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## The economic crisis and future imaginaries: How the economic crisis has affected people's future imaginaries

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**Date of submission:** November 2017

**Accepted in:** December 2017

**Published in:** January 2018

### RECOMMENDED CITATION

SCHÖNBORN, Helen Sophia; DOOSJE, Bertjan (2018). "The economic crisis and future imaginaries: How the economic crisis has affected people's future imagination" [online article]. *Digithum*, no. 21, pp. 21-32. Universitat Oberta de Catalunya and Universidad de Antioquia. [Accessed: dd/mm/yy] <<http://doi.org/10.7238/d.v0i21.3112>>



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### Abstract

This study looks at how people construct future imaginaries and how this has been influenced by the economic crisis of 2008/2009. Future imaginaries are conceived as a realm of plans and wishes for the future, which depend not only on an individual's personal life history, but also on the given social/historical context (Cantó-Milà and Seebach, 2015). The economic crisis, which affected all European countries, has been portrayed as a far-reaching societal event; therefore, it may have an impact on people's future imaginaries. For this study, life story interviews were conducted in Germany and Spain, two countries with different experiences of the economic crisis. The interviews were analyzed using a grounded theory-inspired approach guided by the concepts of *images of the future*, *figures*, and *imaginaries of the future* developed by Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015). The economic crisis affected participants' future imagination in Spain and Germany in different ways. While German participants' outlook on the future remained unchanged by the crisis, Spanish interviewees' accounts indicated three changes in mentality: the labor market is now perceived as less stable than before; young people have to be more prepared – meaning they need higher-level qualifications; younger Spaniards aim to live and work in foreign countries. The reasons and dynamics behind this mentality change are discussed.

### Keywords

economic crisis, future, imaginaries, Simmel

## La crisis económica y los imaginarios de futuro: ¿qué efecto ha tenido la crisis económica en nuestra manera de imaginar el futuro?

### Resumen

Este estudio examina cómo construimos nuestros imaginarios de futuro y qué influencia ha tenido la crisis económica de 2008-2009 en este sentido. Los imaginarios de futuro se conciben como un espacio de planes y deseos para el futuro, que no dependen solamente de la historia de vida de una persona, sino también del contexto historicosocial (Cantó-Milà y Seebach, 2015). La crisis económica, que ha afectado a todos los países europeos, se ha descrito como un hecho social de gran alcance, por lo que puede tener una repercusión importante en nuestra manera de imaginar el futuro. Para este estudio, se han realizado entrevistas biográficas a distintas personas en Alemania y España, dos países que han vivido la crisis de forma diferente. Las entrevistas se han analizado utilizando un método inspirado en la teoría fundamentada, partiendo de los conceptos de imágenes del futuro, figuras e imaginarios de futuro desarrollados por Cantó-Milà y Seebach (2015). La crisis económica ha influido de forma distinta en los imaginarios de futuro de los entrevistados españoles y alemanes. Mientras que la perspectiva de futuro de los entrevistados alemanes se ha mantenido inalterada a lo largo de la crisis, las respuestas de los entrevistados españoles indican tres cambios de mentalidad: el mercado de trabajo se considera menos estable que antes de la crisis; los jóvenes tienen que estar más preparados, es decir, necesitan un mayor nivel de formación; los jóvenes españoles quieren vivir y trabajar en el extranjero. Se analizan las razones y la dinámica de este cambio de mentalidad.

### Palabras clave

crisis económica, futuro, imaginarios, Simmel

## Introduction

The future is a crucial element of our self-understanding, as everything we do in life is influenced by our hopes, plans, and fears for the future. In addition, we imagine other people, families, and social groups as also having a future, so it is not only the self but also our social environment that is imagined to have one (Adam, 2008). In fact, as our personal future hopes, plans and fears are embedded in a future society, we necessarily understand society to have a future. An individual's future imagination is not only a continuation of the individual's personal history, but also a product of his or her social-historical context, since the present society sets the framework for future imaginaries. Despite the fact that the future and how we imagine it play a crucial role in our individual and social lives, little research has taken the future as its object of study; it has more been its objective (Cantó-Milà and Seebach, 2015). To address this research gap, this study investigates how individuals construct their imagination of the future and how this imagination is possibly influenced by the economic crisis of the last decade.

The perception of time as linear – in which the present is preceded by the past and followed by the future – is a modern phenomenon (Nora, 1989). Before the Reformation period, time was perceived in a circular fashion, as life was mostly structured by religious traditions that repeated themselves following the

regularities of nature (Koselleck, 1989). With the rise of science and technology came new means of predictions (eg. astrology), which allowed for a new perception of the future (Koselleck, 1989); thus, the future was no longer expected to be a repetition of the past, but instead became an “empty” space unlike the past and present (Adam, 2010). For the individual, this means that his or her future is no longer written by fate, but is now of his or her own making (Adam, 2010). In this sense, the future has become the realm of hopes, desires, and plans, which define our present as much as our experienced past.

Despite one's social-historical context, an individual's personal life history defines his/her future imagination. Adam and Groves (2007) coined this concept in the term “future horizon”, and Koselleck (1989) conceptualized a similar idea as “horizon of expectations”. Both concepts hold that every person has a horizon of imaginable possibilities, which is defined by the individual's personal history and the practice of desire or possibilities of imagining the future from the present (Adam and Groves, 2007; Koselleck, 1989). Bourdieu (1997) developed the concept of *habitus*, a general theory of the world held by every person that thus guides our perception and understanding of the world. With one's *habitus*, one internalizes a social position that is specific to a respective time period, social class and family as well as personal experiences. *Habitus* is acquired during childhood education and socialization. Therefore, Bourdieu (1991) sees it to be rather stable and constant. According to Bourdieu (1963), different social

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classes come with different abilities to take things for granted and, therefore, with different degrees of security. These different degrees of security lay the groundwork for class-specific future projections. It is, therefore, due to *habitus* that a person's hopes adjust themselves to objective possibilities of their time period, social standing, and personal life history (Bourdieu, 1963).

However, constructing an imagination of the future is not only structured by one's social context; social context is also one of its prerequisites. According to Simmel's (1992) theory of societal integration, one of the apriorities of society is that a society must give each individual the possibility of imagining themselves as having or being able to find their "place", in which they fulfill a particular role. While in pre-modern societies this "special place" was given by the family and/or social class to which they belonged, today it is up to a person to find their place (Cantó-Milà and Seebach, 2015). Ideally, a person's capacities and societal demands are in harmony in a person's special place (Simmel, 1992). The possibility of a special place gives people a sense of belonging and thus engages them in society. For the continuance of social integration, it is crucial that people can image their special place not only in the present, but also in the future. Thus, the future perspective is a fundamental component of societal integration and its maintenance.

Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015) found the imagination of a special place in society to be present in people's life narratives and future imagination. Furthermore, they found that the imagination of a special place was influenced by gender and social class. Most women saw their special place in motherhood, while men saw it in their profession. In further narratives, such as those found in the upper-middle class, the special place was related to social networks and status, while romantic relationships, harmonious family life or the realization of a chosen profession defined the realm of a special place in middle-class accounts. In addition, Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015) found that men and women structured their narratives differently when referring to their professional and love lives: while women imagined their love life to be up to fate and their career up to their making, men's accounts did not show this discrepancy.

Our construction of future imagination seems to be a precondition as well as a result of the interplay between society and the individual. In this sense, it might not only be personal but also societal events that influence what and how we imagine the future. The economic crisis of 2008/2009 affected all European economies and societies, as it resulted in large government budget deficits, less economic growth, wage freezes or cuts and high unemployment rates (Eurofound, 2013). The crisis increased outsourcing and led to the shrinking of public services, thus impacting on individual lives (Atkinson, 2013). In fact, research has shown that the crisis affected working conditions and mental health on an individual level. For example, the recession caused greater job insecurity and stress at work, involuntary part-time

work, and a deterioration of work-life balance (Eurofound, 2013). Therefore, it is not surprising that Grill et al. (2013) found that people's mental health deteriorated due to the crisis. Their study points to an increase in mood disorders, especially depression, anxiety, and alcohol-related disorders. About one-third of mental health problems can be directly attributed to household unemployment and mortgage payment difficulties.

Based on the reviewed literature, the hypothesis is that the imagination of a "special place" in society – in terms of the search for it or its occupation – will be present in participants' life narratives and/or future imaginaries. Following Cantó-Milà and Seebach's findings (2015), we further expect the imagination of a special place to vary among social classes and gender. To date, the question of how the economic crisis influenced individuals' future imaginaries and their construction has not been investigated. In this study, we therefore seek to explore the following question: did the economic crisis have an impact on future imaginaries, and, if so, how? To do so, we conducted interviews in Spain and Germany. While Spain's experience of the recession is among the worst in Europe, Germany was less strongly affected (Eurofound, 2013). Therefore, this study will investigate whether the crisis affected German and Spanish interviewees differently and, if so, how.

Bourdieu (1997) proposes that perceived control over the future varies regarding one's real power to control it in such a way that one's economic or social condition might alter their perceived agency over the future. Following this idea, in the context of a crisis, people might perceive their future to be more up to chance or in an apocalyptic fashion than up to their making. Furthermore, the economic crisis might have influenced how people imagined their special place in society. Since one's profession is one possible realm in which to find a special place, a person might be more anxious about their special place in society, adapt it to the given economic opportunities, or look for it in a different dimension, such as parenthood.

## Methodology

### Participants

Thirty participants were interviewed from different social classes and age groups: 15 in Germany and 15 in Spain. Participants lived in urban or suburban areas of Cologne or Barcelona. We considered social class and age when contacting participants in order to have a representative sample of society. Participants were between 18 and 83 years old and belonged to the lower class, working class, middle class or upper-middle class. In order to classify participants into social classes, they were given a short questionnaire at the end of the interview asking them to state their income, educational level, profession, the numbers

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of books they own, the profession of their three best friends, and how many times they go to the theater every year. Thus, the classification of social class was based on income, education and cultural interest. Participants were acquaintances of the researcher or friends and acquaintances of other participants. They were contacted in person and received no remuneration for their participation.

## Operationalization

Life story interviews were conducted following Werner Fuchs-Heinritz's (2005) approach to biographical research. The interviews were unstructured, which means that few questions guided the conversation, while the participants' accounts structured the interview. The four interview questions targeted the participants' life stories, their plans and wishes for the future (future imaginaries), their experience of the economic crisis, and the impact of the crisis on their future imagination and their vision of the future of society. While we realize that concluding and generalizing findings from a sample of 30 interviews might be difficult, the study set out to involve people from different social classes and age groups to allow for a result that is representative in its distribution. We chose to conduct life story interviews because they allowed us to investigate the dynamics of participants' perception and construction of meaning in their lives and how these dynamics prevailed in their future imagination. Life story and future imagination narration is not an objective account; instead, responses are a product of the interview situation and participants' present self-understanding. Thus, the data for this analysis is not objective in nature. However, since the aim was to gain an understanding of how people saw the economic crisis affecting their future imagination, life story interviews were considered the most adequate data source. Furthermore, life story interviews allowed us to investigate whether the experience of the crisis was a natural part of participants' life stories. In short, since the effects of the economic crisis on future imagination have not yet been investigated, this study sought to carry out an inductive analysis, one which is detailed rather than generalizable.

In the beginning of the interview, the researcher explained the purpose of the study. After having signed the informed consent, the participant was asked to tell his/her life story on the basis of places, people, moments or memories that were especially important. The researcher pointed out that the participant had as much time as they wanted to tell their life story and that they were free to structure it as they wished. Once the life story was told, the researcher asked the remaining questions. The researcher did not interrupt while the participant was talking and only intervened to ask questions for clarification or to ask further open questions to encourage the participant's account. After the interview, the participant answered a short questionnaire aimed at defining the participant's social class. The interviews lasted between 40 minutes

and two hours and were recorded with a phone and transcribed for further analysis.

## Analysis

The interviews were analyzed using an approach inspired by grounded theory. The idea of grounded theory is to extract theory inductively, meaning that no theory is imposed on the data during the analytic process. Instead, new theory is derived from it. Moreover, grounded theory analysis follows the idea of a constant comparative method, which means that the analytic process entails a constant back-and-forth between data and theory. As no theory exists on how the 2008/2009 economic crisis influenced individuals' imagination of personal and societal futures, the grounded theory approach seemed the most suitable. It allows us to shed light on *how* processes evolve rather than to merely verify that they happen.

The analysis of the present study followed the principles of the constant comparative method; however, the analysis was not purely inductive. In addition, we applied the concepts of *images*, *figures*, and *imaginaries* as developed by Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015). The concept of *images of the future* captures the "what": the concrete things or pictures a person imagines for the future, such as a house, a job, or a trip. *Figures* is a concept taken from Marc Augé (2004) which describes the "how": how do the concrete pictures or images a person imagines come about? The concept of *imaginaries of the future* is conceived as the symbolic universe, which integrates both the *figures* and *images of the future* of a person's future narrative. Therefore, a person's *imaginary of the future* brings together images and figures and is defined by a particular matching of an image and a figure.

In terms of figures, Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015) identified eight figures: (1) *continuous return/eternal circle*, according to which people see their future as a repetition of what has already been; (2) *life as an adventure*, or the perspective of not knowing what the future might bring; (3) *continuous process/evolution*, the idea that the future is a natural continuation of the present and will always evolve; (4) *new chance/new beginning*, the idea that the future will bring a possibility of a fundamental chance or a new beginning; (5) *apocalypse*, a pessimistic outlook on the future in which the worst is expected; (6) *haphazard, chance, chaos theory*, a belief that one's future is up to chance and thus what the future will bring can never be known; (7) *destiny, fate, the future is already written*, the idea that people have little agency over their future since it is already determined; (8) *we make our own future*, the perspective that people are believed to have agency over their future as willing actors who are responsible for the consequences of their decisions.

Furthermore, we also applied Simmel's (1992) concept of a "special place" in society, or a position in society in which individuals receive and give something to the collective group

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and are thus integrated and accepted by society. This means that we looked at whether participants saw themselves as having a special place in society or whether they searched for or saw the possibility of finding their "special place" in the future.

## Results

### Future imaginaries

*Images.* Even before being specifically asked to talk about how they imagined the future, all participants mentioned future plans or wishes while telling their life story. Images of participants' future imagination evolved around the themes of job/profession, partnership/children, family, health and leisure. This confirms the general themes Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015) found in individuals' future imaginations, with the addition of the concept of health. The imagination of their professional future took up the majority of participants' future accounts, and the younger participants in particular had a very elaborate imagination of their future careers.

*Figures.* All figures defined by Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015) – apart from "continuous return" – were present in the participants' future imaginations. Overall, the figure used most often was "we make our own future" (in 27 out of 30 cases), and it was especially prevalent in middle-class accounts. While German participants' future imagination was clearly dominated by this figure, the future accounts of Spanish interviewees were equally structured by the figures "chance" and "we make our own future".

In addition to the figures defined by Cantó-Milà and Seebach (2015), a new figure became apparent during the coding process of the German interviews. Imagining their future, German participants described seeing their future as shaped by state institutions in some instances. For instance, Natasha (27, Cologne) said she would like to build a house with a garden for her young family. However, she could not realize this dream because she could not get a loan due to her and her husband being self-employed:

I am really annoyed. I hope we are able to make it because we are normal people. We try to do something, we work, but we don't have the opportunity because the banker doesn't want to give us a loan.<sup>1</sup>

We call this figure "living with institutions", as it involves a vision of the future that is determined by the restrictions of institutions. Thus, the responsibility of future outcomes are neither up to an individual ("we make our own future"), nor up to chance.

Besides not getting a loan, several participants saw their future partly determined by institutions, as they were worried about the amount of their retirement pay. In addition, one participant (Karl, 23, Rheinbach) had a criminal record and thus his career choices were restricted. Overall, more German than Spanish interviewees saw their future to be shaped by institutional restrictions (8 out of 15 and 2 out of 15, respectively). However, while German participants said they saw their personal future to be determined by institutions, the two Spaniards said they saw the future of society to be up to institutions, but not their personal future.

*Imaginaries.* The figure "continuous process/evolution" was always connected to the future of society, never to personal future outlooks. Moreover, all but one German participant saw the future of society to be a "continuous process", while the imagination of society's future in Spain was more mixed. Only two believed in a common future that follows a continuous process. Five saw society's future to be up to chance, three feared some degree of an apocalypse, one person saw the possibility for a new beginning, and two saw the future of society as being up to institutions.

### Special place

All participants imagined themselves as having a special place in society, which confirms our first hypothesis. These special places had three possible dimensions: profession, family, and a location. Most participants saw their special place uniquely or partly realized in their profession in both the present and future. Only those who were already retired did not see their place to be related to their profession.

In terms of family life, all participants who were parents saw their place partly or entirely in parenthood:

When you have a newborn, you are inclined to feel comfortable in the role as a mother and it is easy to stay there. (Vanessa, a 49-year-old mother of three children, Cologne)

However, half of those who were not parents also expressed a desire for children in the future (8 of 15 cases). While the Spanish men and women interviewed expressed an equal desire or equal indecision about parenthood, all of the German women interviewed either had children or saw themselves as a mother in the future. The German men in this sample, however, did not have children, did not talk about them or said that it was still too early to think about children. This only partly confirms our second hypothesis, since the imagination of a special place was only different for men and women in Germany.

This country-specific gender difference might reflect different societal values concerning the role of motherhood. Robert Moeller

1. All translations of interviewee statements are the author's own.

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(1993) found that the West German post-war welfare state promoted the concept of “real family”, which was headed by a male breadwinner while a wife dedicated herself to full-time child care. This orientation towards a “housewife marriage” was unique in Europe (Moeller, 1993).

Besides profession and family, the imagination of a special place was in some cases also related to a location: a county, town, or home. Tobias (41, Rheinbach) had lived almost all his life in the same town and said he saw his place there: “I don’t want to leave Rheinbach. I have all my friends here”. Thus, Rheinbach is the physical dimension of his special place in society.

Furthermore, the imagination of a special place differed among social classes, which confirms our third hypothesis. The results of this study are in line with Cantó-Milà and Seebach’s findings (2015), as the particular realization of a special place was specific to social classes. In upper-middle class narration, the imagination of the special place was related to status, while participants from the middle class saw their special place in the realization of a chosen profession or a romantic relationship. Meanwhile, the special place of working-class members was realized through work and family and the special place for lower-class members was related to general survival.

Moreover, participants’ educational and social background determined their imagination of their special place more than their current economic or educational status. Pedro (45, Barcelona) said he was looking for a third part-time occupation that would make him rich. He comes from a traditional wealthy Catalan family in which tradition dictates that only the oldest son inherits, so he inherited almost nothing. He clearly stated: “I need to be rich again”.

Similarly, Vanessa was from a working-class family in Germany. However, she is now living a “classic” middle-class life: she and her husband’s salaries are both good, she obtained a university degree in Library Studies as an adult, and her children are at university. Even though she is living a middle-class life, in her interview she expressed that she did not see her chosen profession (librarian) as being her special place in society, but rather work in general. She said that working is very important to her, but it does not have to be a chosen profession: “Because I enjoy working, it’s very important for me to have a job”.

This confirms Bourdieu’s (1997) concept of *habitus* as a relatively stable general theory of the world that one acquires during childhood. With their *habitus*, Pedro and Vanessa internalized a social position which continues to condition their imagination and pursuit of their special place in the future.

## Explorative analysis: the economic crisis

*Experience of the economic crisis.* Participants’ experiences of the crisis and its effect on their future imagination were rather different in the German and Spanish samples. Interviewees’ experience of

the crisis can be divided into personal experience, the experience of others (friends, family), and the general effect of the crisis on society.

In terms of personal experience, none of the German participants stated that they were negatively affected by the crisis, while the crisis played a crucial role in 6 out of 15 of the Spanish life narratives. Only one of the German participants mentioned that she lost money due to the crisis. However, she was in the comfortable position of not knowing how much. Two of the German interviewees said that even though they had not been affected financially, they lost trust in institutions:

Before the crisis, I always had some money in my bank account. The crisis showed me that this doesn’t make sense because the bank doesn’t take care of it. I have to invest it myself. (Johnas, 39, Bornheim)

Most of the younger German participants (18 to 26 years old) stated that they had not taken much notice of the crisis because they were not interested in politics or were otherwise occupied:

That was 2008? That is when I had just turned 18 and I must say that I wasn’t interested in it. At that age, I had other goals than to think about the economic crisis. I had just started earning my own money. (Frederik, 26, Merten)

It appears that the crisis could have passed unnoticed in Germany. Lisa (26, Wheelerswist), for instance, said, “No, personally I did not experience the crisis. I was still too young”. In Spain, however, the lives of participants her age were profoundly marked by the crisis. Helena (21, Barcelona) explained that her father had to move to Angola for six years because there was no work for him in their home town. Similarly, Lena (25, Barcelona), whose parents have a small factory, said:

The economic situation was cruel. At the time of the crisis, it was really tough. A client didn’t pay a bill of about €100,000 so the business went bankrupt. My parents had to sell their apartment and we all went to live with my brother.

Older participants were also profoundly affected by the crisis:

Economically, the crisis was horrendous. I had to change jobs, since I was an architect and I lost all clients within a month. I had to reinvent myself. (Pedro, 45, Barcelona)

The Spanish participants’ individual experiences of the crisis were a lot more drastic than the German participants’. However, some Spanish participants also stated that they were personally not affected by it. For example, Jana (21, Barcelona) stated: “I wasn’t affected by the crisis, nor was my family. I could continue

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studying". In addition, two participants from both countries stated that they were positively affected by the crisis. Marilena (58, Barcelona) works as a civil servant and says that she bought a house just before the crisis. Her salary as a civil servant was saved, and – thanks to the crisis – the interest rate on her mortgage payment was reduced: "In the end, I felt the positive effect more, as they reduced the price of my mortgage". Karsten (53, Cologne), a financial accountant, also said that the crisis was positive for him: "For us, the crisis has been positive since more financial planning is necessary now. This lets me look forward to the future without any worries".

On the other hand, those who were not or little affected personally (7 of 15 cases) mentioned those close to them (family, friends) having negative experiences, especially the Spanish participants:

Personally, the crisis did not affect me. I only saw it in my environment. Some friends' parents worked several months without being paid. (Carlo, 31, Barcelona)

In my home town much of the industry was closed down and lots of people lost their jobs. (Xabier, 23, Barcelona)

References to others' experiences were almost absent in German interviews, which suggests that even if the crisis in Spain was not experienced firsthand, it was still very close.

In addition to personal experiences and those of others, participants also explained how they believed that society had been influenced. While these general remarks were sparse in the German interviews, all Spaniards commented on the effect of the crisis on society. For the Spanish interviewees, the experience of the economic crisis translated into difficulties in finding a job, job instability, salary stagnation or cuts, higher prices, and the collapse of the real estate market. Spanish participants highlighted that the crisis was harsh and far-reaching. Marina (83, Barcelona) called it a "total crisis" and Xabier (23, Barcelona) saw Spanish society affected beyond the economy:

This is not only an economic crisis, but also a cultural, political and institutional crisis. It's also a crisis of values.

In contrast, the German interviewees were personally not affected and the general sensation was that Germany is well off economically:

Economically we are well off. I emphasize this again and again. (Gertraud, 77, Leichlingen)

Even though Spanish participants experienced the economic crisis more drastically, they shared the opinion that Spain is doing a better today:

Today the situation is a bit better. There is less unemployment, but you still don't notice it in the salaries. (Maria, 47, Barcelona)

*The effect of the economic crisis on future imagination.* The crisis did not influence the future imaginaries of the German interviewees. Most of them stated that they had not been affected by the crisis and, thus, the crisis had not influenced their future outlook. On a general level, German interviewees agreed that Germany is economically well-off.

On an individual level, four of the six Spanish participants who said they were affected by the crisis no longer saw themselves as being financially affected by the crisis because they had found new jobs. Some even said that the crisis had a positive effect on them in the long run.

At the moment of the crisis, it was very difficult. But today I am not affected anymore. I never had problems finding a job. (Lena, 25, Barcelona)

In the end, the crisis has been positive for me because it forced me to change professions. It worked well. Now I earn more money, a lot more. (Pedro, 45, Barcelona)

Even though most of the Spanish interviewees said that they had overcome the crisis and financially recovered from it, Spanish interviewees' accounts point to two main changes in mentality. Firstly, the participants expressed that the idea that a person can have the same job for his or her entire life is outdated. Thus, today's job market requires that people change jobs and reinvent themselves regularly:

Due to the crisis, the young generation will never have the same concept of work that I had when I was young. Today's job market is more dynamic and entrepreneurial. People have to change jobs more often. (Marilena, 58, Barcelona)

Due to the crisis, I can't imagine a stable future with the same job. (Xabier, 23, Barcelona)

Secondly, Spanish participants expressed the notion that younger generations are and have to be better prepared for the job market. According to participants, they must study more and have to be more creative:

Today we are a very well prepared generation because everybody studies. (Lena, 25, Barcelona)

My sons are more flexible and a lot more prepared for today's job situation. (Teresa, 57, Barcelona)

In addition to these two rather explicitly stated mentality changes, Lena (25, Barcelona) brought up another effect of the

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crisis: "Before the crisis, I saw my future in Spain. After the crisis, I see myself in a foreign country waiting for the situation to get better." She was the only one who clearly stated that the crisis motivated her to live abroad, but it is worth noting that all but one of the Spanish interviewees under 31 (7 of 8) had either already lived or wanted to live abroad. On the other hand, the German participants under 31 wanted to travel but not live abroad.

## Discussion

The fact that all participants mentioned future plans or desires while telling their life narrative suggests that a future perspective is a natural part of the participants' life story and, therefore, their autobiographical self-understanding. This is in line with Rosenthal (1993), who claims that life story narratives are constructed around a thematic focus derived from past experiences, future expectations, and the present situation. In this sense, the concept of a "horizon of expectations" (Koselleck, 1989) or "future horizon" (Adam and Groves, 2007) as defined by the experienced past might be too static and distant. Since participants naturally and repeatedly mentioned their future plans or wishes during their life story narration, it seems that their future is inseparable from their present.

When considering the findings concerning images, figures and imaginaries together, it appears that the German interviewees trusted more in their institutions than the Spanish participants. The fact that the newly coined figure of "living with institutions" structured the imagination of personal futures was particularly evident among German interviewees. This suggests that institutions are a present and respected element of these Germans' lives. In addition, imagining a future shaped by institutions means associating the responsibility of future outcomes with these institutions. Granting someone or something responsibility for one's future is a sign of trust. Moreover, all but one German participant saw the future of society as a continuous process or evolution. Imagining the future as a continuous process means trusting in the durability and continuance of society. Gertraud (77, Leichlingen) even said: "I generally trust that our politicians do the right thing".

From the Spanish sample, only three people expressed the same belief in the continuation of society, while the majority saw society's future to be up to chance or expected some degree of an apocalypse. Spaniards often named corruption as a huge problem in Spanish society and Carlo (31, Barcelona) even said that he could imagine a future for society only under the condition that Rajoy stepped down. This confirms results from the most recent Eurobarometer: while about 60 percent of Germans trusted in their national government and Parliament, only 18 percent of the Spanish population expressed trust in

these institutions (Eurobarometer, May 2017). Generalized trust in institutions reduces uncertainty about the future (Rothstein and Stolle, 2002). Thus, the fact that the Spanish interviewees imagined their future to be up to chance more than the German interviewees might mirror this lack of confidence in institutions and a stable future for society. Similarly, the impression of living in a stable society might contribute to the imagination of a stable personal future.

Following Bourdieu (1997), who proposed that perceived control over the future varies with real power, it was hypothesized that the economic crisis would alter perceived agency over the future. The fact that participants said they believed that the future is up to chance was more present in the Spanish interviews than in the German ones, which might confirm this hypothesis, as the economic crisis might have altered the Spanish participants' perception of agency over their future. This is in line with Atkinson's (2013) qualitative investigation of the economic crisis' impact on people's future outlook in the United Kingdom. He concludes that increased employment insecurity and temporality causes people to worry more about their future. However, longitudinal investigation is necessary in order to further prove this claim.

Interviewees' experience of the economic crisis indicates that there are two main differences between German and Spanish participants regarding the closeness of the crisis to their own lives and the extent of its effect on society. Most Spanish participants either experienced the crisis themselves or mentioned people close to them (family, friends) who had experienced the crisis firsthand. On the other hand, most German participants did not see themselves as being affected and did not mention the experiences of others. They also denied seeing any major effect on society. This difference in the closeness of the crisis to their own lives might reflect the experience of the economies of these countries. However, it might also mirror the media's discussion of the crisis:

The newspaper said, "We're in crisis", and everybody asked themselves, "Ah, we're in a crisis? Do you notice the crisis?", "No, you?", "No, but the newspaper said so". (Clara, 49, Barcelona)

Picard (2015) analyzed the impact of media coverage on the perception of the crisis. He stated that, since media coverage followed national interest, people's information, understanding and reactions differed among European countries. As Clara pointed out, the Spanish media focused on the crisis happening in Spain, and the media in other European countries also focused on the situation in Spain and other southern European countries, as their financial situations were especially precarious (Picard, 2015). This might have allowed German media to present the crisis as happening in the south of Europe, with Germans perceiving the crisis as happening in the media and not in their immediate

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environment. Frederik's comment, for example, suggests that in his opinion this is precisely what happened:

I have to say I wasn't always well informed about what the media said; it didn't interest me that much. [...] I had other goals than thinking about the euro crisis. (Frederik, 26, Cologne)

Since Spanish participants experienced the crisis as immediate and omnipresent, it is not surprising that the extent of the crisis' effects were far-reaching. While on an individual and societal level the crisis went almost unnoticed by the German interviewees, it produced an enduring change of mentality in Spain. Due to the crisis, Spanish participants no longer believe that it is possible to have the same job for one's entire life. Instead, younger generations today have to be better prepared for the job market, and Spanish young adults hope to live abroad in foreign countries with more stable economies. These mentality changes might be due in part to the public media discourse about the effect of the crisis. However, they might just as easily be caused by the dynamics of their personal experiences of the crisis.

The statistics and information from the interviews in this study demonstrate the economic effects of the crisis in Spain with regard to employment. As one's profession is the most dominant dimension of a special place in society, losing one's job and not being able to find a new one challenges one's feeling of self-worth and belonging in society. Since the economic crisis in Spain left many people without a special place or put this special place at risk, the threat to the feeling of belonging was a collective rather than an individual experience. The severity and omnipresence of the crisis – the unemployment rate reached a historic high of almost 27 percent in 2013 – led Spanish participants to lose faith in the stability of their job market (Spain Unemployment Rate, 2017). Since the labor market is the principal realm of special places, the economic crisis potentially challenges people's belonging to society and, thus, social integration. Since 2008, 1.5 percent (700,000) of Spaniards have left their country to work abroad, mainly young adults (Nelson, 2017). This so-called "brain drain" is mainly motivated by high youth unemployment, which reached a record 56 percent in 2013 (Spain Youth Unemployment Rate, 2017). Thus, the desire of many of Spanish interviewees under the age of 31 to live and work abroad in economically more stable countries might be interpreted as a search for an alternative and more secure realm of special places.

My children have a good education and are a lot more prepared for work and finding their place in whatever place on this planet. (Teresa, 56, Barcelona)

Teresa expresses these mentality changes through the way she sees her sons, well prepared for a more unstable job market, and

she is aware that they can and may have to go abroad to find their special place in the professional sphere. The way she imagines her own future, however, is pessimistic, as she lost her job due to the crisis and does not have much hope of finding a new one: "In terms of work, I'm already out because I don't have the necessary skills that an interior designer needs today".

She does not see a way to return to her special place in society as an interior designer. However, Teresa does not feel completely alienated from society, since she sees herself occupying a special place through her role as a mother and a daughter, as she takes care of her ill mother. However, occupying a special place in the private realm does not reassure Teresa about her personal future: "I'm pessimistic about my personal future concerning both my professional future and my health. There is no possibility of me finding a job and both of my parents became ill with serious diseases at a very young age".

Teresa's case contradicts our hypothesis about the effect of the economic crisis on people's imagination of their special place. We hypothesized that the threat to one's special place in the professional domain would motivate people to turn to their role within the family. Teresa does see herself as a mother and daughter, but it does not entirely satisfy her need to belong in society and does not contribute to a positive future outlook. This confirms that the job market is the primary realm of a person's special place and suggests that an accessible and secure labor market is crucial for social integration.

We further hypothesized that people might adapt their imagination of a special place to the economic situation. However, it is less the imagination of a special place but more the imagination of the realm of special places that changed for our interviewees. The job market came to be seen as less stable and people became aware that they had to be better prepared to face it. In addition, the younger Spanish interviewees appeared to look towards foreign countries to offer them more stable realms in which to find their special places.

Except for Teresa, all interviewees who reported experiencing difficulties during the crisis recovered financially from it and managed to integrate their experience into their life narrative. Since they were able to find new employment, society once again offered them a special place and they were able to feel like they were a part of it. As they recovered their feeling of belonging to society, their memory of their experience of the crisis became less severe.

## Conclusion

This study found differences in how German and Spanish interviewees imagined their future and how their future perspective was influenced by the economic crisis. We found that German participants placed more trust in state institutions and

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handed them part of the responsibility for their personal present and future. Apart from the state, they mainly saw themselves as responsible for their personal futures. Spanish participants, on the other hand, expressed more feelings of criticism and mistrust towards their state institutions. Regarding their personal futures, Spanish interviewees saw their future as being as up to chance as of their own making. The trust German participants placed in their government is a reflection of the *Vater Staat* ("Father State") metaphor, which is often used by Germans to refer to their government. The German State takes on a father-like role for its inhabitants, securing the social order and thus organizing, not only the lives of the group, but also to a great extent the lives of the individual.

Moreover, our analysis shows that it is not the imagination of a special place that changes due to the crisis, but the imagination of the realm of special places. The crisis produced enduring mentality changes in Spanish participants' imagination of the labor market and their professional future: the labor market has become more flexible and insecure, people need higher-level qualifications, and the labor market demands more mobility. These mentality changes reflect neoliberal policies, and our analysis suggests that it is due to the crisis that neoliberal practices have become more profoundly ingrained in Spanish participants' imagination of their labor market. Atkinson (2013), who investigated the impact of the crisis on people's future outlook in the United Kingdom, makes a similar claim. The economic crisis enhanced the flexibilization of labor (easy hiring and dismissal) and reduced public services, making personal futures more uncertain. Thus, it would seem that neoliberal practices related to the crisis have been implemented in Spain as well as the UK, as they clearly guide Spaniards' future imaginations in this sample.

Participants who were able to restore the imagination of a possible special place regained a feeling of belonging to society and were positive about their future. As people's professions are the most dominant domain of special places, an accessible and stable labor market or socially and institutionally supported alternatives – such as wifedom/motherhood in Germany – seem to be fundamental for social integration and cohesion. However, it is not only society that has to offer people the possibility of imagining a special place. Participants themselves seemed to be highly motivated to regain the possibility of imaging their own special place within society. We were surprised that all but one participant had a very positive outlook regarding their personal future, regardless of what they had experienced in their lives. A positive imagination of a future special place, if not present throughout, was what almost every life story culminated in, so that participants' perceived future was not a distant imagining but part of the present. Moreover, it seemed that this imagination of a future place not only served to provide a feeling of societal belonging but also to give an individual happy ending to each life story.

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