

# Social Relations and Lived Solidarity Among Young Adults during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Riikka Korkiamäki  
Eriikka Oinonen

[riikka.korkiamaki@tuni.fi](mailto:riikka.korkiamaki@tuni.fi)



# Background

*"Yes I feel like I'm being told who I can meet and who not. Sometimes it feels quite incriminating, like then I really need to weigh who I meet. ... So yes, absolutely, I need to consider it carefully." (Anni, 5th year university student)*

- The changes in social relationships and networks are seen as characteristic to youth and young adulthood. However, relationships both to peers and families remain important. This holds true also during unusual life events or crises (Johnson et al., 2021).
- It is typical for young people to belong and maintain contact to several communities simultaneously. Usually, they don't have to choose between groups and communities which they want to belong to but they flexibly move between and within different physical, virtual and social spaces (e.g., Muggleton 2005).
- During the COVID-19 pandemic, young people had to consciously choose who, how and where they wanted to meet, and which communities they wanted to belong to and participate in.
- These choices were often "practical", but they were not "innocent"

# Research question

Who, or what, young adults (students in higher education) felt connected to during the pandemic?

In what kinds of social and spatial relationships these belongings were negotiated, and how?

# Data and methods

- Students in their final years of studies (24–28 yrs) in a higher education institution in Finland
- Qualitative descriptions of the students' everyday lives during the pandemic (2020–2021)
  - Essays, May 2020, N=19
  - Digital diaries, 5x 7 days, between May 2020 and January 2021, N=11
  - Thematic interviews, April 2021, N=21
- Participatory workshops in December 2021 for shared analysis and interpretation
- Thematic content analysis utilizing the framework of *spatial solidarity* (sources, places and politics of solidarity)

# Why 'solidarity'?

- ...because we want to understand the choices young adults make regarding their relationships, communities and belonging and the reasoning behind them
- The 'new' understanding of solidarity: solidarities build on feelings of togetherness, reciprocity, shared support, but also on differentiation, otherness and control (Dean 1998; Massey 2008; Nurmi 2011; Markham 2014; Oosterlynck et al., 2016, 2017; Nikunen 2019).
- Youth solidarity has mostly been studied in the context of intergenerational (familial) relations, political activism, multiculturalism and nationalism (see Turjanmaa 2020).
- 'Everyday lived solidarity': mundane practices and spatio-temporal negotiations which people perform in their daily lives (Oosterlynck ym. 2017); 'here and now' solidarity (Walter et al., 2017: 110)

# Spatial Solidarity

- Oosterlynck ym. (2016; 2017): spaces, places and communities, and the social interaction and moral negotiations which take place in them
- **Sources**
  - Towards whom or what young people express solidarity?**
    - > **Personal relationships, society and humanity**
- **Places**
  - In what places/spaces the expressions and embodiments of solidarity become meaningful?
    - > Home, public space, social media
- **Politics**
  - Through what kinds of practices solidarities are negotiated in space?
    - > prioritisation drawing from social pressure, personal values, loyalties and practical needs
    - > moralisation, blame and shame, worrying and caring



## PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS AS SOURCES OF SOLIDARITY

- drawing from emotional solidarity
- embodied by concrete help, social support, creativity in organizing contact, sympathy, worry
  - Prioritising between family and friends

*I've made the choice that I don't meet with friends, but maybe that's also because my sister and my dad, they think the same way about covid as I do (Maija, 25-year-old university student)*

- Differentiating between best friends and “loose” friendships

*I've had to prioritise a little about who is the friend I want to see, who is important for me to see, and who also values seeing me. Like there's different levels of friendship, so there's friends who I haven't met at all, so then it's like of course your friendship gets stronger with the friends you see. And the others, well they become more and more distant and then you don't even want to be with them anymore” (Emmi, 5th year university student)*

## CHOOSING BETWEEN FRIENDSHIP AND SOCIETY

- choosing between friendship and "society"
- values and positions with regards to societal norms challenged also close relationships

*In some of my friendships it has caused conflicts (...) like when my friends complain about wearing masks, then I'm like what the hell, there is a good reason why we have to wear masks. And it's like, when I'm like okay there is going to be a lockdown, like we really should do as we are told, so some of my friends at the univeristy are like 'you can't stop me', like 'if I want to go I'll go'. So then, like there's these friends of mine, who I saw a lot earlier, so those friends I don't think I'll want see anymore. Like maybe ever. (Pirjo, 3rd year master's degree student)*

- "testing" a friend's loyalty and reliability

*Like if you'd like to meet up with a friend, then it begins with, you know, like 'how long have you been isolating or have you been on a trip or have you met with your relatives'. Like I usually start a converstation with making sure that my friend hasn't travelled to a covid-positive area or anything like that. (Anni, 4th year university sytudent)*

- meeting friends in secret



## SOCIETY AS A SOURCE OF SOLIDARITY

- Societal solidarity at the expense of mental health

*I wash my hands, I wear the mask, I keep the social distance, and it's my responsibility now that I don't meet with anyone. Maybe it's not doing me very good, like I am quite lonely and... maybe I do it at the expense of my mental health (Saija, university student in her final year)*

- Reverse solidarity: moralising and blaming of those who don't act according to the societal norm

*Yes I have followed the Covid guidelines. Like it feels that many of the other students don't follow them and they go around meeting friends and having parties. So yes, me and my friends are not like that, and we really don't want to have anything to do with those who are. (Sanni, 4. vuoden yliopisto-opiskelija, haastattelu)*

## HUMANITY AS A SOURCE OF SOLIDARITY

- Expressions of solidarity which were not connected to personal relationships or immediate experiences of their own; compassion for vulnerable groups of people in general
  - Sympathy for younger students

*I feel sorry for the younger students. ... like I can imagine what it's like when all you want is a one small thing that keeps you happy and connected to other people, and then they say that it is wrong, that you can't even go to the university. And at the same many of us go to work and sit down for coffee with our colleagues. But if you really are only a student, then that's pretty much all you've got. Like if you've moved to a new town. If it was up to me I'd give students a permission to at least use the library or the reading room, I wouldn't moralise on them wanting to see other people. It feels pretty unfair. (Pilvi, 5th year university student)*

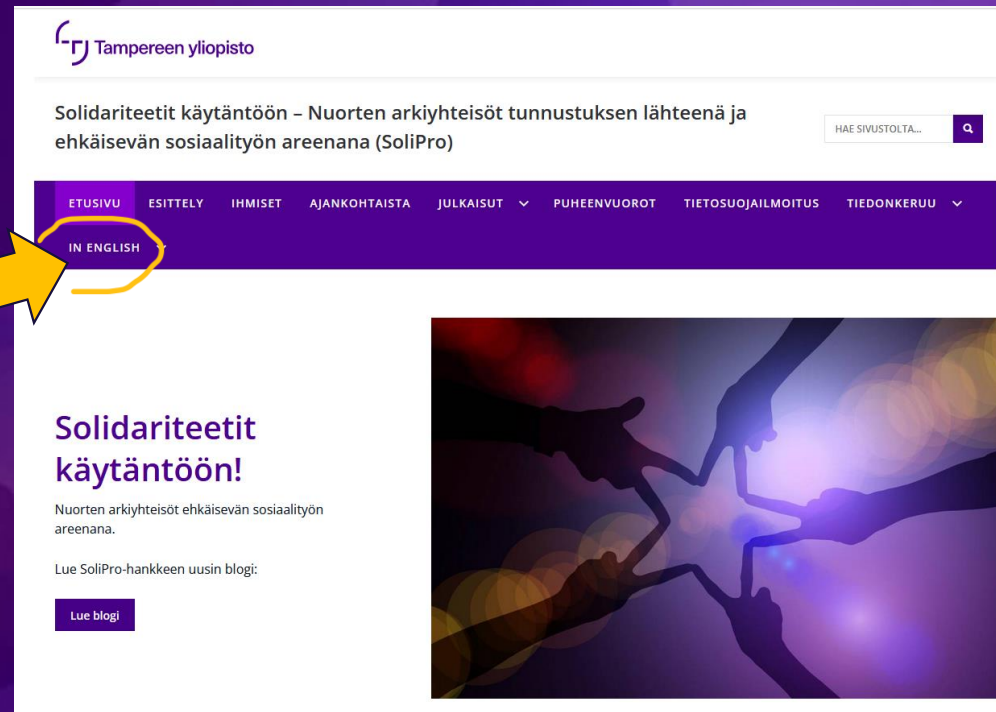
- Sympathy for disadvantaged groups and other groups of people who were seen to suffer most of the pandemic

*"I'm doing okay but this is really hard for like underpaid workers ... and the homeless and the older people and the poor and the others who are in a worse position than some of us" (Sara, 4th year university student)*

# Conclusions

- During the Covid-19 pandemic, young adults had to negotiate their social relationships and solidarities in more conscious way than before and make choices that were sometimes consequential.
- The young adults in this study expressed emotional solidarity and sympathetic views towards vulnerable groups of people, but the concrete practices of solidarity strengthened their close communities and allied them with people they already knew instead of focusing towards societal citizenship or humane "doing good"; cf. Fromm: solidarity expects distancing oneself from what is good for themselves towards *practices* that do good for others (Wilde 2014)
- Negotiations about solidarity are private and public. Public negotiations lead to solutions or conflicts which may sometimes have long-standing effects on young people's lives and relationships.
- Negotiating everyday lived solidarity happens through prioritising social relationships, expressions of friendliness, sympathy and social support, but also through blame and feeling guilt.
- Knowing and understanding the sources of solidarity helps us target the measures when / if we want to increase solidarity

# Thank you!



Solidarity in Practice - Young people's everyday communities as sources of recognition and spaces of preventive social work (SoliPro)

<https://projects.tuni.fi/solidaarisuus/>