Simon, 1)

Constructing a formal plan can be seen as a way of formulating and making sense of one’s options in a wider perspective where information seeking and use contribute in giving substance and credence to the plan itself. Making plans can also be seen as an arena for balancing different perspectives and for taking account of others’ experiences and advice and thereby gaining approval and support.

Although Emma and Bea made use of formal sources of information for more detailed, practical planning, the major source of information about travelling lay in the experiences of friends and acquaintances, either in person or via Internet services such as “travelogues”. Below, Simon describes the influence of his cousin’s travel accounts as a source of inspiration and information:

Then you get another perspective because he is like me and in the same situation even though he has been to university, he’s done the things that I would like to do. He’s 24 so we can talk more like ‘what did you do there?’ and what you shouldn’t do, in a different way. (Simon, 2)

He compares this source of information to the Internet:

Well, it’s more statistics, facts, which are also important, for example about vaccinations and things like that. You have to have a ground to stand on before you leave; I mean you have to know whereabouts the country is! You have to know that, but how it feels and experiences that’s a different type of information (...) the more you know the more inspired you become but you can pile up a great deal of facts about it. I think it’s more valuable to know what is possible than to collect facts, they’re more a complement. (Simon, 2)

Information about what is possible is perhaps the key to this approach in understanding what information is to young people. The ‘facts’ are taken for granted as easily accessible if need arises. Simon’s cousin’s authority as a source is unquestioned because “he is like me”. Neither does Simon question the “facts” to be found on the Internet but he does suggest that it is in association with the experiences and feelings of trustworthy sources that facts gain their informing
power and relevance. For instance, in response to a question on travel and health insurance, Simon replied: “Oh yes, he [his cousin] told me to look into it, because he got an infected sore and needed treatment and it was a lot of bother. Yes, that’s something I’ll have to look into”. (Simon, 2)

In this approach, participants looked forward to leaving school in the assumption that an extended transition would afford them the time they needed not only to think about careers but also for the more detailed planning of their immediate futures even though it did not always seem apparent to them that more detailed planning and information seeking might be required:

I’m not going to decide what I’m going to do in the near future, I just want to investigate. I want to have time to travel and things like that and to get a bit older too. I’m not very old yet, I don’t really feel mature enough. (Stephen, 2)

7.3.3 Information seeking for a broader education

Some participants were more attracted by the idea of broadening their education as a means of further defining their interests; they were also interested in university life for its own sake. They sought information about university courses both in Sweden and abroad. However, a problem that sometimes occurred in connection with an inclination to test university life was that participants experienced that other people had to be convinced they were making the right choices and for this purpose they searched for arguments. Information that could provide an argument for pursuing one’s academic interests became relevant in such cases. In the extract below Ben expresses a struggle between an inclination to develop his personal interest in humanities subjects and a willingness to comply with his parents’ expectation for him to “do something that leads somewhere”. He found his argument in university produced information from institutions in the arts and humanities:

I’ve been reading them [brochures from universities] and they could form a sort of basis. I could read philosophy, theology, literature and subjects I really find interesting. I can see it more as … okay, so what! I think they’re fun and it doesn’t matter as long as I get to study them and I can raise the level of my education. That’s what it says in the brochures as well. (Ben, 1)

Here, information in the brochures is used pragmatically to prove a point. Broadening one’s education is used as an argument for going to university, or at least as a means of testing the strength of interests particularly by those who see little point in temporary work or have no particular desire or opportunity to travel at
this time. From the platform of higher education the participants hoped to be able to develop interests that would eventually direct them towards a career.

Other participants were encouraged by their parents to go to university even if they were unsure of what to study. This type of encouragement seems to be based on values and assumptions that a university education was a resource in itself from a personal point of view:

I’ll probably start studying something that I really like at university and then see where it leads (...). They [his parents] want so much for me but they don’t interfere with my choices (...) because my parents feel that just having a broad knowledge…it steers me into studying something… studying to gain a broader knowledge is more important than what I’m going to work with later (...) it’s good for your self-esteem. (Stephen, 1)

Stephen expresses an orientation towards the future built on norms and values mediated by his parents. Family members were not the only people that mediated expectations to the young people in the study. Several participants referred to the expectations of teachers, in the example below Tom refers to his teachers on the Technology programme:

The teachers say things like ‘those of you planning to go on to university, you need to know this,’ and they talk a lot about Chalmers as if it was obvious that we’re going to go there. So you feel that they sort of believe in us, like we’re special, that we’re like them, I suppose. (Tom, 1)

While some parents and teachers communicated the importance of higher education others were more active in helping their children by seeking information for them. Ben’s mother was a driving force in encouraging him to study in the United States:

My mother is very…energetic, very, very, energetic. So she’s taken a very active part in this. (...) So it’s really my mother… we talk a lot about it (...). We talk a lot about it as a family all the time. And my mother is so interested and has really taken an active part in it. (Ben, 2)

She sent for brochures, inquired about study loans and student accommodation and organised visits to two American colleges of liberal arts:

*Ben*: I got to meet both students and teachers and it was mainly the teachers, I thought, who made a good impression, … they
were really all right, it felt like, well, they didn’t say; “We’ve got all the answers and we’ll give them to you”, they were more interested in reasoning with and listening to students. It felt as if they were, (pause) thinking people.

F.H.: Was that what determined your choice?

Ben: Well, no, it was its location; it was in the wrong place. I mean it was really nice and everything but the other college was in the city centre and this one was way out in the middle of nowhere! ... You have to look at everything, what the college has to offer in general. (Ben, 2)

Here, Ben describes how aspects of student life, educational ideology and geographical location interacted in his choice of college. Although attracted by the educational ethos of one college it did not make sense to him to be stranded out in the countryside when his particular interests in the arts and cultural activities were typically urbane, despite his favourable impression of the teachers. For Ben, these formal visits to the colleges determined his final choice and was as much facilitated by his mother’s information seeking activities as his own. Mothers’ activities in supporting their children, particularly in seeking, selecting and interpreting information has been noted by other researchers particularly in countries such as Britain and the United States where competition on the education market is fiercer than in Sweden (Schneider & Stevenson, 1999, Ball et al, 2002).

However, participants who were either pressured or encouraged by their families to apply to university did so mostly on the basis of hearsay, inclination and the recommendations of friends at the universities they were interested in. Simon has the following to say about university produced information:

And well, you can’t really trust them. They all say ‘voted as the best town to live in’ or ‘regarded as the finest university’. All of them say it; it’s in all the catalogues. You wonder if it’s really true; I mean, how have they done their surveys? I think I’ll make up my own mind through the people who go there and on intuition, I know, for example that Lund is a very good place to study. (Simon, 2)

Neil looked forward to joining his friends at university and had applied for a part-time course in philosophy: “Now I’m going into this quite uninformed but at this point I don’t really think it matters” (Neil, 2). Ilona made a hasty choice of programme guided chiefly by what was available at the nearest universities as she did not wish to move away from home and by family expectations to get a university education. In the following she describes how she made a choice of programme just before the final date for university applications:
I took home a lot of booklets and brochures, read a bit, flicked through them here and there, piled up a lot of different types of jobs. I didn’t know what to take. I thought, ‘it has to be something useful’. Anyway, I read somewhere about economics, a programme. I thought I can do that for a while. It wasn’t the first thing I had in mind but I hope for the best! I thought either I’ll like it or I won’t. It’s better to apply than not to apply at all, and then at least you can change. It’s easier once you’re in, to change. Once you start you get a better overview than you get from a catalogue because then you’ve got the teachers and other people around you and they can tell you what it’s really like. That will make it much easier. (Ilona, 2)

Ilona describes the content of the brochures as a ‘pile’ of jobs that she cannot relate to on a personal level making her choice rationally pragmatic as well as indeterminate. In contrast, she hopes that being on site at a university will constitute a richer information ground for her in the future and, as in many other narratives in the study, she emphasises the significance of interaction with others as a richer source of information. Finally, Simon describes how information from different sources come together in helping him to form a personalised perspective of university studies:

Just about anything can count as information, everything, the media, the newspapers, news on the TV, Internet, everything. You don’t take in everything they say on TV, like, ‘the prospects are not looking good for student architects,’ because that’s now, isn’t it? But you make a note of it in the back of your mind. And I hang out with a couple of students. I hear what they say and I don’t know much about student life so I’m curious but that doesn’t mean that I think what works for them will work for me too. You take it all in and then you form your own picture. (Simon, 2)

Forming a picture might best be described as a prerequisite for more focused career related information seeking and here Simon picks up on the discourse of the risk society, where what applies today does not necessarily apply tomorrow. In practice, this justifies Simon’s lack of interest at this point in time for detailed planning through seeking careers related information. There would be no point to it when the labour market is unpredictable and an extended transition is socially acceptable.
7.3.4 Summary
In this approach, participants described themselves as in search of a focus on which to base their study and career related information seeking. They planned, or dreamed of, extended transitions. Although information seeking was quite extensive as they scanned a range of information sources, it was also confined in time, more or less, to the last term at school and to the project of an extended transition. They accounted for their lack of interest in seeking career and study related information in a number of ways; they were engaged in the struggle for good grades and they felt they needed ‘time-out’ in order to seriously consider their options and eventual career interests. In a long term perspective they were primarily concerned with finding an occupation or line of studies they were “suited for” and their primary sources of information were those closest to them who could be expected to have an opinion on what they ought to aim for in terms of careers. In a short-time perspective, some argued that experience would help them to define their interests and they therefore planned to work and travel for a period of time. Some spoke of enhancing their future employability by gathering a ‘portfolio’ of skills and experiences, for instance, by learning languages or acquiring work experience in an extended transition. Career guidance in this approach was seen as a last minute source of help and inspiration, if it was used at all. As some participants pointed out, there was no point seeking advice or information if you had not already formulated a goal. They positioned themselves as young, spontaneous and adventurous drawing on a youth discourse to justify the idea of escaping from everyday responsibilities and pressures, at least for a time, as a reasonable and sensible course of action.

Beck (1992) points out that people have always had to deal with uncertainty and insecurity but that in late modern society it has turned into an individual enterprise. Failure to make the right choices becomes attributable to personal inadequacy or irresponsibility and people perceive that issues have to be resolved on an individual basis. In this light, using a youth discourse to motivate action emerges as an effective strategy of resistance. It is not surprising that participants in the study spoke of; ‘becoming more mature’, ‘studying something just for fun’ and ‘getting out and seeing the world’ before making what might be irreversible career decisions. They presented their decisions and ideas in positive terms – a rewarding gap year, an enriching experience in an exotic environment, a broadening of intellectual horizons. In the main, they expressed more concern about the kind of life they wanted to live and the kind of society they wished to contribute to than concern for shaping individualistic careers.

A gap year suggests a time of freedom and leisure with life styles based on taking the day as it comes, having a good time and adventures in off-the-beaten-track locations. Part of its charm is the aura of spontaneity, of the idea that preparations do not need to be made or information sought. You just pack a bag and go. Even if career guidance systems were to offer information on different aspects of travelling (and some do) they may be largely ignored, as the whole point of ‘gap
years’ is the illusion of engaging in something unplanned, unorganised and at least, mildly dangerous. At the same time, the young people in this study who intended to travel and/or study abroad all had friends who were already “out there” and with whom they were in contact via travelogues and MSN and where information was unobtrusively sought and offered in travel contexts. Parents largely supported their plans and ideas. Other participants in this approach were more disposed to the idea of university life. Living abroad for a period of time could be included in imagined life trajectories either as a means of contributing to a future working career or as a useful life experience. The idea of extended transitions, which is such a self-evident privilege for many Swedish young people, was understood by them as part of the process of becoming an adult by providing opportunities for self exploration and experimentation through direct experience.

What also became apparent in accounts of information seeking was that most participants who looked forward to an extended transition knew little about higher education and its different options or about labour market opportunities and different types of work and what they entailed; neither was it a priority for them. Immediate plans for the future were therefore tentative and contingent because participants had no clear idea of what they wanted to do in the long term future. Most had a general idea of the direction in which they wished to go based on wide interests developed on upper secondary programmes and expected to continue into higher education sooner or later. First, however, they wanted to find their place in a social and cultural world rather than in the world of work. They implied that they had no intention of drifting along in society, rather, they spoke of the period after school as an orientation phase, which might include temporary work and travels, acquiring practical qualifications such as a driving license or work experience, and working towards further defining their interests in relation to the labour market. Their information related activities revealed that information seeking was quite extensive but not particularly intensive or focused.

It is perhaps a sound tactic, to enjoy being young while one has the chance and to refuse to be coerced into making career decisions and life plans before one is ready to do so. On the other hand, schools and careers guidance do not seem to have been successful in preparing the ground in terms of fostering information literacy in relation to study and occupational choice. There is therefore a risk that gap years continue into uninformed drifting.
7.4 Information seeking deferred or avoided

Careers and study information was sometimes considered irrelevant or untimely in general. In this approach, information seeking is spoken of in negative terms as an activity that participants do not have the time or inclination to engage with at this time. However, this does not mean that participants were not offered information or did not take note of information that had potential relevance for them. In the following, participants’ experiences of the timeliness of information is taken up together with the types of information seeking activities associated with this approach, such as the active localisation of information sources and scanning of potentially useful information, non-directed monitoring of careers related information, the observation of others’ study and careers related activities, being referred to information sources by others, and the active avoidance of information.

In contrast with the previous approaches where the future was generally experienced as a landscape of opportunities, there was instead a tendency to see the future as a landscape of barriers to be overcome. In contrast with the previous approaches, participants confined careers and study related information seeking geographically to the areas in which they lived and were also eager to ‘escape from learning’ (Ball et al, 2000:151). In the next chapter, the portrait of Emily illustrates careers and study information seeking chiefly characterised by avoidance.

7.4.1 The timeliness of information

In their narratives, some participants unsure of what to do on leaving school maintained that working on their grades took priority and left little time for consideration of the future. Ida, for example, saved the brochures that had been sent to her without looking at them:

\[ F.H.: \] What did you think of 18 at last!?
\[ Ida: \] Actually, I haven’t looked at it yet. I’ve collected them all [brochures] and when the time comes…I’ve got an awful lot! I thought I’d give myself some time when, well, the time is ripe, then I’ll think about it more effectively when it’s more urgent…I still have time to wait. (Ida, 1)

A number of participants referred to the time-consuming nature of information seeking in relation to career and study choice. Nora maintained that she had started looking for information during the first year of the three year upper secondary programme and made the following reflection:

We don’t have so much time to work on these things after school and look things up. I think that a lot of people feel that they really do have to take a year off to have time …. it really
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does take time, you really have to go through it, it’s not something that just occurs to you during the night. You have to think about it and check things up. (Nora, 1)

Here, Nora suggests that it is reasonable to defer study and careers related information seeking until after leaving school, when it is assumed there will more time for such activities. Madeleine suggests that it is not only time but both focus and greater maturity that is required:

I haven’t decided yet and everyone else seems to have planned their futures in such detail and I feel that … No! I don’t want to! So I haven’t really checked up anything myself because I don’t feel ready for it yet. I’ll do it later when it’s time and that won’t be before next year. (...) I want to be 21 or so before I take that responsibility, you know, ‘Now is the rest of my life!’ So I don’t really know what’s important for me to find out about just now. (Madeleine, 1)

Not knowing what is important to find out about suggests that study and occupational information was simply not relevant to Madeleine at this time and therefore information seeking lacked meaning for her. Several participants took the position that they were not planners, suggesting that it was a rather unattractive quality compared to “just seeing what happens”, or, as Sean described it, as a lifestyle issue: “Social science people never know what they want to do (...) it’s part of the whole point, you have to be spontaneous!” (Sean, 1) However, this stance did not ring true for all who upheld it in the interview situation. In some cases further questioning revealed that while some used a rhetoric of spontaneity and freedom they had, in actual fact, been relatively active with regard to information seeking and had formulated concrete plans for the period after leaving school while others really had deferred all planning and information seeking.

Some held that seeking information about their alternatives on leaving school was stressful in itself; that it diverted their attention from school examinations and that they were afraid of making hasty decisions. Ida referred to the example of her elder brother who had dropped out of a vocational trainee programme and had started on another programme which he was also dissatisfied with: “It’s awful to see people dropping out and never being satisfied; I don’t think you should go straight from such a stressful situation [the last term at school] into more studying. It’s worth just taking it easy for a while” (Ida, 1).

### 7.4.2 Localising and scanning information

Although formal careers and study information was not directly sought, it was delivered by post and presented at school by careers counsellors and it became
relevant if it could be stored or easily refound. For Madeleine, for example, it was enough to know that brochures existed, and where they could be found:

\[
F.H.: \text{Where would you place this type of literature [brochures on further studies and occupations] on your information horizon?} \\
\text{Madeleine: Well, not central, somewhere out on the edge. You mostly have them in the back of your mind, that you know how to go about it, that there are universities. You know that if you wonder about something that they are there (…) that you can check up things in them. (Madeleine, 1)}
\]

According to a survey carried out by The National Agency of Education (2005a), Swedish schools seldom allocate sufficient resources to career guidance that will meet the needs of every pupil. Counsellors have little time to provide more than basic information, particularly if pupils themselves do not take the initiative to contact them individually. Several participants argued that there was no point in consulting careers counsellors individually if they did not already know what they wanted to do or study – which in turn suggests a view of career counselling as a supply centre for facts and procedures.

Some participants sought careers and study information but were disappointed by what they found. Ida, for example, accounted for her passivity with regard to her future partly as a result of having made the wrong choice of programme at upper secondary level and partly as a result of the discovery that certain doors were now more or less closed to her. She had chosen the International Baccalaureate (IB) programme on the recommendations of a teacher and a careers counsellor: “she [the careers counsellor] thought I should choose a proper programme like IB” (Ida, 1). Ida’s emphasis on the programme being “proper” alludes to its being an academic programme preparing students for higher education and Ida had reached the conclusion that she did not want to continue at university level. She now regretted not having taken a vocational programme in hairdressing: “Now there’s so much work and I’m so tired of school, it would have been a lot better for me if I’d done something else” (Ida, 1).

Ida expressed disappointment in the services of the careers counsellor whom she describes as having been unable to engage in her particular case. However, she had scanned information about becoming a hairdresser. She had found that the only way for her to become a qualified hairdresser was through private schools where she would have to pay fees: “You can’t do it in further education here without paying for it. I’ve checked it, it costs about 60,000 [SEK] for one of those private courses and it takes two years, I think.” (Ida, 1). This structural hindrance disheartened her considerably and seemed to work as an effective barrier for further information activities. However, she sometimes helped out at a hairdressing salon owned by the mother of one of her friends and it was through this contact that she
was able to observe the work but it also helped her to realise that the skills involved required specialised training: “You know, you ask questions to find out what it’s like to work. You have to know a lot about colours and things like that. But you can’t learn how to do it by watching; you have to practice and you have to learn all sorts of things about different types of hair and cutting techniques and products”.

(Ida, 1)

From this perspective, Ida argued that graduating from an academic programme like the IB programme was more of a hindrance than a help to her as she did not intend to pursue academic studies. She experienced it as a hindrance because she that found the careers and study and information directed at her through the programme to be irrelevant to her situation. Ida further experienced that she had been unable to make sense of the information brochures she had received from universities; “I mean, they don’t really help you, when you read the brochures you still don’t know what a civil engineer or a systems architect does!” (Ida, 2). This suggests that a problem for Ida was that her knowledge of occupations and professions was limited. In this respect, if information seeking is understood as an activity carried out for purposes beyond itself or as a means of connecting past experiences and knowledge to present and future scenarios, it will seem pointless if realistic future scenarios cannot be envisaged. Ida felt that the IB programme had not stimulated sufficient interest for her to build on, which gave her a somewhat shaky basis from which to proceed in investigating her study and career options. Ida’s account of the quandary she found herself in at the end of the school year, of being prepared by virtue of her education to go into higher education but not inclined to do so is summed up in her statement;

It was a waste of time, I don’t want to study anymore, studying is not the answer to everything. I have a friend who dragged me around town looking for information about evening classes for improving your grades but I just wasn’t interested in it. (Ida, 2)

A potential problem for Ida was that she did not seek information about work opportunities on leaving school either. Apart from feeling that schoolwork consumed all her time at this point she also experienced the lack of a structure for seeking information about work after leaving school: “They are not interested in you here [school] if you just want to get a job”. (Ida, 2)

7.4.3 Observing others
The use of formal information sources was limited in this approach. However, the example of others could serve as encouragement or reassurance that the future would work out well. Sean, for example, did not intend to go on to higher education. He hoped to find work that would interest him and allow him to develop while at the same time giving him time to pursue his interest in music in his leisure
time. He was encouraged in this line of action by observation of his older brothers, both of whom had got work straight after school:

*Sean*: My other brother, who’s more like me, he started work in a warehouse after school and now he’s responsible for advertising there.

*F.H.*: Are you inspired by your brothers?

*Sean*: Yes, a little, it’s reassuring, I could do that too. (…) I’m not particularly worried, I have plenty of ideas but just now the only thing I can do is to work at getting decent grades, it’s not a big deal. I’m thinking about just getting a job, some money and taking time to do other things. Then, if it’s an interesting job, maybe I can build on it and develop that way. (Sean, 1)

After examining the effects of normative behaviour on information seeking Chatman came to the conclusion that; “People will not search for information if there is no need for them to do so. If members of a social world choose to ignore information, it is because their world is working without it.” (Chatman, 2000:10). This seemed to be the case for Sean; he had neither consulted his careers counsellor nor read any of the career guidance literature, but expected that what had worked for his brothers would also work for him. The fact that he “had plenty of ideas” suggests that he did not experience himself as lacking in resources. He was confident that finding a job would not be a problem and that if his contacts, such as his brothers, could not assist him in getting work he “could always use the telephone catalogue” (Sean, 2). For Sean, higher education did not hold any allure whatsoever, on the contrary; through the examples of his brothers, he looked forward to a working life that offered opportunities for development. At the time of the interviews he maintained that his priority was to get “decent grades” and most of the participants in the study described themselves as stressed by examinations, projects and written assignments. How much time they had to devote to career related information seeking, particularly if participants suspected that the information available might not necessarily lead to wiser choices, may have lead them to avoid the effort of seeking and working on information. As Sean suggests, consulting the telephone catalogue might be just as effective for him as consulting other sources of information.

**7.4.4 Avoiding and limiting information seeking**

In this approach, avoiding or limiting information seeking seemed in part to be connected with a reluctance to move away from home and a strong sense of identification with the region and/or their families. It also appeared to some extent to be associated with a lack of self confidence and a lack of confidence in their own qualifications. De Certeau (1984:171) argues that formal texts are ‘cultural
weapons’ constructed by a social elite in order to mediate the social practices it legitimises and to which the reader is expected to conform. Such texts may also have the effect of submerging or disguising other alternatives for action. The autonomous reader is therefore a literate reader; one who can read ‘between the lines’. Participants who argued that they were not ready or inclined to seek careers and study information may have been asserting autonomy in their own way by refraining from engaging in this type of information at all because they suspected it would require them to act in ways they did not feel prepared for.

Ilona, for instance, was prepared to study but only in her home town:

I don’t think I would like [moving to another town]. I couldn’t live by myself (...). I’ve never lived by myself so it would mean a really great change (...). I’m used to having people around me, my family and our relatives. There are a lot of us, there’s always people calling in and I wouldn’t know what to do on my own, it would be so lonely. (Ilona, 2)

Ilona argued that it was her upbringing in a large immigrant family with its close ties that hindered her from seeking information about higher education that might involve separation from her family. Sean, on the other hand, was prepared to move from home but not from the town where he lived: “All my friends are here, I play in a band here, I’m active in our local SNF [Swedish Society for Nature Conservation]. (...) I like it here, so why should I want to move?” (Sean, 2). Study and career literature advocates mobility as do labour market and education policies; to ignore the literature or to limit information seeking to a minimum can therefore be seen both as a form of self protection and, to some extent, of personal autonomy.

Some participants were not as confident as Sean was about the future, and in some cases it seemed that lack of confidence hindered information seeking. Madeleine had dreams of becoming a photographer and had studied three years on a media programme:

Madeleine: I’ve looked around a bit but not much. What I’d really like to do is work, perhaps as an assistant to a photographer but it’s difficult.
F.H.: Is it?
Madeleine: Yes, I mean I’ve only got this programme. It’s not (...) I mean, it’s not the best education in the world, it’s not much to get a job on. There are so many others that apply for assistant jobs and maybe they’ve been to university. So that’s the problem, I haven’t got much.
F.H.: Would you consider going to university?
Madeleine: No, no, I don’t feel ready to move at all! I really don’t want to and that’s why I haven’t looked at any programmes or courses. I don’t like talking about it. Nearly all my friends have been thinking about it [moving away] but I don’t want to think about them moving to other places and doing other things. I try not to think about it too much (...) I thought that I’ll just see what happens, I’ll just come out and do something in a shop or something, anything at all. (Madeleine, 1)

Madeleine accounted for her lack of initiative in finding ways of becoming a photographer as dependent on two factors. One was her lack of confidence in her own qualifications. She had, in fact, ‘looked around a bit’; enough to ascertain that she would meet strong competition in the search for an assistant job. The other was her reluctance to move away from her home town in order to study and this hindered her from considering information about further education. Being required to act as a consequence of seeking information is described by Sean:

You should get information that makes you want to find out more about the things you read about. When I have time to read them [brochures], I will, but if you read them, you know you’ll feel forced to do something...so I don’t read them. (Sean, 1)

The above quotation touches on a view of information seeking as potentially threatening. Ida commented that it was “quite frightening” to go through job advertisements because “They expect so much like fluency in English, work experience and social skills” (Ida 2). Several participants argued that information seeking for careers and studies would distract them from school work at this crucial period in time because it would prompt them to take further action or cause them anxiety if they could not pay full attention to pursuing the leads it offered. From Madeleine’s perspective information about ways of becoming better qualified as a photographer would force her to decide whether or not she was prepared to move to another town and she was not, as yet, prepared to make that decision.

Although reluctant to describe herself as an active information seeker Madeleine had, in fact, visited a university institution not too far away from home that offered a programme in photography:

There weren’t any nice...well, it was a horrible building with old fashioned stuff. They were supposed to be moving to a new place but I didn’t think,... it didn’t feel right. I mean the milieu here [at school] is so nice and it means a lot to me. I think it gave a very negative impression that the milieu there was so
awful and then it’s a three year course as well and that feels difficult, studying for three more years. (Madeleine, 2)

Madeleine was sceptical about the quality of the programme after her assessment of the premises and evaluation of its equipment which, in turn, justifies her decision not to apply to the programme. The idea of more studies did not appeal to her either. The future was something, Madeleine claimed, that she preferred not to think about and her tactics were thus to “just see what happens,” although not with the sense of optimism that characterised Sean’s story.

Participants who described themselves as avoiding or limiting information seeking surprised me with the extent of information seeking they had nevertheless engaged in. I got the impression that they described themselves as inactive because the results of their information seeking activities either reassured them that they could take their time or disheartened them from further information seeking. Common to this approach was the rather pessimistic view of the future as “stepping into a black hole” or “jumping off a cliff and hoping the water is deep enough” (Sean, 1); metaphors which further suggest that careers and study information seeking had not been a prioritised activity. Attachment to the region or their families together with negative assessments of personal efficacy seemed to foreshorten participants’ time frames to the improvisations required by “just seeing what happens” in the here and now. It seemed that place, in terms of the local, opened possibilities for identity formation which at the same time constructed a largely self-made limitation to careers and study related information seeking.

7.4.5 Summary

In this approach, study and occupation information was either avoided or borne in mind until a later date when participants would have the time and/or inclination to deal with it. Information horizons were characterised by a small number of locally relevant information sources which did not change over the interview period. For participants who had chosen personally inappropriate upper secondary programmes, career guidance and its associated literature could be experienced as threatening or too demanding and therefore ignored. It was sufficient to know that formal information sources existed and could be found if the need for them arose.

For some, the issue of what to do on leaving school was not experienced as problematic; “I take it easy mostly, it’ll sort itself” as Sean (2) expressed it; they lacked the motivation to engage in information seeking activities and from their point of view their worlds were working well enough without it. An implication of this approach is that career guidance was understood as a resource that was largely irrelevant to individual needs.
7 Approaches to information seeking

7.5 Conclusions
The research questions concern the ways in which school leavers approach study and careers related information and how their accounts of information seeking may be understood both in terms of identity and within the context of the prevailing discourses on education and work in Swedish society. Four different approaches to information seeking emerged in the interviews; (1) Information seeking as a tool in making connections between educational interests and the future labour market (2) Information seeking both as a tool in discerning pathways to occupations and as a means of orienting within an occupational domain (3) Study and career information seeking ‘on hold’; information seeking is associated with planning extended transitions, and (4) Study and career information seeking is avoided as potentially threatening or as meaningless. The different approaches were associated with claims to different types of social identities and which in turn related to discourses on career, youth and education: 1) As ‘learner’ and as consumer in compliance with a new career discourse which defines career as less predictable, more individual and less organisationally dependent than in the past. Education is positioned in this discourse as a market for consumers. 2) As aspiring to an occupational identity in compliance with a traditional career discourse of progress and stability within the professions, education is positioned as a means to an end and work as a means of self development and fulfilment 3) As young and cosmopolitan relating to a discourse of youth as a time of freedom from responsibility and of experimentation and education is positioned in this discourse as empowerment and as a means of self-realisation 4) as homebound escaper from education in resistance to a new career discourse and where education is positioned as distanced from the world of work. Participants drew on different discursive scripts in order to account for and justify their information related activities and they deployed identity through talk of being a type of person in order to create coherence in what could otherwise be interpreted as disjointed or directionless orientations towards the future.

In the first approach transitions to work are constructed as a time for gathering a ‘portfolio’ type of education in preparation for a modern career (Cohen et al., 2004) rather than as steps towards an upward progress through an occupation or organisation. This suggests that information seeking becomes part of a process of self-management related to efficient study and career planning. The career guidance information system in this approach is taken for granted as a system whose function is to encourage school leavers to take an active responsibility for information seeking themselves with the goal of constructing an individual and marketable portfolio for a future career. In the second approach, transitions to work are constructed as legitimised pathways to specific occupations along which useful information sources are located although access to them may vary depending on who you are and who you know. Here career guidance may facilitate information access by helping young people to forge contacts within occupations or organisations. In the third and fourth approaches, deferral or denial of information related activities places career planning, at best, somewhere in an opaque future.
The idea of taking opportunities as they arise was one way of resisting the expectancy to strategically plan for the future. The third approach is somewhat ambivalent; transition itself is construed both as ‘time-out’ and as a period when skills, qualifications and experiences are collected portfolio-style. At the same time it is also constructed as a period for enacting one’s youth and coming to terms with oneself. In both the third and fourth approaches participants drew on alternative versions of themselves as flexible and adaptable which is partly in line with a prevalent version of today’s successful entrepreneur. However, if the portfolio view of transition and higher education is accepted as a new normative model congruent with the wider socio-political objectives of adaptation to a globalised knowledge economy then resisters may be viewed as ‘losers’ in their approaches to seeking information by being seen to fail in taking charge of their own futures. The question which arises is whether or not the new career discourse marginalises alternative courses of action even though its underlying assumptions may in fact be questioned.

In their narratives participants also express dilemmas in the tensions between different social identities (Stanley & Billig, 2004). Young people are expected to seek and use study and career related information as a means of effecting a personalised transition to the labour market. They are positioned in the careers and study literature as people who have choices and they are encouraged to take an adult responsibility and to behave in accordance with conceptions of career that are assumed to be in tune with the development of modern society. However, the scarcity of jobs for school leavers and the length of primary and secondary education also justify an extended transition where the metaphor of ‘time-out’ becomes particularly poignant. The scarcity of jobs in itself may also indicate to young people that they cannot ‘choose’ jobs but are required to accept whatever they are offered thus rendering information seeking activities pointless. The tension between seeking information in order to plan their futures and the desire to escape adult responsibility, if only for a time, becomes ideological within the context of career guidance for it relates directly to issues of power and the demands of the wider institutional and economic context. Dilemmas identified in the narratives include tensions between the idea of ‘aspiring adulthood’ and youthful freedom and came to expression in arguments for and against entering higher education and claims to a learner/consumer identity on one hand and plans for extended transitions with claims to a youth identity on the other hand. Tensions between the idea of traditional occupational identities and ‘unique’ free entrepreneurial identities also emerged, as well as between cosmopolitan and homebound identities. The point of such dilemmas is that they are not resolvable (Stanley and Billig, 2004), they exist within a wider contradictory ideology. However, in talking about their information seeking activities the participants in the study were attempting to negotiate between them.

Approaches to information seeking reflect different perspectives on transition, education and career but it is perhaps only in the second approach that the effects of
structure are at all visible. The portfolio models of career and education are suited to the idea of a society characterised by functional lifelong learning but the models implicitly ignore the restraining contextual environment within which people live their lives and thereby also ignores the difficulties young people may encounter in discerning and connecting with information sources. It also obscures the fact that traditional careers and career pathways still exist with their own ‘landscapes’ of information sources. This awakens questions concerning the role of information literacy in career guidance as a means of making visible alternative views on the meaning of education and career and the relationship between them. Some of the difficulties or boundaries to planning and managing careers encountered by participants have been touched upon in this chapter. The next chapter is composed of portraits of four young people in an attempt to further contextualise study and careers related information seeking in lived experience.
In the following chapter, I want to bring into view the different approaches to information seeking demonstrated by individual participants in the study. I have therefore allowed four of the interviewed young people to emerge in greater detail because they are so distinct in their approaches. This is not to say that these four representatives capture the full range of experiences of the twenty young people in the study. They are in fact a highly differentiated group of people, albeit of the same age, but subject to a whole variety of experiences depending on a diverse range of personal circumstances. However, they are also bonded by common concerns and experiences; by their schooling and by the social conditions and climate prevailing in Sweden in this period. The four portraits presented are therefore intended to give the reader an idea both of the diversity of young people in their information seeking activities within a particular context and of the many intersecting interests and influences that impacted on an individual story. They are also an attempt to illustrate the logic of individual courses of action given the constraints and possibilities inherent in their lifeworlds at this time (Hatch & Wisniewski, 1995). Each portrait is summarised with a departure point in McKenzie’s (2003a) model of information practices (see section 5.3.1).

8.1 Nora – Active information seeking: negotiating individual interests and social discourses

Nora had taken the upper secondary programme in the natural sciences, something she claimed she was disposed to do since childhood; her father taught mathematics and natural sciences at secondary level and her mother was a nurse. She had one elder brother who was also interested in the natural sciences but had taken a ‘gap’ year after school to work in a warehouse and to consider his options. They lived in the countryside and the whole family were engaged in orienteering as a leisure activity. Membership in the local orienteering club also provided Nora with a wide social network which included a number of students and who proved to be useful sources of information on higher education. In the interviews, Nora emerged as a person focused on higher education and in the process of developing a student identity. She was engaged in environmental issues and, when we first met, had just completed a school project on the causes and distribution of skin cancer. This had involved testing the effectiveness of sun protection creams in a laboratory setting.
She envisioned herself studying environmental sciences and working in a laboratory setting in the future. She also hoped to gain experience of working or studying abroad. This goal provided the departure point for her information related activities. Nora was also slightly dyslexic and this was a factor she took into consideration as she sought information on different university programmes.

Nora described her major information problem as one of matching university education with labour market opportunities. In addition, she was looking for a university that would afford her opportunities to sustain her interest in orienteering, and for a programme that used pedagogical methods that suited her. At several points in the interviews, she reinforced her ‘learner identity’ with comments on her efforts to find programmes with people ‘like me’, who are ‘ambitious’. In her accounts, she describes her choice-making as risk-taking and of higher education as an individual investment. She emphasised “this is my own choice, (…) people can give me advice but it’s my decision”. Viewing choice of education as a risk she had to take, had consequences for the ways in which she viewed information, as she put it;

Well, it’s a bit worrying that even if you’ve been on a programme, for like five years and then there’s no job afterwards. It feels a bit…you know, five years and no job? I know people that have studied IT and it was just a bubble that burst. It makes me want…I mean if I work with the environment or biotechnology; it seems like there’s a future there, I mean, we’re going to have to produce things that are environmentally safe, in pharmaceuticals as well, we’re going to have to produce things that are not high risk, (pause) but maybe that’s just a bubble as well? Maybe the environment is just a craze because there are so many films about the environment just now? (Nora, 1)

In this excerpt, Nora voices a sense of risk that ensues from a feeling of the reflexivity of the world, rather than of its objectivity. Her reference to environmental studies as “just a craze” suggests that her interest could simply be a response to her being in the world and that others like her would respond similarly. The result could be a ‘bursting bubble’ if too many young people educated themselves in this branch because of its exposure in the media and thus became victims of “a craze”. The statement reveals a reflexive awareness that fluctuations in the labour market are as likely to be influenced by interactions between people and institutions as by objective realities. Nora’s response was to look for programmes in environmental sciences that were “flexible” and allowed its students either to change direction or to incorporate alternative courses in response to current conditions on the labour market. A further precaution Nora took was to look for signs that programmes had connections with working life:
The most important thing, first and foremost, is how the programme is compared to reality, if it’s tied to a company, that it’s not just theoretical but that there are connections to reality. (Nora, 1)

This statement expresses a functional view of higher education as a means to an end. The way in which Nora contrasts ‘reality’ with the ‘theoretical’ aspects of higher education suggests a polarisation between academic “theory” on the one hand, and working life skills on the other, rather than a view of education as enriching to personal and working life in terms of ideas. Nora described her approach to information on programmes as “reading between the lines” suggesting that she was aware of the danger of being lured into an academic culture that might diminish her employability in the “real world”. The ability to evaluate information from a labour market perspective thus emerges as an essential prerequisite in the new careers discourse with its emphasis on individual negotiation and the construction of individual portfolios of education and experience. Up to this point, Nora describes an approach that is in keeping with the social expectations embedded in the National Curriculum, which encourage young people to make rational and well-informed choices. Giddens (1991:142) argues that in late modernity people can choose which approach to take at points of transition in their lives; either to fall back on traditional and familiar patterns of activity or to actively take up the challenge and “take notice of new demands as well as new possibilities”. In this sense, Nora actively takes up the challenge through her scepticism concerning the value of higher education and her consequent efforts to evaluate study and career information in terms of labour market needs. However, from a subjective viewpoint, Nora also had to weigh her options in terms of her own personal interests, anxieties and preferences as well as in terms of her actual knowledge of occupations.

8.1.2 Nora’s information horizon

Getting hold of information was not a problem in Nora’s view, quite the reverse, as the universities deluged potential natural science students with brochures and catalogues during their last year at school24 making it difficult to overview all the options. However, she also felt that the effect of having been brought up in a home which disposed her towards the natural sciences helped her to “screen off” options outside the natural sciences:

I threw away a lot of catalogues because we got so many; I have big piles at home. Especially Linköping, we got an awful

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24 On a national level, universities have been encouraged to increase the number of places for natural science and technology students as part of the overall education policy (Utbildningsdepartementet, 2005). It has however, proved difficult to fill the number of available places, hence intensive publicity campaigns on the part of universities to recruit students.
lot from them, I’m sure it must have been five catalogues! (…) there were just so many from all sorts of places. Of course I didn’t read them all, some of them look really second-class so they’re not interesting…but at the same time you can’t completely ignore them because then you haven’t given them a chance and you shouldn’t…anyway, in the end, I went out on the Internet and got a few hits and then I got them all, all that there are, like about 270 hits and then I just ticked them off – not that one, not that one… and then I checked up on the ones that were left. (Nora, 1)

Nora reduced the number of catalogues and web sites to a manageable level by relating to more subjective criteria than the rational procedure implied by the National Curriculum. She limited her options geographically to southern Sweden, and, in practice, to those universities where she had personal contacts and to what was familiar and known to her. Nora’s first information horizon (App. III) reveals the extent of her social network in this respect, and it can be seen that the majority of sources on it are students at different universities. It also includes her family and her careers counsellor whom Nora described in the first interview as “really neutral” and helpful as a facilitator of access to study and career information and in helping her to understand the system of higher education. The other adults on her horizon included two teachers in mathematics and chemistry who had personally encouraged her to continue with her studies and her mother’s cousin, a teacher at a university with whom she could discuss the nature of university studies. Other sources included the Internet where Nora had sought out university web-sites and information about student loans and accommodation, and TV and radio where Nora had paid particular attention to labour market prognoses. In her second horizon, after Nora had applied to university, university brochures and web-site became more central and relevant to her:

Yes, they’re much more interesting now, they’re much more important and I’ve really read every word. The Internet is much closer now, I think, now, when I know more about what I’m going to do. I’ve checked grade requirements, accommodation, the surroundings, everything. (Nora, 2)

In Nora’s case the careers counsellor became more significant as a source of information towards the end of the school year which was unusual compared to most of the participants’ horizons. This circumstance had to do with her dyslexia problem and is taken up in section 8.1.4.

Most of the human sources on Nora’s horizons were either teachers or students and Nora experienced no difficulties in approaching them for information. She was also spontaneously offered information by older student friends who invited her to visit them at their universities. She was able to put her questions to them and to
contact them on numerous occasions. This was reflected in her information horizon where formal sources of information such as university brochures, the Internet and the careers counsellor were placed on the periphery of her first horizon whereas personal contacts were placed close to her own central position. She made use of the largest number of human sources of all the participants in the study. Apart from being socially well positioned, a further explanation of the large number of sources used by Nora may be that she did not have a specific occupational goal with distinct educational pathways to follow and which might have further narrowed her options. The type of programmes she was interested in were constructed around the idea of flexibility and of contingency on the labour market and were not traditional professional pathways into traditional professions. It can be argued that the programmes themselves, as products of late modernity, condition young people into thinking about them in particular ways. Nora’s information activities in this perspective can therefore also be seen as reflexive activities brought about by what there was on offer in the area she was interested in.

8.1.3 Information seeking with a view to choosing university and higher education programme

In the first interview, Nora was clear about her intention to go to university: “I’m going straight on to university. I’m not tired of school or anything like that, so I think it would be a good thing for me to continue” (Nora, 1). She had reached this conclusion by taking note of her older brother’s gap year experiences. He had academic interests similar to Nora’s but had decided to delay his entry into higher education by working for a while first. According to Nora, he hoped that work experience would help him to clarify his options. Nora drew her own conclusions from his example:

But me, I feel that if I work for a year, perhaps…I mean, I’m sure I’d get lots of experience and that, but I don’t know if I would be any the wiser just because I’d worked for a year. My brother, for example, (...) he took two years off but he still doesn’t know what he wants to do. He hasn’t asked himself those questions, he just says ‘it’ll sort itself, I’ve got two years to think about it’. But he hasn’t thought about it so much! He’s still in the same situation as me! (Nora, 1)

Nora reflected that working in a supermarket or a warehouse may give work experience but that work in itself might not actually facilitate planning for the future. In Nora’s opinion, her brother had not gained anything by working when from the outset, both she and her brother took for granted they would both go to university eventually. Nora returned to this observation several times in the course of the interviews, commenting that “most people” take a “sabbatical”, but that for
her, it would be a waste of time. In addition, she was afraid of losing ‘study techniques’ if she delayed her entry into higher education.

A factor that complicated the evaluation of higher education programmes was that Nora was unsure of what work in the environmental field actually entailed. You could say that Nora felt she was expected to know beforehand what she was going into higher education to learn:

Nora: If I become a civil engineer in environmental sciences, say, or in biotechnics, well what am I? Do you know what I mean? What does a civil engineer do?

F.H.: I don’t know!

Nora: No, me neither! Ha! What shall I do then? (...) It’s so broad! Of course that gives you room for choice but at the same time all these choices are so confusing! (...) The environment can be forests, the sea, the city. There’s loads to choose between so you can’t know. You don’t know what you’ll become, it’s like jumping onto a roller coaster! (Nora 1)

"You can’t know” suggests that Nora felt she was facing her future blindfolded and at the same time she felt she was expected to take responsibility for her choices and calculate the risk she was taking, which was difficult when she was unable to concretise what kind of work she might do or to form a realistic sense of what studies meant in terms of occupations. She attempted to form a picture of a future labour market by keeping alert to labour market prognoses:

F.H. Do you still listen to the radio for [labour market] prognoses?25

Nora: Yes, still intensively. TV, too when they take up the labour market and statistics. (Nora, 2)

The only conclusion she could reach through listening to such prognoses was that ”you don’t get anywhere if you don’t have an education unless you want to sit in a supermarket!” Nora implies that she had connected with the message in prognoses that higher education was essential to career development but that they could not provide sufficiently complete or reliable information on which to base her choice of education programme.

A further information tactic was to talk to her friends at university and discover how they had reasoned when they made their choices. In her accounts, she describes occasions when she actively sought out student friends, or took advantage of encounters, in order to “chat about what you can do if you don’t have high grades or if you’re not sure about which programme to choose” (Nora, 1):

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25 This was a follow-up question in the second interview
I have a friend at Chalmers and when we met together with some friends I asked him about it. He wanted to study biotechnics and when he told me, I hadn’t a clue what biotechnics was (…). He explained, but he didn’t get in, so he’s studying chemistry or chemical technology or something instead because it’s nearly as good. He could choose tracks so it’s nearly the same as the programme he didn’t get into. Then I understood that if you don’t have high grades you can choose something with lower grades in the same type of programme and then make choices so it’s nearly the same. He said I could come and visit him and just hang out with him for a day to see what it’s like. He’s really been a great support. He hasn’t regretted his choice at all and thinks it’s really good. (Nora, 1)

By questioning her friend about programme choice, she learned of useful tactics practiced by ‘insiders’. Nora described how this encounter also led to an opportunity to visit the university and meet other students. The concept of ‘information ground’ (Fisher & Naumer, 2006) as a locality which frames the type of information generated between people in conversation, in this case between newcomers and ‘insiders’, illustrates the complexity of everyday information seeking as well as the advantages of access to appropriate information grounds. For example, when Nora visited her friend at the university she not only could ask her own questions about programmes but was also offered information on student accommodation:

If I’m going to university straightaway where am I going to live? Shall I live at home and commute? No way! I want to leave home, that’s one of the main reasons why I want to study. So I went to the careers counsellor and she gave me a lot of stuff like “this is the way you have to go about it,” but I never got round to it. So, when I was at the university, and saw the student accommodation where my friends live, well, one of them said, ‘we’ll fix it for you’, and he did and now I’m in the queue for a student flat. (Nora, 1)

In the above account, Nora implies that the information from the careers counsellor was general in nature and required further effort on her own part. The outcome of her visit gave not only a greater understanding of the system of higher education but also practical assistance in finding accommodation. The above account was part of the interview held in November, almost a year before Nora would need student accommodation. It suggests that finding somewhere to live was as important a part of the equation for her as finding a suitable programme, and, as Nora pointed out, she did not have time for the practicalities of planning her future, when she had school, homework and her grades to think about as well.
Nora had the advantage of social network that facilitated opportunities to seek and be offered relevant information and her main information strategy was to tap the experiences of her student friends. They were people with backgrounds and interests like her own and who had ventured into higher education without guarantees of a secure future. She reflects in the following way, using an account of advice given by a student friend, to motivate the choice of a programme that gave no clear description of its relation to the labour market:

He said, well, he got in just by chance, he didn’t know if he really wanted to (…) but he said that everything has worked out well, (…). He said just the same things as my mother, that if I didn’t want to continue on that programme I need never feel I’ve made a mistake but you have to see it either as a confirmation, or a way of finding what you really want, and it’s always a good thing to have studied. (Nora, 2)

In this account, Nora describes an interaction between herself and a friend that served to reaffirm advice from her mother. In doing so, she makes use of another and partly conflicting discourse; that of education as personal enrichment. In the account above, she normalises the idea of studying at university without an occupational focus suggesting that it was normal procedure and that it was what people with similar backgrounds to her own did. Although she expressed concern through the rhetoric of the risk society, she used, in practice, a discourse relating to the intrinsic value of higher education to support her choice.

Unable to get a clear picture of where she might fit into the labour market after higher education Nora opted in the end for a flexible programme in environmental sciences. It offered a base year allowing students the opportunity to study different aspects of the discipline before making their minds up about which direction to take. She hoped she would find “something interesting along the way” on which she could focus.

8.1.4 Seeking information on the pedagogic aspects of higher education

A further concern for Nora was to find a programme with a pedagogical approach that suited her needs. As she was slightly dyslexic, she was particularly interested in university programmes that emphasised cooperation rather than competition between students. She had experienced that working in groups facilitated her learning better than individual study did and was therefore on the look-out for information on the pedagogical methods practiced in the different programmes. She was also worried that she might not be able to keep up at university level and was interested in what it was like to study at this level. Her student contacts proved invaluable as a source of “insider” information of a type that is difficult to infer from university brochures and web sites. Nora’s interviews contain several
accounts of active questioning in order to create a picture of university studies. For example, she was invited by a friend to visit him at university, she described how she took the opportunity to question him and his friends:

I ask about lessons and how the teaching works, if they have exam periods and things like that (...) I’ve heard that they have a lot in English at Chalmers, literature and even lectures but that they (the students) help each other when it’s really difficult. I’ve understood that there’s a lot more things you need to work together on, in general, and that’s good. There, (another university) it’s more that you go to lectures and then take stuff home to work on, that’s what it’s like there. (Nora 2)

Opportunities for “working together” in groups that support learning emerged as an important criterion for Nora and was a strategy she used to overcome problems occasioned by her dyslexia. Dyslexia was also something that she preferred not to take up with her friends at university:

F.H.: When you ask about the teaching, are you thinking about dyslexia problems?  
Nora: Yes, but it’s not something you shout from the rooftops. It’s tricky asking, I mean, I don’t ask ‘how do things work if you have dyslexia?’ I just need to know if they work in groups. I can work in groups, especially if the others in the group are ambitious.  
F.H.: When you work in a group, do you tell the others about it?  
Nora: Yes, I do and I offer to do other things. It usually works out well. (Nora, 2)

By asking about group work and how students dealt with literature and lectures in English, Nora tried to ascertain if she would be able to manage studies at this level. It is noteworthy that she had planned questioning strategies for finding out what she needed to know without divulging her problem. Her strategy may, however, also have hindered her from becoming aware of available technical support systems. As Nora was still unsure if she would be able to carry out her studies, her father, who was a teacher, recommended that she consulted the career counsellor at her school as he had “heard somewhere” that universities provide support for people with dyslexia:

She [careers counsellor] helped me to apply as a student with special needs and she checked it out for me. She’s been really creative and fixed everything and said ‘now we’re going to book a time, just you and me, and we’ll go through it all’. She’s
really given it some time and been really good. (…) She told me that I can get really good support at university, that they have technical equipment for people with dyslexia and that I’ll be able to manage just like anyone else. I didn’t know about all this stuff. She showed me where to look on [university] websites to see if they provide support for people with dyslexia. (Nora, 2)

This interaction with the careers counsellor made Nora aware not only of resources for people with dyslexia but also gave her encouragement on an emotional level by acknowledging her problem and empowering her to find the information she needed by herself.

Nora was interested in the experiences of her student friends, particularly when she could relate their learning experiences to her own study interests. In the account below Nora describes how she was able to create a clearer picture of brochure information through a student friend:

The brochures don’t really tell you much but I’ve got friends in Lund, and I just ask them, ‘What’s it like there then?’ (…) I have a friend that studies in Lund and he’s really clever, he’s good at everything. He explains how everything works. He used to go to my school as well so I can really relate to what he says. I have friends that went to technical schools but I don’t know what those schools were like so it’s more difficult to relate to what they say. (Nora, 1)

Here, her student friend’s experiences are accorded considerable weight because, in Schutz’ terms, he was an “insider” with similar perspectives to Nora’s and furthermore, a student at Lund University, which is a high status university. Schutz defines the ‘insider’ as follows; “If I were in his place I would have had the same experiences as he has (…) I would have the same chances or risks in the same situation” (1964b:131). The account suggests that Nora identifies with her friend and places herself in relation to him as a matter of course. The idea of going to university emerges in Nora’s case as ingrained in her ‘thinking as usual’. Embedded within the statement, there is also an implicit reference to two different learning cultures; that of natural science students and that of technical students. Nora points out that she cannot relate to what the technical students have to say about their studies. Her awareness of this distinction also indicates that see sees herself as a student of the natural sciences, what Bourdieu (1986:466) refers to as a ‘practical anticipation’ of the future.

Having read in a brochure that Linköping University used innovative teaching methods, Nora sought out an acquaintance that studied there to find out what this meant: “Then I met up with him at a [orienteering] competition and took the chance to ask him about it”. In the same way that she established the Lund student’s
authority, “he’s really clever” she also established the authority of the Linköping student, “He has very big ambitions”. His point of view, according to Nora, was that new universities, like Linköping “try so much harder” than the traditional high status universities:

He wanted to go to Chalmers, he thinks a lot about status, (...) but he didn’t get in. He got into Linköping instead (...) so I asked him about it. He said, ‘The teaching is really great! I certainly don’t regret that I didn’t go to Chalmers’. He has really convinced me that you don’t need to go to those universities. I think it’s good to know how things really are. He has very big ambitions, he says upper secondary was nothing! He has to study much, much more now. That’s what he thinks. (Nora 1)

In the above accounts, Nora’s awareness of the distinctions between universities together with her pedagogical needs seem to make it imperative for her to motivate her choice of a ‘new’ university. The Linköping student’s perspectives thus have an interpretational relevance that is important to her. “Knowing how things really are” alludes to the conclusion she draws and this is reinforced by her indication that the university requires its students to work hard. Nora finally decided to apply to Linköping University as her first choice.

One aspect on which Nora expressed some worry was whether she would be able to manage on an academically demanding programme. Her father was a teacher in the natural sciences with first hand experience of university studies. She described how they had negotiated this problem:

If I say, “maybe I won’t get in and maybe I won’t be able to manage or it might be too difficult and I might fail the exams”, he just says “of course you’ll pass!” I mean, you feel that you have to get really high grades to get in and Dad just says “when you get in you just have to make sure that you hang on, you don’t have to have the highest grades in everything”. (Nora, 2)

Parents who have themselves successfully managed university studies are probably aware that you do not have to be exceptionally talented in order to succeed at this level. While Nora did not talk in terms of the social reproduction of her family, she could articulate how her family’s values and experiences were mediated ‘round the kitchen table’ in discussions of her and her brother’s futures. The value of family discussions round a common project where advice is sought and passed on seems to work unobtrusively as a means of becoming prepared for university life.

Despite the fact that Nora had already, by the first interview in November, gathered a considerable deal of information and was actively in contact with students at universities, she experienced a lack of time for information seeking.
She experienced her last year at school as very demanding as it was the last chance for improving grades: “When you get home from school then you have homework and things, you can’t exactly decide what to do with your future!” (Nora, 1). Nora found the lack of time stressful and in the circumstances prioritised working for her grades to “be sure of getting in”. By May however, she felt more on top of the situation and could focus on brochure and Internet information on the university. Her student friend in Linköping also took up a more central position in her information horizon:

Now when I’ve decided to go to Linköping I’ve contacted him much more, that’s natural of course. I don’t have time for the others just now. (Nora, 2)

Once she had made the decision to go to Linköping, Nora felt she could relax, the future was now, in a sense out of her hands and she now looked forward to student life and moving from home.

8.1.5 Summary of Nora’s information seeking practices
Active seeking
- Nora actively sought information by contacting the school careers counsellor on numerous occasions during her three years on the Natural Science programme. She initially described the counsellor’s help as “neutral”, “she helps you to fill in the forms”. Guidance was always booked in advance and Nora’s questions were pre-planned and chiefly concerned general procedures for applications to universities. Nora experienced interaction with the careers counsellor as helpful and practical. Later on, the careers counsellor proved to be an emotionally supportive source of information on procedures and strategies for students with special needs.
- Nora contacted student friends with pre-planned questions on teaching methods and student practices. Nora’s reluctance to mention her dyslexia hindered her from being specific in her questions.
- Intensive reading and comparisons of university programmes from selected high status universities. These also formed a basis for family discussions
- Intensive reading of specific university and programme information once her decision had been taken in order to form a fuller picture of studies, environment and student life.

Active scanning
- Gathering and scanning lists of universities and programmes to match academic interests and geographic preferences. Classifying universities; distinguishing between regional or new universities and high status universities.
• Scanning university programme information and looking for signs of pedagogic method, programme flexibility, possibilities to study abroad and connections to working life. “Reading between the lines” to distinguish marketing from information.

• Visiting friends at university and taking opportunities to ask about studies, student life and student accommodation.

Non-directed monitoring
• Being alert to labour market prognoses via press, radio and TV. Nora tried to discern connections between labour market and studies. It was difficult for her to make connections to the labour market as she was uncertain what jobs her studies might lead to and what such jobs entailed.

• Nora was inspired by reading popular science journals. She read them in the school library when she had the opportunity and they gave her “ideas on what could be achieved with science” and a notion of what kind of jobs there might be in the future.

• Nora observed and drew conclusions from her brother’s experiences of work during his ‘gap’ year.

• Family discussions “around the kitchen table” supported and affirmed information seeking activities

By proxy
• Nora’s father recommended that she consult the careers counsellor at her school for information on the provision of support for students with dyslexia at universities.

• Nora’s parents passed on general information to her in the form of stories of their own experiences at university: “Mum said, “you know, if you make the wrong choice, well I studied psychology for a year and dropped out and went on to be nurse instead, and it wasn’t a waste of time.” She found that it was useful in her job anyway”.

• Friends at university passed on stories of studies and advice on study tactics. Some stories were helpful in a negative way: “I have this friend who is a doctoral student, he gives me tips and tells me what it’s like. It’s a bit frightening, actually (...) You have to be really interested in maths if you want to do a Ph.D. It’s definitely not my thing, but it’s also good to know, so you can rule it out!”

• Being recommended by her brother to contact his friend and ask about studies.

Avoidance
• Deliberately excluding information from universities that were not geographically well situated or did not enjoy high status.
8.1.6 Conclusion

Nora described her pathway into the future as “jumping onto a roller coaster” which is perhaps an apt metaphor for young people in the transition from school to work via higher education in late modernity. The decision to jump is individual but once taken there is a risk that you may lose control over the journey itself and its outcome. Throughout the interviews, Nora presented herself as an ambitious and reflexive student who, through her information activities, endeavoured to negotiate between her own interests and the available options. The complex process of interactions described in Nora’s account illustrate a dynamic process where subjective assessments of the relevance of information to her own situation function as a motor driving her forward towards making a decision. Once she had reached her decision, other types of information become relevant as the focus of her interest changed from decision-making to orienting in the world of the university she had chosen.

Although she spoke of making her own decisions, she was clearly following a route that was accepted and well understood by her family. In terms of information literacy, her landscape of information resources was chiefly made up of ‘insiders’, university students whose perspectives and values she shared. Going to university for Nora was not a case of reconsidering who she was but of continuing into a life, which she anticipated and prepared for. Her ease of access to relevant sources of information gave her a “practical class knowledge of the world of education” (Ball et. al, 2000:92) and of its practices. However, it does not necessarily follow that ease of access meant that it was easy for her to relate her growing understanding with her own interests and anxieties.

Nora’s information related activities reflected conflicting discourses; that of a portfolio conception of careers where learning is valued purely in terms of its functional relation to the labour market and that of education as personal empowerment. Using both, Nora was able to negotiate the ambiguity of labour market prognoses and to motivate her choice of education. Nora’s story is coherent and future oriented and her information activities are purposeful and effective, as well as supported by her family’s resources. However, although Nora to some extent embodies the stereotype of an ambitious, middle-class young woman, the fact that she suffered from dyslexia complicates the picture. It required her to question the status of universities and to motivate her in looking for other perspectives that would support her choice. As McKenzie (2003a) has shown, social relationships and social contexts mean more in everyday life information seeking for the choice of information sources than cognitive factors do. This presumably lies in a need not only for ‘the facts’ but for interpretations and understandings of information and for whom the best sources from an emotional perspective must be those with whom one can identify (Poston-Anderson & Edwards, 1993).

In the Swedish study and careers literature, choice of education and occupation are presented as an individual responsibility and a question of young people making rational and well-informed choices. The idea of freedom of choice may however
disguise how difficult it is to become well-informed in an objective sense and, as Dwyer and Wyn (2001) concluded in their study, glosses over questions of power and disadvantage.
8.2 The information seeking “stranger”

For the approaching stranger, however, the pattern of the approached group does not guarantee an objective chance for success but rather a pure subjective likelihood which has to be checked step by step, that is, he has to make sure that the solutions suggested by the new scheme will also produce the desired effect for him in his special situation as outsider and newcomer who has not brought within his grasp the whole system of the cultural pattern but who is rather puzzled by its inconsistency, incoherence and lack of clarity; he needs explicit knowledge (Schutz, 1964f:103).

The quote above is taken from Schutz’ essay on “The Stranger” which is a study concerning how the cultural patterns of a social group may appear to, and be interpreted by, a newcomer who has to orient him or herself within it. On a general level, Shirin’s story, exemplifies the predicament of immigrants and their need of explicit and particular types of information. On an individual level, it exemplifies the efforts of an ambitious and goal oriented young woman. In the following portrait I will attempt, with a focus on her information related activities, to convey a sense of the ways in which Shirin constructs her identity as “a stranger” and how this relates to her views of education, of working life and of the kind of society she wishes to live in and her role within it. The first section deals with the stranger discourse and its implications for information seeking. The sections following highlight information seeking with a focus on pathways towards a profession, on its work content, knowledge base, skills, and social practices. The final section comprises a summary of Shirin’s information practices.

8.2.1 The stranger discourse

The interviews with Shirin are characterised by a discourse that I have identified as a ‘stranger’ discourse and which comes to expression in her descriptions of her information activities. The stranger discourse is the obverse of what Brnic (2004) calls the ‘nationality’ discourse, which she defines as the expressions, “truths”, myths and symbols concerning what it means to be Swedish from a Swedish perspective. Brnic identified several assumptions that relate to this discourse; the idea that immigrants have a lot to learn, in particular, the Swedish language, that immigrants ought to change their behaviour and adapt to Swedish norms and values and, that they should not exploit the Swedish welfare state. Indirectly immigrants are assumed not to want to work for a living or to contribute to the development of Swedish society. In other words, if immigrants wish to be accepted they have to be seen making an effort in these particular directions. Brnic traces this discourse to political documents on integration that tend to emphasise the need for immigrants...
to “learn” with a focus on the language and on Swedish law and norms, as a prerequisite for participating in Swedish society. Campbell found that immigrants had common strategies for adapting to the new society, which he refers to as “citizenship games”. He concluded that immigrants participated in citizenship games in order to form and align their identities “in direct and tacit relation to the processes and procedures of immigration policy, and the “governing mentalities” that underlie them” (Campbell, 2005). Similarly, in an examination of immigrants’ pathways through the academic world in Sweden, Göransson and Lidegran (2005) found that successfully integrated academics had strategies that had helped them to understand where the invisible borders were for how to behave as “Swedish” and where the limits lay for how different one could be. Shirin’s struggle to find these invisible borders, unfolds in her descriptions of her information activities and bear distinct signs of just such strategies and of her willingness to play “citizenship games”.

Shirin and her family came to Sweden a few years previous to the interview period as refugees from Iran. Neither of her parents had been through higher education although they encouraged their children to get a good education. Her mother worked on a part-time basis as an unqualified language teacher while her father shifted between periods of unemployment and participation in municipal employment schemes. Shirin had two older brothers who both studied technology at university level in Stockholm. Her parents therefore had plans to move to Stockholm in order to reunite the family as soon as Shirin left school and it was assumed that she would accompany them.

Shirin emerged in the interviews as highly ambitious and strongly motivated to become a lawyer. When we first met, she was engaged in a school project where she compared women’s civil rights in Sweden and Iran. Shirin’s story pivots around her experiences as an impoverished immigrant and early on in the first interview she described one of her first experiences of Swedish school and how this experience became a central touching point for her ambition:

I remember when I first went to school, we hadn’t been in Sweden very long and we didn’t exactly live in luxury, we were really quite poor, and we [her schoolclass] were to go to the swimming pool in town. I didn’t have a swimsuit so my mother bought me one. And when we got to the pool and, oh, my swimsuit! [Shirin covers her face with her hands and laughs] Oh, I remember how it was! All the others had really flashy swimsuits and I had this ugly pink thing with frills! I’ll never forget that and I’ve thought about it. It's this kind of thing we've lived with, always being a step under everyone else. I want all these things too and perhaps you try to find a way to it. (Shirin 1)
In her account, Shirin accords this experience the ‘motivational relevance’, to use Schutz’ term, that motivates her plan of action, which was to get a good education. In her view, the key to the future lay in higher education, she saw it as the only way she could improve her circumstances:

There is no other way. I mean, most of us have part-time jobs in supermarkets or warehouses or telemarketing. Is that what you want to do? No way! (…) you really have no choice! It’s now or never! And I mean, if you have parents with little or no education, you feel sorry for them, how can you live like that? It feels like you have no choice! (Shirin 1)

Another information seeking activity in which Shirin engaged further emphasises her outsider perspective. By continuous monitoring of her environment, she was able to corroborate information from varied sources and thus to clarify her picture of the Swedish social world:

I mean you see commercials that tell you how good things are. And you think, ‘rich people’, when you see the houses and you think the people who own those houses are lawyers and doctors. Wow, that’s luxury! I usually ask my friends, my school friends, when we’re out ‘Who lives there?’ ‘A doctor’, they say, “a lawyer”. I think about that, what can I do so that things will go so well for me? (Shirin, 1)

In this manner, Shirin connected the impressions she had formed through the media of wealthy lifestyles with the local, physical evidence of the lifestyles of doctors and lawyers. The excerpt also conveys a picture of someone on the outside, looking in, whether it was on the streets looking at the houses or watching commercials and wondering if the lifestyles portrayed in them really existed. Interacting with school-friends in order to discern the connections between living styles and professions, she suggests, spurred her ambition.

During the interviews, Shirin characterized her activities from her position as an immigrant to account for both her experiences and her ambitions. She suggests that she made a significant life course choice as the result of her parents’ intervention:

My parents won't let us dream too far away, (…) I think it has to do with being an immigrant child and taking the wrong way and doing the wrong things because you want to get rich quickly. You don't think that it is a really long way and a difficult process...Mom and Dad have been so good about that, they've said ‘Stop!’ (Shirin, 1)
In the above account, Shirin also implies that her family were not illustrative of the normative view of immigrant families, predestined to doing “the wrong things”. Shirin describes her parents’ intervention as an event, or a series of events, which made her reflect on her future and her options and which resulted in a conscious acknowledgement of the value of higher education as a means of social mobility. From Shirin’s position, opting for higher education is therefore a commitment to “a difficult process”. In contrast, other participants in the study simply took the option of higher education for granted without reflecting particularly on its being a difficult option or not.

Being a stranger who wants to prove herself worthy of acceptance in Swedish society, Shirin takes a stand against people who exploit the system and positions herself as a person who intends to contribute to the development of society:

*F.H.:* Do you feel that society expects anything of you?
*Shirin:* Yes, I really do! I know people that only live for themselves and don’t care about anything else. I despise people like that! I’m the kind of person that looks around and tries to do something useful (…) I’m good at studying, that’s why I should study, it’s the talent that I have.

*F.H.:* What do you mean by useful?
*Shirin:* Well, useful is… I mean if you don’t care about what society has given you,… I mean, everything you see, this chair I’m sitting on, this table, this room, school, it has a basis, there’s something behind it all. (…) You have to look at that and try to develop it instead of turning your back on it and saying let someone else bother about that. I see it as my responsibility to pay something back. (Shirin, 1)

Here, Shirin characterises herself as a person mindful of a personal debt to society, of the ideology manifested in a school building and as a person willing to contribute to the further development of society through her own talents. She frames higher education as a social investment for the general good, rather than as an individual investment. The views that Shirin expresses here on education and society, can thus be seen to be in keeping with a normative perspective on what it means to be Swedish. This, of course, does not detract from her sincerity. The stranger discourse allows Shirin to emerge as a person who is willing to learn and to work hard, and who intends to contribute in strengthening the values she assumes Swedish society is built on.

A further strategy which Shirin undertook was to work on her pronunciation. She had a part-time job in telemarketing where it seemed to be self-evident that a salesperson could not have a foreign accent:
When I got the telephone job they sent me on a course to get rid of my accent. It was really good, I’m really pleased about that, even though it was a struggle. (Shirin 2)

In fact, she succeeded to such a degree that she had an additional job as a radio voice for commercials. The statement also reveals something of the disadvantage Shirin felt in relation to her position in Swedish society and the price she had to pay to be accepted.

The stranger discourse itself also directs Shirin’s information seeking practices in that information seeking is the prerequisite that will afford Shirin the means to appropriate the tools that sustain the Swedish middle class. The major problem that characterises much of Shirin’s information seeking is one of interpretation; she had to be able to interpret information from a Swedish perspective. In order to do so she needed to corroborate her understandings of information with people she could be certain had this perspective; that is; reliable cognitive authorities. In the following, it will be shown how she went about doing so in the three major areas that interested her; pathways into the profession, its skills and knowledge base, and its social practices.

8.2.2 The pathway strategy
The pathway strategy concerns information seeking that is goal-oriented towards ways and means of entering a specific occupation. Shirin had decided to become a lawyer while still at secondary school. Her choice of occupation was originally inspired by the American sitcom Ally McBeal; it attracted her through the image of attractive, well-educated, elegantly dressed women dealing with clients together in a friendly law office environment: "it looked so flashy, wearing suits and so womanly and attractive". In pursuance of this dream she applied and was accepted to an upper secondary programme in Social Studies. A genuine interest in the profession and its knowledge base developed the more she learned about the judicial system and human rights. She used her interest in reading fiction to demonstrate how focused her interest had become over time:

Now I look for books about crime and things happening in Europe, I want to get a picture of what it's like, the judicial systems in other countries (...) this [reading about judicial systems] is just something I do as a hobby. (Shirin, 1)

Here she also suggests that she, as an immigrant, did not take a career in Sweden for granted and therefore ought to gain some insight into the judicial systems of other countries. Now in the third year of the Social Studies programme Shirin described how her growing interest in law studies framed and channelled her information activities towards finding a way of becoming a lawyer. Shirin was aware that the competition for places on Law Studies programmes was severe and
she was prepared not only to work hard in order to get the required grades but also to use other strategies that might enhance her employability in the future, such as reading Russian or Chinese, which she hoped would further increase her eligibility for an international law studies programme.

Shirin’s information horizon (App. IV) comprises her view of the landscape of information resources she had access to. Her first information horizon includes her parents and two elder brothers, teachers, the careers counsellor at her school, representatives from the law profession, the Internet and also TV programmes, commercials and ‘rich friends’. Her second horizon reveals a shift in her landscape where her brothers’ significance as sources of information have lessened, the career counsellor has disappeared from view, her teachers have become more important. Her employer and an new acquaintance with experience of law studies appear as a new sources.

In the first interview, Shirin emphasised the career counsellor’s significance as a source of factual information and as a guide to information resources on the Internet:

“She shows me the paths I can take to find the answers I need. She doesn’t give you direct answers, it’s more ‘you can read this, you can go in here, you can ring these numbers’. So I don’t put my questions to her, I just ask “where can I turn to?” and then she shows me all these things. That’s what she’s for.”

(Shirin, 1)

In this account, the careers counsellor is described as a facilitator who encourages Shirin to take the initiative herself in seeking, “answers”, by showing her how to go about it. Her use of the word “answers” suggests a view of career guidance as self-help in fact-finding and the excerpt also suggests that this was the view that the counsellor mediated to Shirin as most appropriate. As a cognitive authority, however, the career counsellor’s role is therefore limited, as Shirin plays by the ‘rules’ and refrains from asking the counsellor to explain, supplement or corroborate the information she finds.

Her future was something Shirin said she thought about constantly: “these last three years have been a preparation”. Using the sources suggested by the careers counsellor she had already checked law schools in Sweden and come to the conclusion that Gothenburg University offered the programme that would suit her best.

“I’ve checked everything; how I’m going to study, where I can apply, and all that kind of thing. Then I thought, when I’m finished, I ought to be able to get a job not just in Sweden. So I’ve checked what you have to study to be able to work in Europe. I’d like to be sure that I don’t have to stay in Sweden, that I can move around. I’ve checked all the programmes and
Gothenburg looks pretty good. They help you to do courses in European countries and Great Britain …it looks good. (Shirin 1)

Shirin’s information sources were mainly university web-sites, the Job Centre's web site and the web sites for The National Agency for Higher Education and Studying in Sweden. She particularly appreciated the Job Centre's web site for its projective quality and because it clarified her picture of the profession:

You get a really clear picture of the future. This one [handbook and web site for Studying in Sweden] shows you what it's like when you study, but this one [Job Centre's web site] shows you what it's like when you get there, when you've reached your goal. It encourages you to study for what you want to be! (Shirin 1)

However, Shirin did not find that the brochures and web-sites were in themselves fully adequate to putting her in the picture, as it were, and she tried to find ways of corroborating, supplementing or clarifying the information in them. Her parents often offered her advice but she found this problematic. She did not rely on their knowledge of the education system:

They don't know much about studies but you can always get an answer from them - it doesn't need to be the truth but it's always an answer! It might sound good but you have to find out yourself! (Shirin 2)

Shirin was afraid that there might be discrepancies between her parents’ understandings and native Swedes’ understandings of what is useful to know in Swedish educational environments. It meant that she had to seek information in order to test the accuracy and usefulness of her parents’ advice or to disprove notions they had concerning her education. She consulted her teachers at school:

Getting support from a teacher is vitally important to me because my parents aren’t Swedish, they are among the lower middle class, or, they’re not even that really. That’s why. I mean, I can listen to my parents, I really can but I still need confirmation that what they say is right and I get that by listening to an adult that is Swedish, that lives here in Sweden and is middle-class in Sweden. By confirming what my mom and dad say, that it’s right, then it’s much easier to listen to what else they have to say. (Shirin 2)
Apart from seeking out teachers on the basis of both their ‘Swedishness’ and social class, she also turned to one other Swedish adult she knew that could help her corroborate and evaluate her parents’ advice:

Even the boss at work. Even if it’s not the type of work I want to do it really feels good when he sees that I’m working, and now I’ve even been promoted, and sometimes he comes and talks to me and asks me about my studies and things like that, the same sort of things that Mom and Dad say, that’s reassuring, it feels good. (Shirin 2)

This constant gauging of what her parents had to say compared to what adult Swedes say, is in essence, an effective though painstaking, step-by-step strategy for reaching an understanding of the prevailing norms and values that regulate Shirin’s world. It also seems reasonable to guess that Shirin’s growing command of cultural patterns and invisible norms boosted her self-confidence and she reiterates at several points: “it feels good”. Schutz contrasted the position of “the stranger” with that of members of the social group he or she approaches:

a member of the in-group looks in a single glance through the normal social situations occurring to him and that he catches immediately the ready-made recipes appropriate to its solution. (Schutz, 1964f:100-1)

It is clear in her accounts that Shirin experienced a disadvantage in not belonging naturally to a Swedish middle-class social network and that forging such contacts was difficult for her. Her brother (who was in the process of trying to persuade her to choose Stockholm University) gave her, unasked, the telephone number to the head of department at the Law School in Stockholm and encouraged her to ring up and ask her questions. She summoned up the courage to ring:

So I sat at home one day and thought why not ring up? I didn't want to say who I was, I didn't want to say anything because it can be embarrassing, I just wanted to find out what it's like. So I rang up and asked what would happen if I read law for a while and then took a break to do something else for a while, and he explained....I got direct answers to my questions. Here (pointing at the Student Handbook) you might have to read a whole section before you get to what you want to know but there I found out straightaway. (Shirin 2)

She also felt that the answers she got were more "reliable", in that they came from someone who could be regarded as an authority and that she could keep asking questions until she got things straight. However, this kind of contact, although more
useful than brochures, came at a price as Shirin indicates in her fear of embarrassment.

A prerequisite for law studies was to get high grades and Shirin needed to discuss with her teachers how to go about doing so. She described the process as very stressful. She contacted a number of teachers and specifically asked them what she had to do in order to get the grades she needed. To contact her teachers on such issues was not easy for her and at one point Shirin described the hostility with which her ambitiousness was met by one of her teachers by mimicking her tone of voice; “You seem to want high grades in every single subject!” However, after describing her situation and ambitions in detail the teacher became more encouraging:

She started telling me what it was like for her sister’s husband who’s a lawyer. She told me he’d studied an awful lot but that he was out having a lot of fun in the holidays. That was really great, to hear that! (Shirin 2)

It was “great” in two senses; that by opening up and telling Shirin something personal Shirin felt that she had made personal contact with the teacher who was, after all, in a position of power over her. The teacher’s story also fired her ambition further, and in the telling, the teacher indicated that it was not unreasonable for Shirin to have such an ambition. Wilson examined the cognitive authority of teachers dividing it into two types:

For some, teachers will influence what they think about the world, they are recognised as having superior authority. For others they are simply those who administer the entrance requirements for admission to desired places. Admission to all sorts of positions and statuses requires demonstration that one has developed the ability to say, if not to believe, the right things. What we think plausible is influenced by where we want to be. (Wilson, 1983:128)

Shirin commented on a discussion she had had with one of her teachers on how to attain high grades: “everyone gets the same information and the same help. You have to show them what you are worth by using the information they give you” (Shirin, 2). By this Shirin indicated that she used the information the teachers gave her about how to improve her grades, showing them that she did so seemed to be an important part of her strategy, she could thereby demonstrate that she understood what was expected of her, she was doing “the right things” in Wilson’s terms. Shirin’s classmates and family members could not give her the advice that her teachers could. Teachers had, so to speak, better quality resources but access to them required a psychological effort on Shirin’s part.
In her account, Shirin describes her information seeking activities initially as a rational process of connecting and interacting with career guidance resources in order to gather facts and survey her options. However, things were not so simple; there were other requirements that complicated the picture. One was her family’s view of her options and another was the need Shirin felt to verify and corroborate the information she had gathered.

Shirin’s parents’ planned to move to Stockholm and this was a factor she had to deal with when it appeared to her that Gothenburg offered her the best alternative. Although encouraged by her parents to work hard and to get an education they were not, in her view, supportive of her decision to aim for the law profession:

They've never encouraged me to aim for the highest ... instead they say ‘will you be able to manage it?’ And they think it's stupid to struggle for something, to fight for something that I might not be able to reach because they are afraid that the disappointment might be too much for me. (Shirin, 1)

In this account, Shirin describes her family as protective of her but, at the same time, restrictive and unamenable to her arguments. Her brothers also actively campaigned for her to choose Stockholm University. In the following account, she describes her brothers’ information tactics:

My brothers are a little biased ... they take away things they don't want me to know or need to know. They want me to come to Stockholm because they want to live near me. So I say that Gothenburg is best and they say ‘No, it isn't! Stockholm is just as good!’ Then they tell me all the good things about Stockholm, but they don't say anything about Gothenburg, so it's a bit biased. (Shirin, 1)

“They want me to come to Stockholm because they want to live near me” suggests that Shirin was expected to put her family’s needs first and that her choice of university was seen as a collective family decision rather than as an individual decision. That there were things she did not “need to know” also suggests her brothers’ protective attitude towards her. As she saw it, she needed to present arguments that would convince her parents to remain in the area that were more convincing than her own ambition to study in Gothenburg.

For Shirin, the idea of living alone in Gothenburg posed a problem. She was well aware that students in general live alone without experiencing loneliness or vulnerability as a major obstacle, she also described information from her brothers on Stockholm as “biased”. However, she indicated in the following account from the second interview that the way in which she had been brought up hindered her from living apart from her family:
I planned and everything was fixed. But I couldn’t do it. I don’t know, I haven’t tried either, so I don’t know but I know I couldn’t manage, it’s our family, it’s a method of upbringing, it’s made me feel that I need them. (Shirin, 2)

Shirin implied that her upbringing made her feel differently about living apart from her family than upbringing in a Swedish family might have done. It was this circumstance that finally motivated her to apply to Stockholm University. Giddens (1991) argues that the meaning of place is losing its traditional significance in late modernity; that people are no longer as bound to their ‘roots’ as they were in the past. This is perhaps particularly true of people who have had to flee from their countries. However, in Shirin’s case, the meaning of place seems to have been transferred to her family, and as such, had not lost its traditional significance. It is also worth noting that Shirin, at the time of the second interview, had found out that her brothers had put her on the waiting list to student accommodation in Stockholm a year previously. This is an unusual thing to do from a Swedish perspective, as it is the custom for young people to make such decisions and take such action by themselves. This is not to say that young native Swedes do not feel anxiety about moving away from home, some did, but they did not express their anxiety in terms of cultural difference. Information seeking, in this instance, emerges as weighted with emotional and cultural aspects that influence its outcomes.

### 8.2.3 Work content, skills and knowledge base

Through Internet resources, the careers counsellor and impressions gained from television programmes Shirin had created a picture of the profession that she felt she needed to corroborate with real life; “You can’t really get a clear picture on the basis of how luxurious and glamorous it looks on TV.” Her interest can be related to Henslin’s (2006) idea of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ into the profession itself. Through an event organised by the career counsellor at her school she was enabled to meet the representatives of a profession of her choice; "I chose to visit...you could choose two or three ... I chose to meet a lawyer, a judge, a public prosecutor and a law student" (Shirin, 1). She prepared a list of questions that she put to the representatives and was inspired by the whole experience:

...the prosecutor said she'd been threatened and all that kind of thing, that there were new cases piled up on her desk every single morning, that she came home late every evening and it was really hard work. But they talked with such passion! That it was the truth they told us! I mean, then you can choose if that's what you want or not, can't you?...it's a real working life and its serious! (Shirin 1)
In this account, Shirin argues that it was the prosecutor’s engagement and tone that captured her attention in that it conveyed something of the personal value and satisfaction of the work and how they used their engagement to overcome everyday professional problems. Her emphasis on the seriousness of the profession can be seen as a way of contrasting it to portrayals in television sitcoms and can also be seen as Shirin’s way of suggesting that she understood the reality of being a lawyer. Her account suggests that the occasion helped her to understand the profession as a “real working life” and enabled her to contrast and compare the characterisation of lawyers mediated through entertainment programmes on TV. She places the cognitive authority of the representatives beyond question, as experts on the profession; “it was the truth they told us”.

The questions Shirin put to the law student concerned what it was like to be a student and some of the information gleaned here shocked her:

She told me … I asked her a lot of questions, and she said that you compete with your classmates, they are not your friends, they’re rivals. They rip out pages from library books … and sometimes, when you have to read a section in a library book for an exam you find that someone else has destroyed it so that nobody else can read it…I think that must be really unpleasant. (Shirin, 2)

However, she accepted the law student’s view that such behaviour was the result of studying with “students that have high ambitions” and something one could be prepared for rather than see such practices in an entirely negative light. The authority of the law student was also unquestioned as that of an expert “she had studied law for two years so it was fun to talk to someone who knows”. As Shirin saw it, her objective was not to question education programmes but to be prepared for dealing with their different aspects, even in questions of what attitudes would be most appropriate for her to assume.

Not having any personal, informal contacts within the profession, Shirin identified a locality or information ground (Fisher & Naumer, 2006) where she could acquaint herself with the skills and other attributes of the profession:

Shirin: I went down once a week when the court was in session and sat there and listened to them.
F.H.: Did you?
Shirin: Yes, I really wanted to see how they worked (...). I wanted to see how it really was. I made my friends come with me and they thought it was really boring but I sat there and listened and was interested the whole time. I wanted to see how the prosecutor spoke, the way he talked and it was really interesting. I’ve built it up all the time, this is what I’m going to work with. (Shirin, 2)
This can be seen as an attempt not only to authenticate media images of the profession but also as a form of preliminary socialisation into the profession through observing, not only demonstrations of the content of the work but also the outer attributes of its representatives, such as mannerisms and speech. Acquaintanceship with these attributes is significant to Shirin from both an immigrant perspective and a professional perspective. In the above Shirin demonstrates her awareness that one of the keys to the profession was the appropriation of its terminology and communication skills. A practical difficulty connected to this venture was that Shirin preferred not to attend the court sessions on her own.

Shirin did not experience practical difficulties in gathering information but her main questions concerned its interpretation:

*F.H.:* What about finding information?
*Shirin:* Yes, information, it’s been difficult in fact. I mean, if you think that I’ve known what I want to be all the time, during these three years I’ve collected facts, taken in everything I’ve heard, all the myths and all the truths and put them together. On that basis, I’ve started to build an understanding of the different universities, about what it means to study and what it’s like.

(Shirin, 2)

This statement perhaps best illustrates what it means to be information literate in the area of study and career decision-making. Putting together the myths and truths required, in Shirin’s case, qualified interpretation beyond the gathering of information and in which an effective interaction with teachers, family and the career counsellor played a central role. In contrast with other participants in the study with similar ambitions (for example, see Andreas, section 7.2.1 and App VII) Shirin had very little access to practicing professionals, her sources of information are mainly formal and she was conscious of her position as a ‘stranger’. Shirin’s efforts to be well-informed reveal aspects of information seeking such as information seeking as a tool in penetrating the norms, practices and attitudes that characterise specific studies and professions. Shirin’s approach to information seeking also makes visible the cultural norms that act as barriers for outsiders, whether they are outsiders in terms of culture or of social class. Barriers include embedded cultural norms and taken for granted ways of acting as well as difficulties in accessing appropriate interpersonal sources of information.

**8.2.4 Shirin’s information seeking practices**

Shirin’s information seeking practices are summarised below in terms of McKenzie’s (2003a) model of information practices.
Active seeking

- Shirin actively sought information by contacting the school careers counsellor during her first year on the three-year Social Studies programme. Interaction with the counsellor involved defining each other’s roles. On an understanding of the counsellor’s role as support for self-help, Shirin learned of interesting sources on the Internet and how to access them. Shirin’s consideration of the counsellor’s role prevented her from asking for help in interpreting the information she found.
- After searching career guidance’ digital resources, such as job centre and university web sites, Shirin was able to gather descriptions of law programmes and scan her different options in an attempt to create an initial overview of different pathways into the profession and gain an impression of the profession’s work content.
- Meetings organised by her school enabled Shirin to connect with representatives of the profession. She asked pre-planned questions and used the responses to corroborate, supplement and verify information and impressions gained from other sources, such as TV, brochures and web-sites. She was also able to observe and interpret individual professional engagement.
- Shirin contacted her teachers for advice on how to attain high grades. Her questions were pre-planned and through interaction with the teachers, she demonstrated her understanding of the requirements, gained emotional support and corroborated and confirmed her parents’ advice. However, Shirin found the experience of connecting and interacting with the teachers very stressful.

Active scanning

- Shirin identified the local law courts as a likely information ground where she could observe the practices, behaviour and procedures of the law profession. One difficulty in association with these visits lay in persuading friends to accompany her.
- Recognising teachers as likely sources of information concerning the norms and assumptions of the Swedish middle class and identifying suitable occasions in which to ask questions and observe their reactions to her study and career plans.

Non-directed monitoring

- Through a serendipitous encounter, Shirin recognised her employer as a source of information that could corroborate and affirm her parent’s advice from a Swedish perspective.
- Being offered unexpected information by a teacher and taking the opportunity to chat about the law profession.
• Being offered information by her brothers on the advantages of studying in Stockholm and interacting through recognising bias but nonetheless being afforded opportunities to ask and chat about student life on an everyday basis
• Reading crime novels as a source of information on judicial systems and reading in order to get a fuller picture of the profession
• Passing by houses in her neighbourhood and taking opportunities to chat about lifestyle and professional status of the owners with school friends.

By proxy
• On her brother’s initiative, Shirin contacted the director of a Law school and asked specific questions on studies thus enabling her to complement and confirm brochure information. She was initially hindered in connecting with this source because of fear of embarrassment.

Shirin’s story is one of active information seeking. She seldom referred to being identified by others or being contacted spontaneously by people that were aware of her study and career interests. What is striking about her activities is that she undertakes them largely on her own and her plans are only partly supported by her family. When she was referred to sources on the Internet or to practicing professionals, it was a result of her own inquiries and initiative. In part, this reflects Shirin’s social position and the absence in her social network of expert sources in the area in which she was interested.

8.2.5 Conclusion

Shirin’s story is characterised by a ‘stranger’ discourse that reveals the effort that she had to put in to gaining “the explicit knowledge” of cultural patterns referred to by Schutz in the opening passage. In her accounts, the discourse is used as a means of expressing social barriers in access to information sources and as such suggests that the difficulties expressed by Shirin are also experienced by other ‘strangers’ to Swedish society. Shirin’s major information problems circled around its interpretation from a Swedish perspective. However, she was not chiefly concerned with critically evaluating formal information in terms of its sources but in interpreting it in order to use it correctly as a tool in manifesting a Swedish identity and as a tool in achieving her goals on the same premises as the Swedish middle class did. Her strategy was to appropriate the tools that she observed that others, like Andreas for instance, were putting to use. Her practical problems were connected with her position as an immigrant and had to do with her lack of mentors in both her chosen profession and in the Swedish middle class.

A comparison between Shirin’s (App. IV) and Andreas’ information horizons (App VII) makes clear the significance of access to sources of relevant information. Andreas was equally as goal oriented as Shirin but his information horizon differs quite considerably. It is dominated by family members, family friends and colleagues who were journalists, or closely connected to journalists,
affording him easy access to expert information as well as to emotional support. Shirin’s family had no relationship with the profession she had chosen so they were unable to offer her practical support and information but they dominate her information horizon for other reasons. Instead, formal sources such as brochures and web-sites take precedence together with the people singled out by Shirin as appropriate representatives of the Swedish middle class, such as specific teachers, classmates and her employer and whose perspectives helped her to interpret information. In comparison with Nora’s horizons (App. III), Shirin’s sources were not as numerous but this can partly be accounted for by the nature of their goals. In following a more traditional pathway into a specific profession, Shirin had fewer options to consider than Nora had and therefore less need of a wide range of sources. Instead, she was able to focus more on the skills, practices and knowledge base of the profession in a way that Nora, who was unsure of where her education would lead her, was not in a position to do at this point in time.

Lacking personal connections Shirin was resourceful in making the most of the few contacts she had in combination with formal sources of information. However, she also indicated that her options were modified by consideration of her family. Her story suggests that her career and study decisions were a collective family concern and that she was disposed by her upbringing to respect this viewpoint; her choices were, in this sense, reflective. With respect to her goals and what it was she wanted to achieve Shirin was information literate, effectively discerning and interacting with information sources. She was aware of sources to which she did not have access, such as informal contacts within the profession, but there was little she could do about this. Andreas’ information activities, on the other hand, took their departure points in the familiar and the known; in his lived experience and in the information resources that were available to him through his family network and its connections as well as those of his workplace. He too, was information literate but reflexive in ways that differed from Shirin; for example he critically evaluated the sources of information with what he called a journalist’s perspective.

Bourdieu provides concepts that can help to clarify Shirin’s strategy. For example, in order to succeed according to the ‘stranger’ discourse, it is necessary to acquire the right form of social ‘capital’. In this respect, Shirin forged what contacts she could with members of the Swedish middle class in order to be in a position where she would have access to the information she needed. She did not speak in terms of challenging the system or creating an individualised pathway to a career; she spoke in terms of being accepted within the system by appropriating its own tools and abiding by its rules or playing ‘citizenship games’. The contrast between Shirin’s and Andreas’ information activities bring clearly into view the social and cultural aspects of information seeking that tend to be taken for granted and thereby rendered invisible by the “in-group”. Although both Andreas and Shirin expended considerable effort and were skilful in investigating their options the findings reveal the extra effort and awareness required of Shirin to enable her to cross cultural borders.
In terms of self-efficacy, Shirin had two older brothers whose experiences of higher education she could draw on and who encouraged and supported her, even though they were sceptical to her choice of profession, as were her parents. In an inquiry into power elites and ethnicity in Sweden Göransson (2005) found that the most popular programmes among first and second generation immigrants motivated to enter higher education were in medicine, the natural sciences and technology. A reasonable explanation for the popularity of these programmes is that they enjoy a high status all over the world. Furthermore, studies often have an international character and course literature is often in English, so fluency in Swedish need not be a determinant of success. Young people with foreign backgrounds do not tend to choose the social sciences unless they plan to use their backgrounds as a form of political capital, for example, in the form of specialist knowledge of integration issues, languages, or women’s issues and it was precisely these issues that Shirin was interested in. Göransson also found that ambitious students with foreign backgrounds apply to high status universities, thus applying a class knowledge and this was also an imperative for Shirin and her brothers. In contrast, university status was not one of Andreas’ concerns but rather the reputation of different programmes in journalism in the eyes of practitioners. This may be an outcome of the differences between studies in law and journalism. It may also have to do with different ambitions – to have an education from a university that is internationally ranked or an education that is recognised by practitioners. Whichever may be the case, it is significant that in both cases verification of the value of the education from a cognitive authority seems to be required.

8.3 Neil: Information seeking deferred: a tactic in the transition from school to adulthood

It is generally understood that when young people leave school in western society information on further studies and different types of careers will be relevant to them as a group and that they will view it as appropriate and normal. Yet, Neil was one of several participants who did not prioritise this type of information at this stage in his life. Schutz argues that despite the societal stamp on what should be relevant to a specific group of people, individuals are nonetheless free to define their own situations and to define their own priorities as a natural part of their “unalienable right to the pursuit of happiness” (Schutz, 1964b:254). Schutz also suggests that individuals may experience inner conflict as they try to negotiate between the relevances imposed by society at the macro-level and his or her own private situation. I would argue that decision-making concerning career and study choice are shaped, constructed and constrained by the discourses prevailing at the macro-level. Discourses signal possible and acceptable social pathways, behaviour and aspirations for young people in the transition from school to adulthood and the messages embedded in social discourses are therefore likely to become part of the motives and concerns of young people. The dominance of the new career discourse, for instance, in career and study literature has shifted the traditional social and
educational discourse concerning youth away from a concern with equity, social and individual rights and responsibilities to a concern with national economic imperatives where youth are expected to play a part in supporting the new era of entrepreneurial enterprise, technology and business. Neil’s story of his information related activities reveals the conflict he experienced between macro-level social expectations and the micro-contexts of peers and family.

Neil was in his final year of the Natural Science programme, which he had not enjoyed. He had chosen it for strategic reasons but found that he could not summon up a real interest in the profile subjects, particularly in mathematics: “You must think I’m a really weird science student because I only chose it to have as many study options as possible afterwards” (Neil, 1). His father worked as a builder with his own small company and he wanted Neil to either get a ‘real job’ when he finished school, or to aim for a specific profession through higher education. Neil’s mother worked as a school administrator. He had a younger sister and an elder half-brother and half-sister that were several years older than he was. Both of his elder siblings had university educations, his elder sister had studied and worked in Germany for a while and now taught languages at upper secondary level. Neil lived in a village a few miles outside town. He described himself as middle-class, “at least economically” with many privileges, such as travelling often abroad on holiday. He had numerous commitments; he had a girlfriend at the same school and with whom he had travelled round the Greek islands the previous summer, he enjoyed playing ice hockey on a local team and was a member of an environmental group. He dreamed of backpacking and seeing the world with his friends and generally “taking things easy” before committing to an education or career. His older sister’s experiences of living abroad inspired Neil to the extent that he also considered the possibility of studying in Germany. He also had good friends who were students at Gothenburg University and whom he visited quite regularly. Neil was interested in going to university eventually, but he was uncertain about what courses to follow and what jobs he might be interested in afterwards. He found the idea of leaving school:

Really nice, but at the same time you feel anxious about all the possibilities. It’s wonderful, really, because you have so many options and there’s such a lot of cool things you can do. (Neil, 1)

Neil’s uncertainty about the future was partly to do with having chosen an upper secondary programme that did not suit him. This choice had been encouraged by his parents as it was “broad” and gave “more options”. Neil uses a cultural script similar to that of Nora’s:

My parents don’t interfere with my choices; we discuss things. I mean, if I chose to drop out they’d do anything to… but the
choices are mine. They say, ‘you won’t earn anything there’, but they leave the choice to me. (Neil, 1)

The distinction between discussion and exerting influence is, of course, hair-fine. It is also symptomatic of several of the middle-class youngsters in the study that they refer to ‘discussions’ within the family concerning their futures and which indicated how they bear the aspirations of their families with them when choice of programme becomes a ‘family project’ (Foskett & Helmsley-Brown, 2001). Although they speak of individual choice, it seemed clear that their families exerted moderate pressure on them.

Neil’s story of his information seeking activities is bound up with his experiences of having chosen an unsuitable programme, the attraction of university life as represented by friends and his older siblings, and by pressure from his family to qualify himself for a “real job”. He described his time on the programme as a period of identity formation where he gradually distanced himself from “the planners” and “people with career goals” to take time to “find my own thing”. Finding his ‘own thing’ for Neil entailed; “You know, finding my own values, not just going along with my parents’ views on things or what other people think”. In effect, Neil’s description of this conflict of expectations concerns a discrepancy between a pragmatic view of the transition to adulthood as leaving school and moving into the labour force and transition in individualistic terms as a process of self understanding and growing independence in terms of values and beliefs. Neil turned his attention more and more to the core subjects common to most programmes; social studies in particular, and to electives in cultural studies and philosophy:

_F.H._: What do you like about those subjects?
_Neil_: I just thought they were fun, I like the people, it’s fun and I like discussing things, I really like it. I’ve been a bit put off by the science subjects, mainly because of the maths, I’m really sick of that. (Neil, 1)

He concluded with regard to the upper secondary programme he had taken:

Now it feels like it was stupid to choose this programme when it didn’t suit me … and now I feel the same thing about work. Now I see it’s very important to choose something you really want to do … and I think it’s more interesting to study abstract subjects like law where you need to interpret, that you discuss, the intuitive, the philosophical. (Neil, 2)

Neil’s negative experience of studying subjects that did not interest him made him cautious about future choices and uncertain, although optimistic, about what to do on leaving school. He used his accounts of his upper secondary experiences to
describe how he had developed as a person and become interested in both the humanities and social sciences. On the one hand, he hoped that practical experience of the world outside school would give him a firmer basis for choice, perhaps through travelling and meeting new cultures. At the same time, he was drawn to studies on philosophy on a deeper level than he had had the opportunity to do at upper secondary level and identified himself with humanities students. When we first met in November, he said that because of his uncertainty, he found it more important to concentrate on school-work at this time, rather than on seeking information and planning his future:

F.H.: Have you any plans?
Neil: Well, it’s a bit difficult, I haven’t actually thought about it so much that I can tell you what I’m going to do, I mean, if something happens then it happens. You can just take off the day after you make your mind up. I’m not the type of person that has to have everything planned. I’m working on my grades now, that’s what keeps me going, to have as good a basis as possible. (Neil, 1)

It is likely that my question made Neil feel that he ought to have made plans, which he counters by describing himself as a spontaneous person. At the same time it was clear that the idea of just taking off was attractive to him and at several points he voiced his optimism; “I have lots of options,” “I’m young, things will work out”. For Neil, the world seemed full of possibilities, his time-span was extensive and he was confident that once he had formulated a goal he could reach it. Neil had much in common with several other young men in the study such as Simon, Sam, Stephen and Ben. They were ambivalent about private and public sector jobs, they were interested in ‘working with people’ and they mentioned social work and teaching. At the same time, Neil wanted to “earn some money” and “wouldn’t mind leadership”. In contrast with Nora who carefully chose and sorted in relation to university programme content, university status and qualifications for working life Neil’s information related activities are haphazard and minimal.

One problem was that Neil felt himself to be the target of conflicting interests; partly through his parents who felt that higher education was not an end in itself. His father “thought that studying philosophy was completely idiotic (…) I can see what he thinks – you don’t become anything”(Neil, 2) and partly through his friends who took a different view of the value of higher education, describing it both as life on “a higher sphere” and “fun” from a social perspective. At the time of the first interview, Neil was considering the possibility of taking a year off to travel but in case his travel plans did not work out he also had a back-up plan to apply to university: “I was thinking about studying something I really like and perhaps not choose something aimed at an occupation, just study for the sake of it instead of it being something considered useful” (Neil, 1). He was drawn to the idea of higher education as an opportunity to learn and develop on a personal level and the way in
which he contrasts it with something “useful” suggests that he feels anxiety in connection with this choice. Furthermore, his parents were against the idea of studying subjects in the humanities:

He [his father] thinks an architect programme is okay because it educates you for a real job and he can relate to that because he’s a builder himself. So of course he puts pressure on me to study and pressure on me about what I should study”. (Neil, 1)

In his accounts, Neil negotiated the conflict between his inclination to study “for its own sake” and pragmatic arguments to choose an education that led to “a real job”. He toyed with the idea of applying to a programme in architecture in the future, maintaining that if his grades were not high enough he could complement them by studying at a college of further education:

I mean if you want to get in somewhere, we’re young, and you just do it. That’s how it is, I never give up if there’s something I want, so it’s just to ring up, get in touch with Komvux\textsuperscript{26}, whatever. You can always solve that kind of problem. (Neil, 1)

In light of his hesitation it is therefore not surprising that Neil also considered getting his bearings by exploring the world outside school before making decisions about higher education. In a Swedish survey of young people’s values and norms it was found that they took for granted the possibility of a gap year, or a self-elected “transition market” of temporary jobs in order to earn enough to travel or for opportunities to turn up that would help them decide what to aim for careerwise (\textit{UngdomsBarometern}, 2004). As Neil said himself, he had a lot of options, but the tone of the interviews with Neil were marked by his experience of having made a mistake in his choice of the Natural Science programme and which made him question the idea of educating himself in line with the rhetoric of national economic interests. This is not to say that he felt empty-handed as he prepared to leave school; he did not expect high grades in the natural science subjects but he had enjoyed other subjects which confirmed his ‘learner’ identity. It is against this background that Neil’s information seeking activities can be understood.

\subsection*{8.3.1 Scanning alternatives}

As mentioned, when we met in November Neil had several ideas about his immediate future one of which was to take a “sabbatical” in order to orientate himself in the world outside school and gain first-hand experiences:

\textit{F.H.:} Do you have any ideas about what you would like to do?

\footnote{Komvux is a municipally funded system of further education where adults can complement secondary and upper secondary education}
Neil: No, no, I have absolutely no idea! (...) I want to get out and travel! Me and a friend have talked about it. I’ve been thinking about, well, I’ve been looking at how it might be to go to an English-speaking country and do volunteer work … we were talking about Scotland, for instance. Then me and another friend, we’d like to travel towards Vietnam and up into China, so we’ll see. (Neil, 1)

Neil’s use of the term ‘sabbatical’ suggests that he saw himself as a student. Doing volunteer work in an English speaking country had a double advantage; it would enable him to become more proficient in the language; “I’d really like to master a language though it’s boring learning them. I’d rather be in a country a while and then just take an examination when I get back”. He also reasoned it would give him the opportunity to test his aptitude for, and the strength of his interest in, social work. His interest in social work had developed after a school visit to a German concentration camp from the Second World War:

I think it was grounded there, I felt that I developed because it was a new experience that I’d never felt before. I think, well, …if you want to develop as a person and feel that you are satisfied with who you are, I think it’s [volunteer work] a good thing to do. (Neil, 1)

The theme of self-development, of taking responsibility for one’s actions and developing self-esteem recur throughout the interviews and Neil connects this theme to a desire to do something that would benefit others that would, at the same time, give insight into the reality of the work itself. His interest in travelling to Vietnam and China, he pointed out, was not only for the sake of the adventure but stemmed also from curiosity in their cultures:

From a political viewpoint it would be interesting to see the traces of war and when you read about Vietnam’s and China’s culture, I mean, when you see that China’s culture was flowering when it was the Stone Age here, it makes you really want to go and see for yourself! (Neil, 1)

Neil and his friends had followed up these ideas by searching the Internet for volunteer programmes and for language courses at European universities. However, at this stage plans were extremely tentative and sources, although numerous, had been investigated only on a superficial level, and were mostly in the order of scouting the territory and coming up with a range of possibilities through discussion among friends. Searching for information on the Internet was ad hoc and unplanned and Neil described it as a group activity around a computer or a coffee table; “You just sit talking, thinking up possibilities and checking things out on a
lap-top or a computer, it gives you an idea of what there is” (Neil, 1). Information via these sources was not sorted or saved; there was “no point in saving stuff, not until you really know what you want”. Neil had not consulted the careers counsellor either, “I don’t really feel I need to, not yet, not before I have some idea” (Neil, 1). He reasoned that the counsellor’s job was to supply facts and describe procedures once he had decided what to do.

8.3.2 Balancing values, viewpoints and experiences

When he started the programme three years previously, Neil had been interested in a high status, well salaried career and had consequently chosen a high status programme. The first source Neil depicted on his information horizon was “societal authority” which he described as being made up of the tacit expectations of the adults around him; teachers and family members, as those who most influenced his choices. He exemplified by referring to the social and occupational status of doctors: “It’s sort of unconscious, really. You see adults, doctors for example, and you take in information, impressions that you’re not aware of. That’s important information, they’re authorities.” Here, Neil is observant of doctors in not only their capacity as medical experts but in their interaction with their working environments, how they act and how they are seen by others. He commented in the following way as he drew in “society” on his first information horizon:

Neil: It’s not a person, it’s more society and all its values. I mean, you think you have your own free will but actually you’re steered a lot by your environment and what’s around you. I mean some things are not accepted and some things are…

F. H.: Can you think of an example?

Neil: Yes, you’re supposed to aim for status and a high salary and that influences you when you make choices … I mean you think about how everyone around you thinks about certain occupations. … Still, it’s very important that you learn the skills of an occupation, that’s what you think. You want to develop both in an occupation and as a person and you don’t want to be treated like a machine, like an installation. I want to have something to say, you know, so people don’t just push you around. You have to decide what is important. (Neil, 1)

Neil’s information horizon is, in a sense, a representation of his endeavour to “decide what is important” in life and he describes how he attempts to balance what was expected of him with who he wanted to become, referring to what “you’re supposed to aim for” and being “steered by the environment” and what people think of different occupations. He describes a tension between a pragmatic view of occupational skills as useful to have and the need to develop personally in order to
be able to defend his rights and take a place in society. In his reference to being “treated like a machine” he alluded to his experiences of working on a building site during the summer holidays where he had experienced a need to be able to assert himself and to “have something to say”. Neil’s reasoning expresses a struggle in which he tries to come to terms what is really important to him as an individual at this point in time and which can constitute a basis for further action. He describes making career decisions at this point as a call to decide how he wants to live his life.

When we met the second time Neil had more decided plans. He intended to work over the summer and autumn to save money and to study on a part-time basis during the autumn at Gothenburg University which he chose on the grounds that he had friends there. To this end, he had sought information specifically on course descriptions and entry requirements through the university web-site. He was influenced in his choice by the experiences of a student friend whom he often visited at his university:

His time has inspired me, he’s had a good time as a student and I think that has influenced me unconsciously (…) Having a broad basis, that’s what’s steering me to study something, studying to develop a basis is more important than working, it has to be good for the way you feel about yourself (…) It’s not a plan for the future, it’s just for fun. I want to see what it’s like, (…) I want to try out student life, university life, and hang around with the people there. I like it there, they’re my type of people. (Neil, 2)

Neil indicated that he had found an institutional milieu in which he felt comfortable and which reinforced his sense of who he was or could become. Using the advice and recommendations of his university friends, he navigated the university web site in order to gather information about courses, requirements and how to apply for student accommodation and grants. His information seeking activities were therefore limited and specific but also closely intertwined with his endeavour to come to terms with how he wanted to live his life. This is illustrated in a comparison of his first and second information horizons. On his second information horizon (App. V), he had drawn in himself in large letters, together with “society” and “people around me”. His parents and other “authorities” such as teachers and the media had disappeared. Neil explained this by stating: “Now it feels like I have gained some insight, that I have become important and that my views are the most important”. This suggests that in his final school term Neil’s activities with regard to his own future have mainly focused on weighing the opinions of his parents and friends against his own developing values and his experiences of work and school. In his account, he emphasised his own agency in partly breaking with his parents’ aspirations by not committing to studies oriented towards a specific profession. At the same time, he considered only part-time
studies, not taking the step towards student life fully. This pragmatic decision is perhaps what Bruner refers to as “what one can live with among those with whom one interacts in the setting where one must operate” (2001:36). Neil also expressed a hope that the course he had applied for at university (Practical philosophy) would eventually help him to discern, if only through the effect of time, what would be for him, a worthwhile profession:

Well, I’ve given it some thought and when it’s over [the university course] then I will choose something that I think is fun. Of course salary plays an important role, you don’t want to feel drowned in study debts and then not earn any money. But it plays a lesser role for me now than it did before. At the beginning of upper secondary it was a really strong argument that you wanted to be something that was well-paid, but it doesn’t play an important role any longer (…) I’ve understood that you just can’t study something you don’t think is fun. That’s the most important thing, that you’re interested. (Neil, 2)

Neil concluded; “I just want to investigate, I want to have time to travel around and just get a bit older”. His decision was not the outcome of comparing options or based on a consideration of the long-term consequences of his choice from a labour market perspective. He went for one option rather than choosing among many. Hodkinson and Sparkes (1997) argue, as a result of their study, that career and study decisions are circumscribed by what the individual perceives as suitable for them as well as by what they perceive is available at the time decisions need to be made and are therefore influenced by fortuitous contacts and experiences; and this seems to me to be a fitting description of Neil’s tactics.

8.3.3 Summary of Neil’s information seeking practices

Active seeking
- Neil actively sought information on specific courses at Gothenburg University shortly before the application deadline after discussions with friends at the university.

Active scanning
- Scanning the Internet with friends for ideas on voluntary work and studies abroad. Listening to and interacting with friends’ dreams and aspirations.

Non-directed monitoring
- Neil and his friends monitored the travel experiences of older friends via travelogues published on the Internet. They observed what was “possible”.

By proxy
• Being recommended to apply for student accommodation by student friend.
• Being given unasked for advice by his father on where and what to study.

Avoidance and deferral
• Avoiding career guidance on the assumption that the service was designed for those who had definite plans and aspirations.
• Saving brochures and catalogues from universities ‘for later’.

8.3.4 Conclusion

Neil’s story is inextricably bound up with the discourses pertaining to national economic and educational policies and trends that, in turn, construct the available pathways for young people into working life. Careers and study information give form in this sense to socially endorsed discourses and social practices (De Certeau, 1984). At the same time, Neil’s experiences allowed him to question the values inherent in these discourses and to account for his own limited information seeking activities in this respect. He does this by using an alternative discourse where he frames the transition to adulthood in terms of his development of personal values and beliefs, in taking responsibility for the consequences of his choices and by describing transition as a means of taking one’s place in a democratic society.

Neil’s information related activities with regard to study and occupational choice bear little relation to the objectives of the National Curriculum (see App. I). He had not become familiar with the conditions for working life related to his area of studies, nor with different educational alternatives in connection with the Natural Science programme nor had he, in any formal sense, analysed different options and evaluated their consequences. The main reason for this was that, partly, he was unable to do so, and, partly, he preferred not to formulate long-term study or occupational goals at this time. As far as his future was concerned, Neil saw it optimistically as a pending “landscape of choice” (Ball et al, 2000). His perspective also resonates with Miles’ argument that:

> what young people are seeking to do is to offset the imposition of structure on their lives. Being young is about rejecting the paraphernalia of adulthood and not about aspiring to it. (Miles, 2003:177)

In this light, the lack of relevance of the study and career goals of the National Curriculum to Neil’s own life are understandable. Neil’s recognition of his own youth and its possibilities might perhaps be described as a tactic he uses to defer information seeking for career decision-making and to rather creatively deflect the functioning of the career guidance system that might otherwise propel him into areas of study or work that did not suit him.
8.4 Emily: Avoiding information seeking as a self-protective tactic

Emily both avoided and deferred studies and career related information seeking. Like Neil, she had chosen an unsuitable upper secondary programme, but unlike Neil, she had not been able to uphold a learner identity by investing in academic subjects that were not central to the programme profile. She described herself as an ‘outsider’. Huotari and Chatman define insiders as “socialised members of a small world, and outsiders are in essence strangers to that world” (Huotari & Chatman, 2001:353). Shirin also describes herself as a ‘stranger’ but the difference between Emily and Shirin lay in their attitudes to their studies and classmates; Shirin strove to become an ‘insider’ by appropriating her group’s values and norms whereas Emily was antagonistic to the worldview she perceived that her classmates and teachers shared. When we met, she was in the final year of the Economics programme. The Economics programme is primarily oriented towards higher education and characterised by subjects such as economics, business studies, information technology and mathematics. However, Emily did not plan to go to university at this stage in her life, not did she plan to build further on her experiences of the Economics programme. She longed to leave school and to leave home.

Emily lived with her father and younger sister in a house on the outskirts of a village. Her parents were separated and her mother lived in an apartment in the village. Her father was a foreman at a local warehouse and her mother worked as a receptionist in a small business. She described her family as “definitely working class”. Her father had left school at the age of sixteen and her mother at the age of eighteen. Emily enjoyed riding in her leisure time and spent a great deal of her free time at a local stable helping out and exercising horses. She was fond of animals in general; she had her own cat and planned to get a dog when she left home. She was also in a relationship with a young man and hoped that that they would set up home together in the near future.

Emily’s story was characterised by a view of the future blurred by barriers where she positioned herself as inactivated by a series of hindrances. Emily’s major priority on both interview occasions was her desire to leave home which meant in practice that she needed to get a job: “I’m so sick of school, I just want to get away from here. (…) I’ll get a job and move away from home and start my own life” (Emily, 1). However, her information activities in this regard had been minimal for a number of reasons. Emily regretted her choice of upper secondary programme, having found the courses boring and disliking life styles of her classmates where she felt that acceptance "depends on the clothes you wear". This was apparent even to me, I could see that many of the Economics programme students looked “expensive” while Emily herself came to the interviews in a simple t-shirt, worn jeans and sneakers. Emily positioned herself as one not fully accepted in her class,
in contrast, for example, to Nora and Neil who at several points in their interviews referred to interaction with friends at school as a matter of course in their discussions on the future. Emily ascribed her sense of alienation to a number of factors; partly, she did not feel that the programme was of much use to her except on a limited personal level:

I might have some use for the classes in economics when I move away from home, in making a budget and that, otherwise I’ll never have any use for it. (Emily, 1)

The other subjects were defined by Emily as useless in the sense that she could not see how they might help her to get a job. The uselessness of the programme, she maintained, also accounted for her inactivity with regard to finding out what work might be available to her on leaving school. Partly, Emily was disappointed because the programme did not provide any occupational training or practical support in getting a job:

Emily: There are programmes that prepare you for a job straightaway, like a chef. But this programme doesn’t prepare you for a job, it prepares you for studying. I know people who get jobs straightaway with the help of teachers and that, but this programme is geared to university.

FH: So you are all expected to apply to university?

Emily: Yeah, right! If you want to get a job you have to do it by yourself.

FH: Oh?

Emily: In my friend’s class they all got a job each after school.

(Emily, 1)

Three years on the economics programme left Emily with a sense that she had very little to qualify her for a job she would enjoy and she was painfully aware of the need for formal qualifications or “bits of paper” as she called them. By comparing the programme negatively with the vocational programmes her friends had taken, Emily conveyed her disappointment that her teachers were not more active in helping her to find a job and also a sense of helplessness in her expression “you have to do it by yourself”. Moreover, it reveals that she had not been fully aware of the consequences of her choice of an academic programme until it was too late which, in itself, indicates dysfunctions in the flow of information to secondary students:

FH: Why did you choose it [the Economics programme]?

Emily: I don’t know really, I left it till the last minute and I was quite good at maths so the careers counsellor thought it would suit me. Now, afterwards, when I think about it, I really hadn’t
a clue. I didn’t even know what to ask her, what kind of jobs I might get or anything. I wish I’d had someone who’d known something. My parents didn’t have a clue either, they thought it sounded all right, but that I should decide myself. But I didn’t know what all those options meant for me, I didn’t even realise that there might have been information that would have helped me, or if I’d visited the school or something, I might have realised. (Emily, 1)

Here Emily’s reflexivity is expressed in her awareness that there were ways of ‘knowing’ things that she had not had the resources to access by herself, for instance, that choosing an upper secondary programme can be a way of representing oneself. At this point, she dissociates herself decidedly from her classmates and the programme subjects: “they belong together and they are not my type”. As Emily experienced it, even her parents, who were not academics, had somewhat unrealistic expectations concerning her future:

F.H.: Do you feel that you are expected to go on to university?
Emily: Yes, of course, by teachers and my parents and people that know me.
F.H.: Your parents?
Emily: Yes, a little, they think I’m good at everything – they seem to think I can be a teacher or a doctor or a lawyer! (Emily, 1)

Furthermore, she associated the careers counsellor with the programme itself: “he just gives me brochures, he’s just the same as the teachers, and I don’t read them”. As Emily experienced it, all the adults depicted on her information horizon (App. VI) had expectations for her based on her choice of upper secondary programme. By stating that her parents were under the impression that she could become “a doctor or a lawyer” after a programme in economics she implies that any advice or information they had to offer would be irrelevant and that they were not in a position to be able to understand her real alternatives. Her disappointment in the programme expressed itself in resistance to its expected outcome of continued studies and in resistance to using her studies in economics as a departure point for job directed information activities.

Emily had, in fact, other possibilities of identity, particularly through her leisure interests. During the course of her studies, she reached the conclusion that she would prefer an occupation where she could be physically active:

... it’s always been in the back of my mind that I want to do something... but office work, you sit still all day and drink coffee and click away on a computer and that...no, I’d never be able to stick it, I’m too active for that. (Emily, 1)
Here, Emily lays claim to another type of identity as a physically active person; she wants to “do” things and makes it clear that in terms of personal identity computer-associated work was not included in her sense of who she was. However, the programme had one practical advantage and that was that it gave her one of the qualifications required for applying to the Police Academy. Emily’s long-term ambition or dream was to become a police dog handler and this idea seemed to work as a support that kept her on track in her studies and gave her the motivation to complete them. In comparing university studies with studies at the Police Academy Emily states the following:

The Police Academy and university aren’t the same thing. (…)
At the Police Academy it’s more than just grades, it’s psyche and strength and motivation …it’s not the same thing. (Emily, 1)

Emily’s experiences of an academic programme made her feel out of place but embedded in this sense of alienation there was another possibility of identity as an active, strong and motivated person. Identity claims are part of narrative stories, which in turn are discursive resources, used for performing social actions such as negotiating “dilemmas of ideology” (Stanley & Billig, 2004:160). The social action performed by Emily in this instance was framed not only by the interview itself in which she projects herself as an active person but also in a wider ideological context where she negotiates the values inherent in academic education by contrasting it unfavourably with the education for police, which is “more than just grades”. However, Emily did not plan to apply to the police academy yet; her first priority was to get a job that would enable her to leave home.

Despite her intention to get work, Emily was not particularly active with regard to seeking job information or finding out more about police work, its requirements and conditions. Her accounts of her information related activities reveal some of the dilemmas and obstacles she faced. Her main tactic was, in effect, to put off seeking information to the point of avoiding it, and she accounts for this strategy by lifting forward a number of obstacles that hindered her from taking action.

8.4.1 Orienting towards police work

Emily’s ambition to become a police-dog handler was initiated through a serendipitous encounter:

It was just by chance! I was waiting for the bus, turned around and saw that the police were going to have some sort of competition with their dogs and I thought that must be fun! (Emily, 1)
The event itself made a strong impression on Emily because this particular occupation united three of the criteria Emily looked for in a job: working outdoors, being physically active and working with animals. The encounter gave Emily a focus for her interests in occupational terms and she described how, after this encounter, she became alert to anything touching on the police and police dogs, such as TV documentaries and other programmes, and newspaper reports involving police dogs. Dervin refers to “the essential randomness of information seeking” and the way, once people have formulated a topic of interest for themselves and it is active in their minds, they “seek information from wherever they can get it” (Dervin, 1983:172). Later, Emily described a chance meeting with a police officer:

It's when you've been somewhere and just bumped into a police officer and started talking to them. Just by chance. I haven't gone into the police station and asked how you become a policewoman. It was at a music festival and I liked the way they [the police] were friendly but firm, telling people where they could camp. I watched them and I thought, yes, I could do that. I got to talk to one and he was nice and he told me how to go about it and he said I should go for it. (Emily, 2).

After her encounter with the police dog handlers Emily actively searched for information on how to apply to the Police Academy. Although she had access to the Internet, both at home and at school, she did not feel proficient in computer use, especially when there were technical hitches. Her younger sister's boyfriend helped her to find the web-site for The Swedish National Police Academy and she was able to reassure herself that it existed and that she could return to it when needed and that it was useful: "It's easy to use and they describe in detail what you have to do. There are even application forms and everything, so it's no problem at all" (Emily, 1). Although she did not examine the website in detail she discovered that she not only needed to complete the economics programme in order to qualify for entry, she also needed high grades. She also found that military service counted as a merit for applicants:

Emily: I should really have done military service but it wasn’t to be.
F.H.: No?
Emily: And you have to have really high grades so I’m going to have to improve them at Komvux27 or university.
F.H.: Are you thinking of doing that?
Emily: Yes, if I have to.
F.H.: So, now you’re waiting to see what grades you get?
Emily: Exactly!

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27 Municipal colleges of further education
F.H.: What else do you need?

Emily: Good nerves and not being afraid of hard work I should think, …but the main thing is, I suppose, that you’ve made your mind up. (Emily 1)

In Sweden, young women can apply to do military service on leaving school and this would have enhanced Emily’s chances of acceptance at the police academy. She did not apply because: “I don’t think I would have managed it because I have a bad back and bad knees so it wouldn’t have worked. I'm a bit afraid that the police won't accept me either.” Here then were a series of barriers that effectually obstructed Emily from pursuing her dream. Taken together they suggest that the main obstacle for Emily was her sense of self-efficacy (see section 2.3 on self-efficacy). She doubted that she would get good grades, which must have affected her confidence in her ability to learn. She had no friends with whom she could identify on the programme and who might have encouraged her through their example. She did not know anyone who was a police candidate or had joined the police force and whom she could emulate. Finally, the way in which she dwelt on her personal deficiencies suggests a lack of confidence in her own abilities. In theory, structures exist which could facilitate Emily’s efforts, her schooling provided the basis requirements, information was available and accessible but acting on information requires the conviction that it’s use has the power to change a situation. However, what seemed to be important to Emily at this stage was that she had made a decision that gave her a focus for future information activities. Emily returned to this decision several times; she was “relieved” that she knew what she wanted to do, and that she was “luckier” than some of her friends who did not know what they wanted to do. In fact, she maintained, it was this formulated ambition that kept her at school working on her grades.

8.4.2 Scanning job information

When we met in late May, 2004, Emily explained she had been too stressed by final examinations and deadlines for essays and projects to have made any plans for her immediate or long-term future. However, she had taken up scanning the local newspaper for jobs but the information she gleaned from job advertisements made her apprehensive. She was apprehensive because she did not have work experience, a driving licence or contacts that could help her in this endeavour and had decided to put off looking for work till after her graduation:

Emily: I haven’t had the energy to look for a job yet, that’ll be a project for the summer; to find a job.
F.H.: What do you feel most uncertain about?
Emily: Well, I’ve noticed that you need a driving license for a lot of jobs and I won’t get mine until July or August and that stresses me. I can’t apply for a job that needs a driving license
until the autumn (...) and then maybe I won’t be able to do the job, maybe it won’t suit me, I might not get on with the people I work with. (...) It’s so difficult to find a job nowadays; getting a job is a job. You should get paid for job searching (...) You can’t find out what the atmosphere is like by just walking around at a workplace. You have to work there. (Emily, 2)

Emily’s lack of ‘energy’ reflects her sense of futility in applying for jobs she felt from the outset, she had no chance of getting. She expresses here a lack of confidence and anxiety over her future that in part reflects her experiences of alienation on the economics programme but that also suggests that she did not have enough time to focus on job searching or long term planning while trying at the same time to secure adequate grades at school. It would also seem that the more information she had about possible options the more disheartened she became. There must have been little attraction for Emily in spending effort on a pursuit that she felt had little or no chance of success or that almost certainly would result in diminishing the little reserve of self-confidence she had.

8.4.3 Avoiding information

Emily was sometimes offered or given information or advice that she had not asked for. She mentioned that her younger sister had tried to encourage her to take an interest in the brochures sent home to her but she had resisted: "My sister runs around complaining that I don't read them...she thinks I ought to read them so I just flip through them. Then I put them down and never look at them again". Emily conformed to this seemingly reasonable expectation that she at least read the brochures with a token gesture but, by describing her sister as one who “runs around complaining,” she suggested that she found the information in the brochures irrelevant to her situation and was irritated by her sister’s lack of insight.

Although Emily had on one occasion consulted the careers counsellor to seek his support in looking for a job after school she was disappointed with the results:

Emily: He gave me a few brochures, but it's still the same thing, I don't read them.
F.H.: Why not?
Emily: Oh! Because they’re not...they’re just about universities and work where you have to study economics ... I wanted him to say, ‘Here’s a job, I’ll help you to get it.’ But I suppose they don’t work that way. You have to do everything yourself. (Emily, 1)

McKenzie (2001) found that when people make appointments in order to ask specific questions they generally have strategies for finding out what they want to
know, for example, by having pre-planned questions and varied ways of asking and persisting. In Emily’s case, it would seem that her lack of confidence hindered her from persisting with her questions. The above also reflects both a sense of powerlessness and of resistance. Giddens offers an interesting insight that may illuminate Emily’s position as a possible ‘survivor’, who despite feelings of powerlessness offers resistance. The economics programme might in Giddens’ terms be described as a “consumption package” i.e. the consumer buys not only into the subjects offered on the programme but also into a specific identity as a ‘learner’ and even into a type of life style associated with the majority of programme students. Emily had not realised this when she chose the programme and she resisted both the learner identity and the life style implicated. She also demonstrated resistance to the self-help culture of career counselling by refusing to ‘play the game’. Giddens argues that individuals resist processes of commodification by “discriminating among types of available information as well as interpreting it on their own terms” (Giddens, 1991:199). However, although Emily deliberately distanced herself from the study and careers information that was offered to her, her resistance can be seen as a self-protective negative agency in response to an experience of unequal power relations (Shor, 1980). Emily’s reflection on the ways in which career counsellors work, or rather, do not work, suggests that the system did not cater for young people that for one reason or another, did not wish to continue to follow the path they had chosen. It may in part also reflect the fact that careers counsellors seldom have the time to see and support the individual student.

On two occasions, Emily missed opportunities to meet representatives from the police:

F.H.: You mentioned that you were going to meet some representatives from the police that the careers counsellor was going to organise for you. Did you do that?
Emily: Well, that’s something they do, but the last time I didn’t go and the first time I was sick. Then I was really sick so I couldn’t go. The last time I didn’t go for some reason, we didn’t get any information, our teachers are not very good at giving us information. (Emily, 2)

Here, Emily distanced the event from her own personal sphere by describing it as “something they do” as if her own participation had no particular meaning. It is possible that Emily avoided seeking information that was of potential value to her because that same information might have led to insights that would force her to reconsider her choice. It was also, she maintained, her ambition to be a police dog handler that kept her from leaving school; without it there would have been little to motivate her to finishing the programme. Seeking information implies further action; deferring or avoiding information seeking can therefore be seen as a self-
protective tactic that might allow the individual to concentrate on the present moment.

Another interpretation of Emily’s avoidance of information seeking is suggested by Schutz’ (1964f) idea of the outsider. Outsiders, according to Schutz, do not share the values, norms and assumptions that are built into the patterns of behaviour that guide the activities of the in-group; in Emily’s case the in-group was constituted by the people associated with the economics programme. She maintained that she did not “fit in” and this suggests that she may not have had easy access to the type of information resources that were taken for granted by her classmates. Emily’s information horizon included only her father, her sister and her sister’s boyfriend, and a teacher that encouraged her in art. She experienced instead that she was invisible to those who might have been able to help her:

_F. H._: Do you feel pressure on you to get a job?
_Emily_: Just from myself, to feel that I’m good enough, that I am something. I don’t really think that anyone else cares if I do anything. (Emily, 2)

When we met the second time, Emily did not want to draw a new horizon stating that “it’s the same as it was before”; and although the interviews revealed that she had not been entirely inactive the results of the information seeking she had carried out had not encouraged her to persist.

**8.4.4 Summary of Emily’s information practices**

**Active seeking**
- Emily made an appointment with the career guidance counsellor at her school to ask about the possibility of getting a job after leaving school. However, she found the support offered by the counsellor irrelevant to her needs.
- With some help, Emily navigated the Internet in order to find out more about the entry requirements for the Police Academy. She was hindered in part by technical access to the Internet.

**Active scanning**
- Towards the end of the school year, Emily began to scan newspapers for jobs but did not find anything helpful. Instead, the descriptions of job requirements discouraged further information seeking.
- Active scanning includes identifying opportunities to ask questions (McKenzie, 2001) and Emily took opportunities both to observe the police at work and draw her own conclusions about her own abilities in this respect as well as to ask questions about police work and entry requirements.

**Everyday monitoring**
• A chance encounter with police dog handlers inspired Emily to find out more about the work and its requirements. However, the pressure of school-work and other priorities kept further information seeking on a low key and confined mainly to heightened alertness to aspects of the work as depicted on television and in film.

Avoiding information or deferring information seeking
• Emily was recommended information by a careers guidance counsellor and advised to read study and career literature by her sister but preferred not to do so. The careers counsellor also arranged for Emily to meet representatives from the police but she was unable to take part in this activity. This may have been a self-protective strategy at a time when Emily felt she had neither the time nor the confidence to focus on study and career related information seeking.

8.4.5 Conclusion
In her narrative, Emily describes herself as more or less inactive in her information seeking activities with regard to studies and careers. Her story, however, is not really one of inactivity, but rather of obstructed activity where lack of self-confidence and of access to relevant sources prevented her from pursuing her attempts to examine her alternatives. In his essay “Reading as poaching”, de Certeau argues that the producers of formal information discursively “give form” to social practices. Reading, is therefore, “to wander through an imposed system” where interpretations are already “given by socially authorised professionals and intellectuals” (de Certeau, 1984:171). In this light, Emily’s rejection of the study and careers information directed to pupils studying economics can be seen as a form of resistance and self-protection, a kind of negative agency. Emily’s and Shirin’s stories have some points in common; both describe themselves as “outsiders”, both have formulated occupational goals and neither of them have easy access to representatives from the occupations that interest them or to relevant information sources. However, their approaches to information seeking are widely different as can be seen in the sources they used and the degree to which they are used. This suggests that Emily’s aspirations, at least at this point in time, are little more than a dream. Her story also reveals obstacles that effectively cancel out a more active long-term strategy.

McKenzie’s model of information practices does not include information avoidance or the deferral of information seeking and this can be accounted for in the fact that the participants in her study were not in a position to defer or avoid information seeking; it was simply not in their own interests to do so. In this study, particularly in Emily’s case, avoiding information can be understood as a tactic that protects the individual, at least for the time-being. Tactics, in comparison to the long-term strategies employed by Shirin and Nora emerge in Neil’s and Emily’s cases as a means of buying time and of being open to unexpected or timely
opportunities. The tactic of avoidance also reflects differences in class where Emily’s social location puts her at a disadvantage.

8.5 Chapter summary
The participants were interviewed while on the verge of leaving school and each person constructed narratives that described their personal positions at the time of the interviews and how their information activities were related to these positions. It is important to bear in mind that these are unfinished stories and that the young people in the study were struggling to create coherent identities in relation to different expectations they perceived in those around them and from society in general.

Nora’s information related activities can be described as strategic and goal-oriented and can be seen in part as a response to her perception of the labour market as unpredictable. She sought information both intensively and extensively during the three years of the upper secondary programme in her efforts to relate her academic interests to programmes in higher education, to labour market needs and to her personal preferences. In describing her activities, she often relates to new career discourse and uses it to emphasise the significance of individual choice and creating a unique education. Her interest in finding institutions that used a pedagogical methodology that suited her learning needs further helped her to differentiate between educational options. All Nora’s endeavours were supported and facilitated by the familial resources constantly available to her in everyday life. In terms of information literacy in relation to study and occupational choice and the goals of the National Curriculum her positive experiences of the Natural Science programme had helped her to develop a point of view on future studies. The difficulties she experienced were related to her scant knowledge of work in the environmental science sector and what work actually entailed in the form of tasks and conditions. Nora also demonstrated her ability to evaluate descriptions of programmes in higher education in relation to labour market opportunities as well as in evaluating her friends’ experiences of studies in relation to her own preferences and needs. Information literacy emerged primarily as an ability to evaluate educational options through the effective use of the information resources available to her and in alignment with the signs of the times as they are expressed through formal career and study related information.

Shirin was also strategically goal oriented in her information seeking activities. In contrast to Nora, she did not discuss her choice of profession in terms of risk or in terms of the new career discourse. This may be explained by the clearly defined nature of the educational path towards the law profession and by the strength of her focus, which excluded other options. Her information related activities touched on multiple aspects of becoming a lawyer; its knowledge base, educational pathways, and the social attributes and skills of the profession. As an immigrant, she used a ‘stranger’ discourse to account for the intensity of her ambition and to explain her position as a newcomer which, in effect, entailed a much greater use of formal
sources of information in comparison with Nora. Shirin had greater difficulties in interpreting the meaning of such information, unaccustomed as she and her family were to the norms, traditions and assumptions that may lie underneath the surface in careers and study related information and in the education system. This made the informal support of “adult middle-class Swedes” very important to her. The ‘literal’ meaning of texts, argues de Certeau (1984), are the products of social elites and endorsed by socially authorised professionals. Shirin’s concern with the ‘correct’ interpretation of study and careers information reflects in part her desire to move upwards socially.

Like Nora, she consulted the careers councillor in practical matters but she emphasised that consultations took place on the basis of her understanding that she should not go beyond the limit of inquiring about practices and procedures. Shirin’s intensive information activities reflect the strength of her ambition and demonstrate her need of support and encouragement from authoritative and socially appropriate sources. Shirin was information literate in the sense that she discerned the resources of an ‘information landscape’ and could identify useful opportunities to learn more of the profession. Becoming information literate in Shirin’s case was a process that developed over the years on the Social Studies programme and it involved understanding and integrating the information produced by a social elite into her own personal information practices.

Neil’s account reflects both his perception of an unpredictable labour market and the effects of an unsuitable choice of upper secondary programme in constraining his options. His information activities, as accounted for in the interviews, were characterised by a step-by-step dialogic process of weighing a ‘gap’ year against a potentially interesting course of studies. He was drawn both to travels abroad and to higher education as means of self development. The idea of self actualisation and self development informed his information activities and underlined the significance of the youth period itself in Neil’s lifeworld. His information activities can be described as tactics that deflected social expectations embedded in the new career discourse and allowed him to use the idea of travel and university studies “for their own sake” as a part of the enactment of his own youth. In his case, the exercise of skills in information literacy has no real place at this stage, if one accepts that its object is to encourage young people to conform to the political and social objectives of the time.

Neil’s last minute decision to take a part-time university course supports the idea that career choice is often the result of a number of incremental decisions and choices that in turn form the basis for future decisions and choices. At the same time, Neil emerges as torn between competing forces in relation to notions of work and education on one hand and of escape and personal development on the other. Neil dealt with these tensions in everyday negotiations with his family and friends where he worked through the kind of adult he could and wanted to become.

Emily had also chosen an inappropriate upper secondary programme but, unlike Neil, she did not develop a ‘learner’ identity but was in the process of developing an identity as a physically active, outdoors person. Her lack of self-confidence as
well as her lack of access to supportive information sources, on the other hand, effectually hindered her from engaging in purposeful information seeking and she intended to defer seeking information about work opportunities until after her graduation. In the interviews, Emily positioned herself as an ‘outsider’, which may have entailed that access to information that was appropriate to her situation required a psychological effort that was too great for her at this time, particularly in view of the fact that she had very few information resources on her information horizon. Emily actively resisted careers and study information, a tactic which can be described as self protective but which ultimately might reinforce her excluded position.

The four narratives reveal that choices are not completely open, nor are they completely isolated events; rather they are made within the context of other life choices, sociocultural background, life experiences and sense of identity. Their different approaches to information seeking make visible inequalities of access to information as well as individual differences in agency and objectives. It is perhaps true to say that these participants sought and resisted information in ways that were ‘pragmatically rational’ (Hodkinson and Sparkes, 1997) from their own unique standpoints in life.
The objective of the thesis is to develop knowledge of school leavers’ approaches to study and career choice by studying their information related activities. The major departure point has been that young people, through their activities and their descriptions of their information related activities are saying something fundamental about the ways in which they negotiate and interpret study and careers information and its meaning in their lives. In this chapter, the findings of the study are discussed against a background of the theoretical framework and earlier research. This is followed by a discussion of some of the themes that emerged in accounts but which I had not anticipated in the initial research questions. These include the relevance of place, space and social position in stories of information seeking. In the final sections of the chapter I will review the research and professional contributions of the study.

The theoretical weight of the thesis lies in a phenomenologically based discussion of everyday life and the life world in a narrative mode where I argue that action and decision in everyday life are framed by earlier experiences, both lived and mediated, and biographical situation. Information seeking, therefore, is seen as an activity oriented towards the future but shaped by the past and the present and used to make connections between them. By studying information seeking both as a step on the way towards realising the pictures young people make for themselves of the future and as a socially and culturally formed practice I argue that it is possible to create a clearer understanding of the problems they may encounter.

### 9.1 Meanings of information seeking

Participants gave meaning to information seeking in various ways: as a means of understanding the relation between higher education and the labour market; as a means of understanding university life and studies; as a means of forming a comprehensive picture of an occupation; as a means of planning an extended transition; and, by avoiding or limiting study and careers related information seeking they position this activity as meaningless or even threatening in their lives. Participants in the study justify their accounts of information related activities both through the connections they make to lived experiences and, on a discursive level, through identity claims and by relating their stories to sociocultural norms and
practices. On an experiential level, participants’ intentions gave meaning to their activities and at the same time indicated sociocultural barriers in accessing and connecting with potentially useful information sources.

In the context of Swedish society, accounts of information seeking revealed how young people negotiate between sources of information by making use of a mixture of discourses concerning work, education, nationality and youth in order to make sense of their options as well as to justify their decisions. Patterns and variations in stories of information seeking also revealed to some extent participants’ personal understandings of their own positions in the social structure which in turn coloured their approaches to study and career information.

In a narrative perspective, accounts of information related activities illuminate the relationship between individuals and their social contexts, and how people understand and act with respect to this relationship. In this research, stories of information seeking have enabled me to attend to aspects of the social world that participants in the study identify as enabling or constraining them. Through their stories, participants have also indicated how their personal circumstances related to broader social trends.

### 9.1.1 Seeking information as a means of relating personal interests to higher education and the future labour market

Accounts of information related activities that focused on the construction of a unique line of studies and experiences bear witness to the pervasiveness of the idea of individualisation and portfolio education and careers. In this approach, talk of information seeking was often characterised by an individualisation terminology; participants spoke of looking for a unique education leading to specialised ‘niches’ on the labour market, of being alert to current labour market prognoses and of being adaptable, flexible and equipped with a marketable variety of skills, experiences and competences. They described strategies which incorporated the new careers discourse thus indicating that they were thinking about ‘career’ in socially approved ways. Co-existing within this approach there was a parallel theme of seeking and using information in order to imagine life as a student and which entailed preparing to take on the challenge of meeting a new environment.

Life as a student was imagined on two levels: envisaging oneself ‘at university’, and projecting further into the future where the interlude at university was positioned as a step towards this future. Some participants had the possibility to contextualise their ‘knowledge about’ university through interaction with university students in their friendship networks, which afforded access to an ‘insider knowledge’ of the teaching philosophy, ways of knowing, working and valuing esteemed by the institution in question as well as of the lighter social side of life as a student. Participants with this kind of ‘cultural capital’ were in a good position to access information about studies and to be identified by others as interested in this type of information. Their environment can be described as one that afforded the transition from school leaver to student identity.
Other ways of building an understanding of university studies were through brochures and websites that described course and programme content, reading lists, academic requirements and the relevance of studies to the labour market. However, the drawback with this type of information is that it does not stand alone. Its interpretation is dependent on the previous experiences of its readers as well as on their access to sources that can corroborate and validate it, which, in turn, is interwoven with the individual’s ‘cultural capital’. This has implications, of course, for young people who do not have contacts within universities or who come from families that do not have experiences of higher education.

In accounts of seeking information about the future labour market, participants expressed much greater uncertainty than they did about university studies as such and it is here that the interplay between individual agency and social structure emerges. Participants spoke of individualisation, specialisation and flexibility as relevant terms in evaluating information about studies and work. These are terms which hold the promise of varied, interesting and new jobs as well as being suggestive of the ability to become competitive in an increasingly global economy. The brochures from universities, exemplified earlier in “The Student Handbook” as well as in “18 at last!”, the brochure from the Swedish Confederation of Trade and Industry, are full of such terms and yet there are few descriptions of actual work that participants can relate to; as Ida said in frustration: “But what does a systems architect do?” Terms like ‘flexible’ and ‘specialisation’ are related to people rather than to job descriptions and the uncertainty they evoke may have to do with the fact that these terms are also used in conjunction with organisations. If organisations are also called upon to be flexible and specialised in a globalised economy where does that put employees and the value of a “unique” education in times of recession? And indirectly, it begs the question – can information about the future labour market formulated through the new careers discourse have any value or relevance for school leavers beyond making them apprehensive? It seems more to require them to think in instrumental ways about education and work. In this light, it is understandable that uncertainty is negotiated by falling back on the mediated experiences of an older generation and the social practices they give rise to. Seeking information with departure points in family and friendship networks can be seen both as a means of appropriating and reproducing social position and family values. So for some, university studies were assumed to be advantageous in the long run in terms of a traditional career discourse, and particularly so if individuals could construct their own education as they progressed through the higher education system in terms of the new careers discourse. For others, the decision to go to university was put on hold as a venture too risky to embark on at this time.

According to the new careers discourse, young people are expected to be the architects of their own education and careers and this has, undoubtedly, the effect of rendering structural constraints invisible while individual agency features prominent. However, in their stories of information seeking participants who acknowledged the idea of portfolio education by using its terminology and who attempted to discern, through information, connections to future job opportunities,
also drew on the idea of education as an abstract quality in its own right in order to justify decisions to go to university.

9.1.2 Seeking information as a means of creating a comprehensive picture of an occupation

Information could be sought to facilitate socialisation into different occupational identities as was shown in Shirin’s case. She sought information not only on a practical level but was also, as an aspiring law student and lawyer, interested in the information practices of law students as well as in information concerning the routines, norms and values of the profession which were mediated in part through the embodiment of its practices. Her activities can be related to the findings of Lloyd’s (2006) study where she describes the information ‘landscapes’ discerned by novice firefighters. Lloyd found that information literacy in workplace contexts “is not only about understanding how to navigate and use text as a site of learning, but also about how to access and use information gathered from people, from their own bodies, through observation of the bodies of others, and developing a line of action towards them” (Lloyd, 2006:574). What is interesting in Shirin’s and the other participants’ cases, whose information activities are largely steered by their ambitions to join specific professions, is that they have started to engage in this process while still at school and not only when they have opportunities to engage in work practice. This has implications for our understanding of ‘anticipatory socialisation’ (Henslin, 2006) a concept which captures how people ‘rehearse’ for future occupations or social relationships. The addition of an information seeking dimension to the idea of anticipatory socialisation may suggest useful ways of facilitating entry into occupations or other social constellations. It also lifts forward the significance of experts/practitioners as sources of information. The landscapes of information resources afforded by workplace contexts are open, to some extent, to aspirants not yet ‘there’, which suggests that educators in information literacy as well as career guidance professionals can support young people in enabling them to identify not only the textual information resources of these landscapes but also the significance of their social and embodied information resources.

Stereotypical images of occupational identity, on the other hand, could work against active information seeking. Pictures of ‘office work’ as soul destroying, of ‘lab rats’, of nurses as over-worked and under-paid are constrictive and once categorized, easy to dismiss. Schutz argues that we make the life world manageable by categorizing its phenomena. At the same time, categorization can curb imagination and lead to discrimination, as much of Bourdieu’s research has demonstrated. Stereotypical images of occupations also reflect a static view of their practices, obscuring the prospect of people and professions in development. While it is, of course, convenient to be able to dismiss some options in order to concentrate on others it also seems clear, both from this and other studies (Furusten & Zune, 2004), that some young people dismiss whole categories of occupations because they lack information and knowledge of work content and of the nature of
career in long-term perspectives. Schutz points at this problem when he distinguishes between ‘knowledge of’ and ‘knowledge about’ phenomena in the life world where ‘knowledge about’ lies on a superficial level and is inadequate as a basis for deeper understanding; it has elements of “mere belief and ignorance” (Schutz 1975:123). The problem with knowledge ‘about’ occupations is that its quality is seldom reflected upon unless explicitly challenged and it can be used inappropriately as a rhetorical tool in justifying action.

Accounts of information seeking directed at specific socially recognised professions or occupations reveal participants’ awareness of and interest in the resources, interpretive schemes and norms embedded in different types of work and workplaces. The institution of journalism, for instance, can be said to encode norms, ways of behaviour and ways of speaking which offer to the aspirant an interpretive scheme which can facilitate entry. Arthur et al. (1999:42) argue that these types of interpretive schemes can be understood as “institutionally rather than individually determined programmes” and are shaped by specific organisations, professions or by family and social contexts. Such a view emphasises the embeddedness of career pathways in social and cultural practice. In this study stories of information seeking in relation to entering specific professions support this view and also bear implications for what we mean by information seeking.

Information is always sought in relation to some object of interest and it is perhaps this relationship that differentiates the first approach from the second. Participants with specific occupational goals had quite clearly defined occupational domains and pathways towards them that they could seek information about, while in the first approach, participants were unsure of where their interests might lead them, hence their focus on options within higher education.

### 9.1.3 Seeking information for planning extended transitions

The focus of the study on occupational and educational choice obscures to some extent other priorities in the lives of young people and it is possible that in their accounts participants give the appearance of being more organised and goal oriented than they would have done if focus had been on information seeking with regard to life styles and leisure interests. A problem in this respect is that educational and labour market policies are usually expressed abstractly in terms of national and international economic competition and are almost exclusively concerned with the production of future workers with particular skills and/or dispositions. A powerful discourse is thus created that dominates career and study information and obscures other alternatives that young people might have, even to the point of casting suspicion on ways of viewing the world that do not comply with prevailing assumptions and expectations regarding the choices young people make. Young people’s interest in their own life projects and self-realisation are seldom paid attention in economic policies. There is a discontinuity, evident for example in Neil’s portrait, between the structures which shape young people’s transitions between education and work with departure points in national labour
market needs, and the lives that young people live and imagine for themselves and which emerges in their accounts of their information related activities.

In this approach participants were geared more to the immediate future in their information activities and were not, in fact, overly concerned with their futures in terms of careers. The inclination to defer career decisions is woven through many of the narratives and expressed as “I’m not really mature enough yet” or as a need to have time to find their bearings. Ideas of travelling, of moving away from home, of going to university for the sake of studying, were central to accounts of preparing to leave school. In part, disinterest in study and career information emphasises a claim to the youth period itself and raises the question if it can be understood as a form of resistance to contemporary notions of how careers and transition ‘should’ be planned.

One reason for interpreting disinterest in careers information as resistance is that it is often couched in moral tones that underline the importance of thinking ahead in terms of updating skills, acquiring varied work and educational experiences and developing the right values and attitudes for the modern world. The effect of this new careers discourse is to objectify young people by requiring them to create versions of themselves that are congruent with the assumed requirements of modern society, and they did indeed speak of transition plans that were constructed through family discussions. Information contextualised in the new career discourse may, however, sidestep what it means to be young by attempting to harness youth transitions to labour market needs through recommendations to young people to think in terms of gathering suitable portfolios for the future. In the study, young people attempted to navigate between a set of personal, occupational and educational interests, and external expectations, where the services and information sources of the career guidance system were heavily weighted towards the requirements envisioned for the development of a knowledge economy. The contextualisation of study and career information in national, economic and labour market goals may in fact effectively remove it, in terms of relevance, from the lives of young people and may account for why it is ignored or put aside ‘until the time is ripe’ by some.

The idea of a gap year or ‘time-out’ has its special appeal for young people and is now so accepted in Swedish society that it is implicitly almost taken for granted as a ‘requirement’ for facilitating future employment. This, in itself, suggests that a connection is being forged between the agenda underlying labour market and education policies and the aspirations and dreams of young people where the idea of the gap year is deliberately related to the needs of the labour market by suggesting it be planned and used as a means of gathering a portfolio of work experiences, for example, in the brochure published by the Swedish Confederation of Trade and Industry (CSE, 2003). Reciprocally, young people also justify their claim to an extended transition discursively by underlining its value in terms of personal development and experience.

Harnessing the idea of the ‘gap year’ to the new careers discourse has implications for information seeking. It requires that young people view temporary
work and studies abroad and at home in terms of their usefulness to future careers; for instance, information on studies abroad will be more relevant if such studies are acknowledged as a merit in the Swedish education system. Information that makes clear the connection to a Swedish context is of more interest than that which does not. Stephen, for example, was unsure of information that came directly from German universities; it needed, in his view, some kind of Swedish sanction behind it. Here, the idea of cognitive authority adds a further dimension by making visible how the content of the information itself is valued in relation to how it is valued within a Swedish social context.

9.1.4 Avoiding and limiting information seeking: information as a potential threat

In this approach information on studies and careers was experienced as untimely, irrelevant and potentially threatening. Accounts of avoiding information were justified by participants’ focus on examinations and the need to complete school projects on time, in a ‘first things first’ approach. However, feelings of anxiety and stress also loomed large in connection with study and career decision making and it is not unlikely that such feelings were the outcome of participants’ reactions to the implications of the new careers discourse; that is, the expectancy that school leavers take personal responsibility for their futures by constructing feasible study and/or career plans. Implicit assumptions that particular types of information were relevant to students in specific upper secondary programmes ignored the situations of school leavers who did not intend to build further on their studies. In this respect refusal to engage with information related to careers and studies can also be understood as a form of resistance and self-protection. Information was ‘there’ in an objective sense but in this approach participants did not find it applicable or relevant to their particular situations. Engaging with any type of information can be seen as preparation for further action and, in discursive terms, engaging with careers and study information means, to some extent, accepting the premises on which it is built and the particular ways of defining and discussing transitions and careers that it offers. For the participants, the advantages of not engaging with information outweighed its supposed advantages. They could, for instance tap into alternative discourses of ‘escaping’ from the world of school or of living out their own youth.

Dyer and Humphries (2002) make an interesting point with regard to discursive resistance. They argue that resistors may be recast as ‘failures’ in the project of self-management by those who have adopted the new careers discourse. This suggests that ‘failure’ plays an important role in reproducing and affirming the new careers discourse for those who have appropriated it. Structural constraints perceived by resistors therefore become obscured through a discourse of individual failing to make plans for the future. With this in mind, it is possible that in being targeted by careers guidance services as in need of extra support resistors may in
turn legitimise a view of careers guidance as a service for the helpless, which is indeed how it was regarded by some participants.

9.2 Accounts of information seeking in narratives of lived experience: the significance of space and place in accounts of information seeking

Accounts of information seeking relate on one level to contemporary discourse on the changing nature of career. On another level they also relate to lived experience as participants, through accounts of information seeking, construct coherent life stories. On this level the constraints and possibilities afforded by structure emerge in their complexity. One area in which this was particularly visible was in stories of attachment to home or, conversely, in the desire to travel or move to university towns.

It was not my intention in this study to investigate aspects of mobility and social and physical place in accounts of information seeking. Yet, in seeking to understand how young people, through their information seeking activities approach the future I inevitably noted different orientations towards mobility that played a role in their accounts. Orientations towards mobility differed and this can be ascribed to differences in sociocultural background and to the particularities of family culture, individual agency and social location. Giddens (1991) suggests that young people are no longer so rooted to place as earlier generations have been. His argument is built on three strands; (i) the intensification of mediated experience, i.e. increasing familiarity with events in places that are far away, (ii) the increasing ease and safety of travel, and (iii) the decreasing significance of family ties as people become more mobile and inclined or required to move to other regions. In contrast, Furlong and Cartmel (1997:113) argue, while conceding the increasing intensification of mediated experience, that “our opportunities and our life chances continue to be structured by our lived rather than our mediated experiences”. This suggests that place still has a significant role to play as a framework for choice and information seeking. In the study, participants speak of travel and social and physical mobility as aspects of their strategies or tactics for the future that underlay information seeking activities. In doing so, some accounts also reveal the connections between themselves and wider family projects of social mobility.

Place takes on different meanings in the study and, to a certain extent, supports both arguments. Participants refer to themselves as inhabitants of a physical place and as inhabiting a social space or ‘socioscape’ (Ball et al., 2000). For some, the town itself represented the limits of possibility as they considered their futures. Moving out of the area was a barely conceivable option for them. Home meant for them security, defined social relationships and a local world in which they were in the process of establishing their positions through their social and leisure activities. Moving away, in their view, entailed discontinuity and fear of a loss of identity rather than openness of opportunity. However, attachment to place also seems to be linked to foreshortened time perspectives, at least in terms of seeking information...
as part of long-term strategies. Some participants described a ‘first things first’
approach and information related activities, if they were undertaken at all, were
mainly directed towards the summer following the end of the school year.
Transitions generally involve loss of some kind and Giddens argues that reflexivity
is required to a greater extent today in order to constructively face transitions and
the options they open; Giddens contends that reflexive awareness enables the
individual to distance themselves from past experience and to imagine different
types of futures for themselves. However, it is possible that the young person who
looks back on his or her life so far may want to retain as much as possible by using
place as a framework for information seeking, and in so doing, can be just as
reflexively aware as his or her more cosmopolitan counterparts.

For others, place played a role in the balancing of options for education by
framing choice through the preferences and inclinations developed as the result of
living in the countryside or in towns. Nora and Emily both emphasised their
preferences for continuing to live near or in the countryside as a criterion for
choosing universities. They both wanted to be able to continue with leisure
activities that they associated with the places where they lived. Bella and Ben both
argued that their cultural interests framed information seeking in the sense that they
both evaluated information on studies from the perspective of their desire to live in
large cities. They strove, in other words, towards creating coherence in their lives
and this channelled their information activities and determined how they evaluated
information. For some, the further away the better. Ben, Sam and Simon, for
example, had relatively unfettered perceptions of space. Opportunity, adventure and
imagination characterised their view of the world, rather than the loneliness and
vulnerability anticipated by other participants in separation from place. They
described themselves as looking forward to movement and boundary crossing, and
the essential ‘distance’ of distance was overcome for them through the idea of ‘gap
years’ abroad, through ease of contact through the Internet with peers abroad,
through stories of travelling experiences mediated through their parents, and
through experiences of holidays and school trips abroad. They looked on the world
as an extension of their own socioscapes. Even the idea of going to university
meant either moving to friends or ‘like-minded’ where they expected that the
security of the social landscape would facilitate the meeting of different
perspectives and new ideas.

Space was for some participants closely linked with their families rather than
with physical place. While investigating opportunities in education and occupations
that were internationally viable, participants like Shirin and Ilona with immigrant
backgrounds, were at the same time, particularly unwilling to separate from their
families. Their aspirations with regard to the future co-existed with their attachment
to a close-knit family culture in ‘the vivid present’ to quote Schutz (1962:216).
They expected that the issue would resolve itself in the future, which is perhaps, in
itself, a preparation. The issue of place in stories of information seeking illustrates a
discrepancy between the idea of the transformation of society with the erosion of
traditions and greater geographic mobility, and the idea of the life world which
emphasises people’s endeavours to create a sense of continuity and coherence in their lives as a basis for orientating themselves towards the future. While Schutz describes the life world grounded in experience but “future oriented”, Beck (2000:214) contends that:

the concept of risk reverses the relationship of past, present and future. Its place as cause of present-day experience and action is taken by the future, that is to say, something non-existent, constructed and fictitious. (Beck, 2000:214)

The language of Beck and Giddens give shape, in part, to the idea of a ‘brave new world’ with their emphasis on the new urban economies growing up around us and on the increasing mobility of people. The problem with this contention, as I see it, is that it ignores the narratives of continuity that people construct in their everyday lives. Beck argues, for instance, that families lose their function in reproducing the culture of the lifeworld. Shirin’s case illustrates the struggle that takes place as a young person tries to navigate between social expectations embedded in Swedish society and the place of her family in her construction of a coherent self-biography. Her story shows how the family as a self-evident source of information is under question but it is by no means clear that the outcomes of such struggles will be a reduction in the significance of past and present experience. Rather, it can be argued that Shirin negotiated transition by discerning and adapting to Swedish norms in order to use them effectively, learning the ‘routines’ or recipes for action characteristic of the Swedish middle class and doing so reflexively. Claiming a Swedish identity for Shirin was a practical way of orienting herself and adapting to the surrounding landscape rather than an ideological issue.

The medialisation of everyday life, the development of information technology and globalisation processes seemed to bring the Far East, Australia and the United States closer to the participants’ consciousness than, for example, the rural areas of Northern Sweden. In the study, none of the participants were, in fact, prepared to move or travel to a place where they would be total strangers or of which they had not had experiences mediated by friends. They were prepared to move, so to speak, within their own socioscapes and these were, to a great extent, class-based. However, this may be oversimplifying; some of the participants, like Emma, Max and Michael who had working-class backgrounds, the idea of crossing boundaries and of moving was also real to them. This was evident in information seeking focused on studies in international milieux; what made the difference was that their sources of information were purely formal in contrast to the informal sources made use of by others such as Sam and Simon. For some, the idea of moving implied breaking up from family and friends that were physically located in the area; their socio-cultural landscape coincided with physical place. For others, moving was abstract, they inhabited a socioscape where their social relationships transcended place.
9.3 Contribution to transition and information seeking and use research

The study’s focus on young people’s approaches to information seeking in relation to further education and careers grew out of an interest in current public concern for what seemed to be a serious discrepancy between young people’s career and study choices and opportunities on the labour market despite the accessibility of information. Loath to believe that young people intentionally make choices that lead directly to unemployment and/or to huge study loans that do not pay off in terms of career, I decided to go to the young people themselves with a view to learn something about the ways in which they approached and experienced study and careers related information. The study is based on a phenomenological narrative approach to information seeking that permitted me to relate stories of information seeking to the sociohistorical context in which they are embedded. The findings can therefore be understood in their particularly Swedish setting, which in turn is influenced by global trends and international developments and agreements that, reciprocally, influence how young people look at the world. The specific characteristics of information seeking in the context of school leavers’ study and career choices may only to a limited extent be applicable as a means of understanding how young people in other national settings seek information. However, the study may contribute to research by contrasting it with other studies in other national settings as a means of understanding the ways in which different socioeconomic and political factors influence information related activities.

The theoretical contribution of the study lies in the construction of the theoretical framework. The framework of the thesis focuses on the life-world, the situated nature of identity construction and narrative theory which situates the individual within a cultural context where experiences are understood as woven into the larger social and cultural processes that shape and inform them. This combination makes it possible for the researcher to be sensitive both to individual experiences of information seeking and use and to the discourses that give shape to stories. It permits a study of the underling social norms and values that positions information within certain perspectives as well as of the strategies and tactics people use in relation to it. De Certeau (1984:xix) defines strategies as activities that emanate from the power that sustain them while tactics are activities that ‘wander out of orbit’ from the sphere to which they are related. In terms of career and study choice, I found De Certeau’s distinction between strategies and tactics useful in distinguishing the career strategies that are aligned with the expectations embedded in study and career information from the tactics that subvert or find imaginative ways round fulfilling such expectations.

Many of the research surveys that concern young people’s career and study choices are related to normative definitions of what it means to be well-informed; for example, in the National Curriculum the idea of being well-informed relates to a functional rationalist ideal. Results from surveys therefore suggest that the ‘poorly-informed’ are irrational and perhaps even dysfunctional with problems to be remedied or ‘put straight’. I found, on the other hand, that the theoretical
framework offered ways of acknowledging young people’s capacity to motivate their intentions and activities in their ways of relating to the social expectations embedded in the new career discourse. Their discursive negotiations allowed other interests and desires to emerge that were neither determined nor captured by the new career discourse and the system which it shapes and is shaped by. This suggests that activities within career counselling should not be overtly remedial in character but tolerant of alternative perspectives and constructive in relation to them.

The narrative dimension of the theoretical framework increases sensitivity to stories of information seeking as sites of social identity construction in the sense that stories can be viewed as individual responses to the demands of a complex society and indications of the individual’s sense of who they are, of their social location and consequently of how they are prepared to act. Frykman and Gilje (2003:9) argue, for instance, that “people in complex societies are actors that must find paths to walk”. Assuming a social identity is one such practical path to take as the environments in which they function offer departure points, actions and practices which include discerning and using the information resources of particular landscapes, whether it is an occupational identity, a student identity, a youth identity or a national identity. “Identity,” argue Frykman and Gilje, “is worked out in relation to an existing environment” (2003:11). I found that a focus on the construction of identity in stories of information seeking was useful as a means of gaining insight into the individual contexts of information seeking and for understanding how people, in their claims to identity, limit and define what they need to pay attention to, which perhaps can be described as an effective way of dealing with an overabundance of information.

Given the complexity of the stories of information seeking in this study, McKenzie’s (2003b) model of information practices was useful and it worked well in the context of study and careers related information seeking. The model worked as a practical means of categorising different types of information related activities within a fluid process of discovering information, for instance, in unplanned encounters, in actively identifying sources and approaching them with questions, of being alert to situations where information is likely to emerge, such as listening to reports and discussions in the media, as well as in discerning and using likely ‘information grounds’ effectively. The model lifts forward information practices that are not overtly directed at actively seeking information and encompasses activities that allow information to emerge, take form, be affirmed, reaffirmed, corroborated and supplemented in rather unobtrusive, everyday ways but which are nonetheless of significance for the information seeker. The model also makes it possible to contrast the difficulties encountered by some participants, both in accessing and interpreting information, with the taken-for-granted ease of access and social interaction experienced by others.

Other theories that complemented the theoretical framework included Chatman’s (1996) theory of information poverty. Her notion of life ‘lived in the round’ (Chatman, 1999) taken together with the idea of the situated relevance of
information has, in her studies, provided a basis for explaining why people cut themselves off from information that has the potential to help them or ignore relevant information sources because the use of them might endanger their status within their own social or ‘small worlds’. Chatman’s insights provide in this study a way of understanding how ignoring information sources can be a form of self protection that shields individuals from negative views of themselves or from taking action at a time when they feel unprepared to engage with information seeking oriented towards making sense of the greater social world outside school and which intimidates them. At the same time, Chatman’s insights can be used conversely to understand why it is that many of the participants in the study were able, through engaging with information, to envisage a life outside school and to begin to redefine themselves in terms of new environments. By linking stories of information seeking to the notion of identity construction the findings of the study emphasise the view that information is not independent and context free but that one purpose of active information seeking is to “systematically change behavior to fit the environment” (Chatman, 1999:208). This view of information seeking leads to an insight into the difficulties some young people may experience when they feel they know relatively little about the world outside school and experience difficulties in connecting with relevant sources of information.

The phenomenological narrative approach also highlighted role played by social navigation in the discovery and construction of information. The term social navigation refers to communication and interaction between people, directly or indirectly, in the process of seeking information. It is not necessarily based on face-to-face communication; following the practices of earlier generations or taking action because peers have taken similar action in similar situations or simply choosing a popular university because others have chosen it are typical instances of social navigation. Phenomenological narrative inquiry allows the researcher to look beyond the fact of social navigation to its social underpinnings by paying attention to the social structuring of individual, personal experience. The navigator emerges as the vulnerable individual seeking approval, advice, verification and corroboration in the process of ‘discovering’ information. Leaving school is about leaving one culture and approaching others and of becoming prepared to act in social environments that are relatively unfamiliar to the individual. This is seldom the case for people that have been in similar situations previously, for instance, the tension in Chatman’s (1999) study of the information practices of women prisoners arises in the contrast between the vulnerable situations of newly incarcerated prisoners and the ‘lifers’ who have the necessary knowledge to act effectively within the prison environment. The cultures of prison life or working life, youth travels or student life tend not to be documented but implicit and embodied and, consequently, gaining access to information emerges as an as an activity that illuminates relations between self and society.

The information seeking process model accounts for feelings such as uncertainty, apprehension, elation and relief as natural and essential aspects of making personal meaning from information. Uncertainty, argues Kuhlthau,
indicates a need for intervention and support that enables the person to move on towards greater clarity and it also involves recognising that uncertainty emerges at different stages in the process and for different reasons which in turn indicates that different types of intervention and support may be required if study and career guidance is to be more effective from an individual perspective. In this respect, the model has implications for the traditional view of the well-informed decision-maker as systematic, orderly, and rational in their activities rather than the uncertain, confused and reiterative process that people commonly experience. The context of career and study guidance is of course different to that of work and school tasks, particularly as such tasks are usually demarcated with precise deadlines and other institutionalised criteria. Neither is there evidence that young people think of study and career decision-making as discrete tasks comparable to school assignments. On the other hand, it may prove useful to career guidance professionals to think in terms of task and the information seeking process when planning long-term career education that is adaptable to the situations of individuals. Thinking in terms of the information seeking process also allows information seeking to emerge as a more complex activity than learning the techniques to locate sources locally and on the Internet.

9.4 Contribution to professional field: an argument for information literacy development within study and career guidance.

The study shows how many of the young people who participated in it were not really aware of the idea of information seeking as a useful tool with regard to study and career choice and they tended to rely on the habits and routines they had developed for accessing information in everyday life, a finding which corroborates Shenton and Dixon’s (2003) study of youngsters’ predominant use of other people as sources of information. In order to orient in the world young people need not only access to information but also the capacity to find, overview, evaluate, analyse and organise information in ways that are meaningful to them and their projects; they need to be able to use effectively the information resources which they discern are useful to them. This study may increase awareness of approaches to seeking and using information in the rather critical situation of leaving school, and can lead to the development of methods that support information seeking thereby enabling young people to form a realistic view of opportunity structures on the labour market in relation to their own interests. This means that discovering information is not only an act within a learning process but also a learning process in itself (Limberg, 1998; Solomon, 2002). Research which has led to the development of the concept of information literacy has been largely focused on its significance within education and as a framework for lifelong learning (for example: Limberg, 1998; Bruce, 2002; Andretta, 2007). The concept has been developed as a result of research within the discipline of Library and Information Science and it informs library-driven user education for both schools and universities. However, it is being
increasingly argued that the concept of information literacy has much wider implications (Limberg et al, forthcoming; Whitworth, 2007). It is a concept that has developed hand in hand with the development of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the need for people to find ways of dealing with the superabundance of information and the potential offered by its increasing technical accessibility (Whitworth, 2007). Limberg and her colleagues, for instance, speak of ‘information literacies’ for a variety of fields. They underline that a repertoire of competences in information literacy can be developed from within those contexts where they are to be put to use. I argue that career and study guidance is one such context. At present, the notion of information literacy within career and study guidance seems to be limited to instructions on how to navigate the Internet and to connect with appropriate information sources – a situation which is comparable to the early days of information literacy education in libraries (Bruce, 1997).

To be information literate can therefore be seen as a prerequisite for learning and communicating within specific domains in order to be able to participate in the practices that domains are built of and around. In other words, what we learn and what we seek information about are tied to specific situations and activities. Further, the ways in which jargon, specialised vocabulary and the ways in which world views are formulated within domains can contribute to the building of ‘exclusionary walls’ (Whitworth, 2007). This questions the value of a generalised education in information literacy as it is arguable that skills and competences developed for use in one type of context may not be directly transferable to other contexts. For instance, information literacy developed in order to help students tackle school assignments is unlikely to be fully appropriate to the context of study and career choice. A critical information literacy developed within study and career guidance would better enable young people to understand the factors which surround information – why it is produced, by whom and for what purposes, as well as to penetrate assumptions underlying expressions such as ‘a broad education’, ‘a proper education’, or a ‘real job’. From a sociocultural perspective, the idea of information literacy offers a way of approaching the physical artefacts for communication that have been developed within the domain of career and study guidance, for example, the publications, databases, web portals and media commentaries that offer information about and analyses of study and career options and with whose assistance people find, process and use information.

Physical artefacts, such as those mentioned above, are created by people and institutions with specific purposes within a Swedish cultural tradition in order to achieve something that had not otherwise been possible without them. They can be described as ‘tools’ that help the individual to seek information while at the same time they also position information within particular perspectives as well as structuring how information is sought (Limberg et al. in press). By developing skills and competences in information literacy the individual can become aware of the perspectives, values and truisms that specific tools for information seeking bear with them. Becoming information literate cannot therefore be seen as a set of intuitive skills but as the outcome of situated learning processes.
From a career guidance perspective, Watts (1996b:390) argues that career and study guidance can “make the wider structure of society work, by linking individual needs to societal needs on a voluntaristic basis”. His point is grounded in the idea that guidance is more than a means of facilitating the efficient workings of the labour and education markets and of imposing public interests on individual choice. It is also concerned with respect for individuals and for their growth and development. The contribution to the professional field offered by this study is the idea of information literacy for the field of study and career guidance. The concept bears with it an explicit methodology that can empower young people to make personally constructive decisions with regard to studies and careers and to recognise (and withstand if they so wish) pressures exerted on them by the agendas of different groups within society.

9.5 Suggestions for further research
The different contributors of information to the career guidance system offer young people a number of sometimes contradictory messages that influence how they make sense of their options and during the course of work on the study the role of career and study counsellors or ‘path guiders’, as they are called in Swedish, attracted my interest. However, as the focus of the study was on young people’s interaction with the information system there was neither time nor space to devote to this group of professionals. In their excellent overview of career guidance and education, Watts et al. (1996) draw attention to the relation between guidance and public policy and indicate the conflict of loyalties counsellors have to negotiate in the practice of their profession. There are some indications in the present study that counsellors see their primary client as the individual rather than government or the labour and education markets. At the same time, there is evidence that a large number of school leavers do not take advantage of opportunities for personal counselling. Watts (1996b:382) argues that “guidance services have a responsibility to ensure that individual choices are well-informed in terms of the opportunity structure, but they have no responsibility for directing or encouraging individuals to meet the requirements of educational institutions or employers, or the behest of government”. His standpoint is based on the assumption that the main concern of guidance is to support individuals in taking responsibility for their choices in terms of what is in their own best interests. The assumption is that this will ultimately serve the public interest too. The requirement to ‘ensure that individual choices are well-informed in terms of the opportunity structure’ seems to me to be an interesting departure point for investigating how counsellors relate to study and career related information themselves as well as to its various providers. A study of this nature could contribute to professional development.

The idea of social navigation has implications for the design of information systems and is indeed an approach within the research area of human-computer interaction (Hook et al., 2003). User studies have sometimes been criticised for being too interested in the user perspective and thereby neglectful of people’s
approaching the future interactions with technologies and documents (Talja & Hartel, 2007). I suggest therefore that a useful study in the future might, for example, examine the extent to which the content of formal information systems meets the social needs of the user in terms of verifying, supplementing and corroborating information from different sources and could focus on discovering various ways of helping the user to consult other users in constructive dialogue. With the growing number of users connected to the Internet this is a realistic extension to adaptive interfaces. Savolainen’s (2001) observation that discussions in Internet forums are seldom resolved but tend to consist of a collection of different opinions is interesting in this respect and may have to with difficulties for the reader/contributor to ascertain where opinions are coming from or on what assumptions they are based. Södergård’s (2007) study of interaction in a virtual community from an information seeking perspective suggests that people participating in Internet forums have an instinctive need to ascertain the social identities and locations of those with whom they communicate in order to have any kind of meaningful discussion. It would seem therefore that further research that can relate the social aspects of Internet use to applications in the career guidance information system, for instance, and would be valuable particularly for young people who do not have easy access to informal sources of information.

The theoretical framework might be helpful in the study of other everyday information seeking contexts, for example, in investigating the interaction of the life world, identity construction and information seeking in healthcare settings, in the meeting between immigrants and Swedish culture or in the transition from working life to senior citizenship. Studies which focus on people’s different ways of dealing with the expectations they perceive are directed at them might help us to discover ways of enabling people to access information without feeling threatened by it or to access information from sources that do not intimidate them.

Finally

The dissertation gives a snapshot of the information related activities of a small group of school leavers at a moment in time and place in Swedish society. Its purpose has not been to predict what is going to happen but to describe what was happening from the perspective of career and study related information seeking in the context of preparing to leave school. By focusing on information related activities the study provides a means of investigating how young people experience the challenge of leaving school. In its findings the study offers openings for developing support for young people as well as for increasing understanding of a critical phase in life and in identity formation. It would be oversimplifying to point out ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ ways of approaching information or to claim that this study is comprehensive. However, I think the thesis can be of interest to educators and professionals in career guidance as a departure point for developing an understanding of information seeking and use as an object of learning and of the significance of its social aspects in the lives of young people. From a Library and Information Science perspective this work shows how people’s experiences and
accounts of preparing for transition constitute a rich context for studying information related activities in relation to societal discourses and conditions
Summary in Swedish/Sammanfattning

**Utgångspunkter**

- Vilka strategier och/eller taktiker redogör ungdomar för i sina berättelser om studie- och karriärrelaterade informationssökning?
- Hur positionerar sig ungdomar i förhållande till identitet i sina berättelser om studie- och karriärrelaterad informationssökning?
- Hur kan ungdomarnas informationssökningsberättelser förstås mot bakgrund av diskurer i samhället rörande utbildning och arbete?

inom ett halvår om sina liv och erfarenheter av gymnasiet, om förväntningar och förhoppningar på framtiden och om sina informationsrelaterade aktiviteter inför övergången från gymnasieskolans värld till arbetsliv eller fortsatta studier. En diskursorienterad undersökning av studie- och karriärrelaterad information beskrivs i kapitel 5. Denna studie ger en orientering i de diskurser som samspelar inom domänen för studie- och yrkesval.

**Tidigare forskning**

Kapitel 2 ger en översikt av forskning i studie- och yrkesval som relaterar till avhandlingens forskningsfrågor. Olika teoretiska perspektiv framträder och bidrar till en komplex bild av övergången från skola till arbetsliv på en generell nivå. Studierna som tas upp har sina rötter i både svenska och internationella kontexter och har därmed olika inriktningar beroende på nationella förhållanden och förhållningssätt. Detta i sig lyfter fram hur olika sociokulturella och politiska villkor inverkar på synen på ungdomars val.

Genom sina olika perspektiv erbjuder forskningsstudierna begrepp som har bidragit till min förståelse av övergången från skola till arbetsliv. Övergången kan förstås som en väsentlig del i människors olika livsmönster. Genom förståelsen av just denna övergång riktas forskarens uppmärksamhet mot den unga människans perspektiv på hur det som är viktig i livet formar hans eller hennes uppfattningar om vad som är möjligt för just dem. Begreppet “careership” eller “karriärskap” som omfattar pragmatisk rationell beslutsfattning, vändpunkter i livet, och samspelet mellan olika sociala och kontextuella villkor tillåter forskaren att undvika begränsningar inbyggda i uppfattningar om karriärutveckling som en linjär, logiskt process eller som utfallet av sociala strukturers inverkan eller av personliga attribut. Karriärskapsmodellen öppnar för lyhördhet mellan hur människor tycker de ”bör” välja och hur de faktiskt väljer. Begreppet “bounded agency” eller ”bundet handlande” tillåter individen att framträda som aktiv och mer eller mindre kapabel att överskrida socialt och kulturellt konstruerade gränser och bli medveten om dessa gränserns existens.

Informationssökning som fenomen framträder sällan i dessa studier men de ger ändå en bild av informationssökning som en aktivitet färgad av de sociala, politiska och kulturella villkoren i ett givet samhälle. Informationssökningens roll i forskningen om studie- och yrkesval utgör sällan fokus, varken som en målinriktad aktivitet eller en social praktik som kan visa hur vi erfarrer världen. Trots detta dyker informationssökning ibland upp i viktiga sammanhang. I sociala och kulturella ansatser, till exempel, definieras information som någonting människor uppfattar i tidsbundna situationer. Studierna tyder också på att sätten man informerar sig på till viss del präglas av vardagspraktiker och rutiner utvecklade inom olika sociala and kulturella sammanhang och därmed är förknippade med livsstil och social identitet.

I kapitel 3 diskuteras begrepp som relaterar till informationssökning och relevant forskning inom Biblioteks och informationsvetenskap. Information definieras som ett kontextbundet fenomen som upptäcks genom engagemang i
Informationssökning i vardagslivet kan förstås som vanemässiga handlingsmönster som är socialt erhållna och grundade tidigt i livet (Savolainen, 1995; Chatman, 1996; Agosto, 2002). Människor föredrar att använda mänskliga informationskällor i synerhet källor som befinner sig på samma sociala nivå som de själva. Tillgång till informationskällor som ligger utanför det vardagliga kräver därför särskild ansträngning (Wilson, 1983; Cross et al, 2001; Johnson, 2004)

I personliga kriser, i nya oväntade situationer eller i övergångar mellan olika faser i livet kan vardagspraktiker för informationssökning visa sig vara otillräckliga. I sådana fall måste individen kunna urskilja och komma i kontakt med informationsskällor som kan vara främmande för dem och som kan upplevas som svåra att få kontakt med och använda. Lloyd (2006), till exempel, visar hur yrkessocialisering underlättas om novisen kan identifiera och använda de informationskällor som finns och tillmäts värde inom ett yrkes “informationslandskap”. Informationskällor beskrivs som sociala, textbaserade eller förkroppsligade till sin natur vilket i sin tur har implikationer för hur vi förstår begreppet informationskompetens.

Informationssökning kan i sig användas symboliskt för att etablera eller bekräfta social- eller yrkestillhörighet (Chatman, 1996; Sundin, 2003).


På en diskursiv nivå, ägnar flera studier uppmärksamhet åt sätten människor i sina berättelser om informationssökning definiera sig själva i relation till andra. Delvis, kan människor använda sig av diskurser för att legitimera sina aktiviteter som rimliga och värdiga och samtidigt visar berättelserna hur olika diskurser i viss mån styr deras handlingar (McKenzie, 2002; Sundin, 2003; Tuominen, 2004).

**Teoretiska utgångspunkter**

I kapitel 4 beskrivs de teoretiska premisserna för avhandlingen. Schutz föreställning om livsvärlden utgör en utgångspunkt och begreppet ger en ögonblicksbild av människan som rör sig i världen med sin egen personliga historia mot en framtid men som samtidigt delar ett meningsbärande socialt och kulturellt landskap med sina medmänniskor. I livsvärlden strävar människan att särskilja sig från andra människor; samtidigt strävar hon efter att hävda sin tillhörighet i olika
sociala grupperingar. Detta görs genom att människor interagerar på olika social arenor, vilka i sin tur erbjuder eller tilldelar individ en repertoar av sociala identiteter att förhandla om. Habitusbegreppet bidrar till föreställningen om livsvärlden genom att fördjupa förståelsen för hur människor på olika sociala och kulturella arenor utvecklar karakteristiska dispositioner, livsstilar, normer, värderingar och beteendemönster. I det ljuset framträder informationssökning både som en symbolisk reflektion av omedvetna benägenheter att handla på vissa sätt och som ett verktyg som kan användas för att ta reda på, utmana eller bryta med de sociala förväntningarna som uppstår i olika situationer. Kunskap i livsvärlden uppfattas som socialt fördelade, vilket i sin tur betyder att tillgång till information är socialt stratifierade. I det avseendet, framträder möjligheten att informera sig i frågor som angår oss som en demokratisk rättighet och ansvar.

Avhandlingens fenomenologisk narrativa ansats fångar upp livsvärldsbegreppet och utgör ett sätt att relatera individers upplevelser och erfarenheter till de kulturella kontexter i vilka upplevelser uppstår och förmås. Nyckelbegrepp i denna ansats omfattar självbiografi och social identitet. Begreppet självbiografi syftar på en process där individen väljer och länkar ihop självupplevda erfarenheter för att beskriva en sammanhängande självberättelse. Social identitet syftar på människors förmåga att identifiera sig med olika sociala grupperingar, till exempel, genom att själva anta de attityder, normer och praktiker som är gemensamma för en viss grupp i samhället.

Resultat och diskussion
Bakgrunden till studien introduceras i kapitel 6 genom beskrivningar av deltagarna, de gymnasieprogram de deltog i och en kort beskrivning av regionen. Kapitlet inkluderar beskrivningar av deltagarnas syn på studie- och yrkesvägledning och sammanfattas här nedanför:

- Vägledning är till för människor som riskerar att få låga betyg eller som inte vet hur man söker studie- och yrkesrelaterade information själva.
- Vägledare kan bekräfta information från andra källor.
- Syftet med vägledning är att främja självständighet i informationssökning.
- Studie- och yrkesvägledning utnyttjas bäst när man vet vad man vill och behöver fakta och information om ansökningsproceduren.
- När man vet vad man vill behöver man inte vägledning.
- Vägledning erbjuder individuell rådgivning och personlig stöd med kunskap om olika karriärs- och studiemöjligheter.

Kapitlet innefattar dessutom en diskursorienterad undersökning av tre betydande publikationer riktade till avgångselever. Mitt syfte med denna studie var att identifiera de diskurser som kommer till användning inom vägledningsdomänen. Jag menar inte att olika diskurser kan härledas till olika institutioner utan mitt syfte var att syna de olika sätt genom vilka unga människor erbjuds att tala om och förstå

**Erfarenheter av gymnasieprogram som utgångspunkt för studie- och yrkes relaterade informationssökning**

Deltagaren i studien uppgav tre huvudanledningar till sina val av gymnasieprogram:

- **Ämnesintresse:** de flesta som valde på grund av ämnesintresse bekräftade sina intressen. Deras intressen grundades för det mesta inom familjen. Några deltagare utvecklade nya intressen under gymnasietiden utan att ängra sina val. Generellt, innebar det att de tänkte fortsätta utveckla sina intressen genom högre utbildning även om de var osäkra på vart deras intressen skulle leda på arbetsmarknaden. Från ett informationssökningsperspektiv fokuserade deltagarna på att söka kopplingar mellan sina intressen, högre utbildning och arbetsmarknaden.

- **Yrkesintresse:** studierna på gymnasiet bekräftade yrkesintressen för de flesta. Flera yrkesinriktade deltagare hade erfarenheter av yrket inom familjen. Informationssökning fokuserade på att skapa en helhetsbild av yrket och av vägarna dit.

- **Strategisk val eller andra skäl:** deltagare som valde strategiskt för att ha breda valmöjligheter senare, för att vänner hade valt samma program, för att andra hade rekommenderat ett program eller av preferens till en viss gymnasieskola tenderade att vara missnöjda med sina val. Missnöjet grundades i känslor av att inte passa in socialt bland lärare och klasskamrater eller av svårigheter med, eller ointresse för, profilämnen. Från ett informationssökningsperspektiv saknade deltagarna fokus på studie- och
karriärsrelaterad informationsökning och var benägna att ignorera den typen av information eller att skjuta upp informationsrelaterade aktiviteter till framtiden.

Forskningsfrågorna syftar till att undersöka hur gymnasieelever närmare sig studie- och karriärrelaterade information och hur informationssökningsberättelser kan förstås från ett identitetsperspektiv och inom kontexten för diskurser i samhället om utbildning och arbete i Sverige. Fyra olika förhållningssätt till informationssökning trädde fram i berättelserna:

1. Informationsökning uppfattas som ett verktyg för att koppla ihop ämnesintressen, högre utbildning och karriär.
2. Informationsökning uppfattas som ett verktyg för att urskilja karriärvägar och ett sätt att orientera sig inom en yrkesdomän.

De fyra förhållningssätt kan associeras till olika identitetsanspråk och i förlängning till diskurser rörande karriär, ungdom och utbildning:

2. Som aspirant till en yrkesidentitet i enighet med en traditionell karriärdiskurs där det antas att det finns möjligheter till progression inom en profession eller yrke i traditionell mening och genom vilket professionerna framställs som relativt stabila. Utbildning positioneras som ändamålsenlig och arbete som ett sätt att förverkliga sig själv och utvecklas som människa.
3. Som ungdom; i ungdomsdiskursen framställs ungdomstiden som en fas i livet som är relativt ansvarsfri, där det finns utrymme för experimenterande och för att ”hitta sig själv”. Utbildning positioneras som ett sätt att förverkliga sig själv.

I det andra förhållningssättet konstrueras övergången till arbetslivet som legitimerade vägar till specifika yrken där vägarna är kantade med användbara informationskällor även om tillgängligheten till dem kan bero på vem man är och vilka man känner. I det här förhållningssättet diskuterades de utvalda yrkena som någonting man kände ett stort ideellt engagemang för; man ”brann för” dem. I fall där ungdomar inte hade familjkontakter inom yrket uppskattades vägledningens arbete med att underlätta kontakterna med yrkespraktiker, studenter eller organisationer.

I de tredje och fjärde förhållningssätten positioneras vägledning som ointressant. Idén att ta dagen som den kommer eller att passa på när tillfällen erbjuds framstår som sätt att motstå förväntningar att man bör planera strategiskt inför framtiden. Det tredje förhållningssättet är något ambivalent då övergången till arbetslivet konstrueras både som ’time-out’ och som en period då färdigheter, akademiska meriter och yrkeserfarenheter skulle kunna samlas i portfoliostil. Samtidigt konstrueras själva övergången som en ungdomsperiod då man lever ut sin ungdom och utvecklas på en personlig plan. Det fjärde förhållningssättet innebär att man avstår från att söka information därför att det upplevs som hotfullt eller stressande. Informationssökning i sig upplevs som en aktivitet som kräver fortsatt handling i en tid då ungdomar menar att skolarbete kräver deras fulla uppmärksamhet.


I sina berättelser gav deltagarna också uttryck för dilemma de upplevde i spännningen mellan olika identiteter (Stanley & Billig, 2004). Unga människor förväntas söka och använda information som ett sätt att iscensätta en personlig övergång till arbetsmarknaden. De framställs i studie- och karriärrelaterad

Olika sätt att förhålla sig till informationssökning reflekterar olika perspektiv på övergången till arbetsmarknad, utbildning och karriär och visar dessutom på strukturellt inflytande. Den nya karriärsdiskursen passar ett samhälle som införliknar begreppet funktionellt livslångt lärande i karriärbegreppet. Men modellen ignorerer implicit de restriktiva effekterna som samhälleliga strukturer har på människors sätt att leva sina liv, och därmed negligerar den de svårigheter som unga människor måste överniva för att uppfatta och interagera med informationskällor. Modellen skymmer dessutom fallet att traditionella karriärer och karriärvägar fortfarande existerar med sina egna ”landskap” av informationsresurser. Det väcker frågor om hur man kan utveckla metoder inom vägledning som syftar till att ge människor större möjligheter att söka och använda information som är till gagn för dem själva och som ger dem verkyg för att synliggöra och granska olika alternativ och synsätt.

Beskrivningar av informationsrelaterade aktiviteter understyrker betydelsen av personliga nätverk och tillgång till ”inside” information och till relevanta ”informationsgrunder” (information grounds). Processen att informera sig framstår som högst interaktiv och socialt positionerad. Inom familjer, till exempel, formas världsuppfattningar som gör ungdomar mer eller mindre benägna att söka till högre utbildning. Genom att besöka universitet eller arbetsplatser eller genom att träffa studenter eller yrkespraktiker kan ungdomarnas bilder av studier eller yrken sättas in i sina sammanhang och ge värdefull information om hur man ska vara och bete sig i specifika sociala miljöer. Deltagarnas berättelser understyrker också betydelsen av familjediskussioner och samtal med vänner i planeringen av olika strategier och taktiker för framtiden och verkar utgöra ett forum där information
bearbetas, godkänns och kompletteras. För ungdomar med små möjligheter att planera sin framtid i diskussion med människor som står de nära förefaller formella informationsresurser vara värdefulla men inte fullt så personligt stödjande.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 The National Curriculum (Lpf 94)

The Swedish version follows

2.4 Choice of education – work and society
The voluntary school forms shall work in close cooperation with compulsory school forms, with working life, with higher education and with the community in general. This is required so that pupils will be given an education of high quality that will form the basis for the choice of courses on the programmes they participate in, of further education or of occupations. It is particularly important that schools cooperate with working life with regard to vocational studies.
In view of the situation that working life is undergoing continual change with regard to its need for competence and workforce recruitment from different areas, study and occupational guidance must be seen in a wide sense. Higher education, job centres, trade and industry and the trade unions have therefore an important role to play in their information to schools and their pupils.

Goals to strive towards
Schools shall strive towards that pupils
- develop self-understanding and the ability to individually plan their studies,
- consciously develop a point of view on future studies and occupations on the basis of collected experiences, knowledge and current information,
- develop their ability to analyse different options and evaluate the consequences they can have,
- become familiar with the conditions of working life, particularly within areas of their studies, together with educational alternatives, opportunities for work practice etc. in Sweden and abroad,
- become aware that all occupational areas change in pace with technological development, changes in social and working life and with international cooperation. Pupils must therefore understand the need for continual personal development throughout working life

Guidelines for school staff
- School staff shall, after agreement with the headmaster on the distribution of workload:
- contribute to the basis on which pupils make their choice of education and occupation
• inform and guide pupils in their choice of courses, further education and occupation and in so doing counteract constraints on choice that are based on gender, or social and cultural background.
• In information and career guidance make use of pupils’, staff’s and the community’s knowledge
• In teaching, use the knowledge and experience that pupils have acquired from work and society during the course of their education
• Develop contacts with higher education and with supervisors and others in working life that can contribute to the achievement of the goals of education
• Use contacts from working life, the cultural sphere, and associations in education
• Contribute in providing presumptive pupils with information about educational options in schools

Utbildningsval -- arbete och samhällsliv
De skolformerna skall nära samverka med den obligatoriska skolan, med arbetslivet, med universiteten och högskolorna och med samhället i övrigt. Detta krävs för att eleverna skall få en utbildning av hög kvalitet och få underlag för val av kurser på den utbildning eleven går, vidare studier eller yrkesverksamhet. Det är särskilt viktigt att skolan samarbetar med arbetslivet om den yrkesförberedande utbildningen.
Genom att arbetslivet fortlöpande förändras när det gäller behovet av kompetens och rekrytering av arbetskraft inom olika områden har studie- och yrkesvägledning i vid mening stor betydelse. Universitet och högskolor, arbetsförmedlingar, näringsliv samt arbetsmarknadens parter och branschorganisationer har därför viktiga roller i informationen till skolorna och deras elever.

Mål att sträva mot
• Skolan skall sträva mot att varje elev
  • utvecklar sin självkännedom och sin förmåga till individuell studieplanering,
  • medvetet kan ta ställning till fortsatt studie- och yrkesinriktning på grundval av samlade erfarenheter och kunskaper samt aktuell information,
  • ökar sin förmåga att analysera olika valmöjligheter och bedöma vilka konsekvenser dessa kan ha,
  • får kännedom om arbetslivets villkor, särskilt inom sitt studieområde, samt om möjligheter till utbildning, praktik m.m. i Sverige och andra länder och
  • är medveten om att alla yrkesområden förändras i takt med teknisk utveckling, förändringar i samhälls- och yrkesliv och ökad internationell samverkan. Eleven skall därmed förstå behovet av personlig utveckling i yrket.

Riktlinjer
Personalen skall, efter en av rektor gjord arbetsfördelning,
• bidra med underlag för elevernas val av utbildning och yrke,
• informera och vägleda eleverna inför deras val av kurser, fortsatt utbildning och yrkesverksamhet och därvid motverka sådana begränsningar i valet som grundar sig på kön och på social eller kulturell bakgrund,
• i informationen och vägledningen utnyttja de kunskaper som finns hos eleverna, hos skolans personal och i samhället utanför skolan,
• i undervisningen utnyttja kunskaper och erfarenheter från arbets- och samhällsliv som eleverna har eller skaffar sig under utbildningens gång,
• utveckla kontakter med universitet och högskolor samt med handledare och andra inom arbetslivet som kan bidra till att målen för undervisningen nås,
• i utbildningen utnyttja kontakter med det omgivande samhället och dess arbets-, förenings- och kulturliv och
• bidra till att presumtiva elever får information om skolans utbildningar.
Appendix II Interview guide 1

**Background/biography**
Can you tell me something about yourself?
Family background
Parents’ work and education
Childhood milieu

**Experiences of upper secondary school**
What’s it like, your last year at school?
How did you come to choose this programme?
Would you have chosen the same programme today?

**The future**
How do you feel about leaving school?
What will you be doing in the summer?
Do you know what you would like to work with or study?
- How did you arrive at that?
- Have you always wanted to...?
Have you made any plans? Can you tell me about them?
How do you see yourself in five years time?

**Concerning information related activities**
- What is important for you to find out about just now?
- How do you go about finding out?
- Is there anyone you talk to about your future?
- Is there anything you have wanted to find out about but have not succeeded?

**Concerning a specific instance of information seeking**
Can you describe an occasion when you wanted to find out about something that has to do with your future?
- What was it you wanted to know? Why was that?
- How did you go about finding out?
- Was there anyone you could talk to about it?
- How did it made you feel?

**Views of occupations and studies**
What kinds of work interest you?
Is there any line of work that you wouldn't dream of considering? … even though you might be qualified for it?
What qualities do you think you have to have to take this kind of work?
What is important for you to know about different occupations?

What type of studies would you consider?
Is there anything you need to find out about before you decide on a course of studies?
Is there anything you definitely wouldn't like to study?
What have you been able to find out?
If you plan to continue to higher education - where would you like to study? Why's that?

**Concerning study and career information sources and channels**
Has the career counsellor been helpful? In what ways?
Teachers?
Work practice?
Work experience?

**Anyone/anything else?**
Have you had any use for the brochures and handbooks about careers and studies that are available? (ie, I have with me *The Student handbook* published by The National Agency for Higher Education *Choose an occupation* published by the Swedish Union of Academics (SACO) and *18 at last!* published by The Confederation of Swedish Enterprise. These are also available on the Internet via the web sites for the schools involved in the study)
Can you show me or tell me about anything that has caught your attention?
Appendix III Nora’s information horizons, November and April

November

Radio

Internet - Job Centre, Chalmers, Lund, Student Loans, student accommodation

Lars at Lund University

Carl at Chalmers University

Matthew at Umeå University

Programme catalogues

Mum’s cousin

Dad, Mum, big brother

Close friend Linda at Lund University

Liam at Linköping University

Teachers in chemistry and maths

Nora

Brochures sent home

Dad, Mum, big brother

Mum’s cousin

Careers counsellor

Lars at Lund University

Carl at Chalmers University

Matthew at Umeå University

Programme catalogues

November

Dad, Mum, big brother

Mum’s cousin

Careers counsellor

Lars at Lund University

Carl at Chalmers University

Matthew at Umeå University

Programme catalogues

Radio

Internet - Job Centre, Chalmers, Lund, Student Loans, student accommodation

Nora

Mum’s cousin

Scientific Journal

Lars at Lund University

Carl at Chalmers University

Radio

Internet - Student Loans, student accommodation

Close friend Linda at Lund University

Liam at Linköping University

Nora
Appendix IV Shirin’s information horizons, November 2003 and April 2004

November

- Rich friends’ parents
- Mum & Dad
- TV
- Brochures
- Visit to professions representatives
- Career advisor
- Internet
- Web-site for National Agency
- For Higher Education
- Job centre’s web-site
- Teachers

April

- Talking to someone I met who is a law student
- Shirin
- Boss at work
- Teachers
- Careers counsellor
- Brothers
- Rich friends’ parents
Appendix V Neil’s information horizons, November 2003 and April 2004

November

Neil

People around me

Information from the media

Authorities –
(teachers,
(parents)
professionals

Societal authority

Neil, April

NEIL

People
around me

Society
Appendix VI Emily’s information horizon November 2003

Emily

- Teacher
- Sister’s boyfriend
- Policeman on the street
- Dad – job searching
- Friends – test ideas
- Relatives and people I know
- Brochures
- Computer/Internet (Police Academy)
- TV programmes about police
Appendix VII Andreas’ information horizons, November 2003 and April 2004

In the above Andreas’ closeness to the sources is indicated by their proximity. More than one arrow indicates increasing distance in source significance. Below, Andreas indicates that he is self-sufficient in terms of information in the context of studies and careers.
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