Scholars have suggested that we live in the time of reflexive modernity (Beck, Giddens and Lash 1994). Within the discipline of sociology the present day world has been called “high” or “late” modernity. We live in a world of uncertainty and multiple choices. Our future is overshadowed by the risks of ecological catastrophes, the collapse of global economic mechanisms, political crises etc. These factors are also important to the ways people experience ageing and how they are structuring their attitudes, values, identities and worldviews.

My research interest has arisen from a curiosity about certain questions, inspired by a sort of multidisciplinary approach: How do people’s beliefs, concepts of the world, attitudes and values form the “lenses” through which they view the world? How do age, gender and education affect world views? What other influences on the world views of people can we find? My starting premise has been that everyday world views are socialised into people by their own culture and personal life experiences during their (different) transitions from childhood to adulthood and old age. My longitudinal study focused on world views and their structures which are difficult to measure. Before testing any hypothesis about a world view formation, it is necessary to have a clear conception of a world view. The study has tried to look closely at the conceptions of different types of world views (Niiniluoto 1981). It also tried to look closely at the techniques that have been developed to measure people’s ideological development, values and thinking, their questions about life and their views of the world. This study has tried to relate the different types of world views suggesting that these types of a world view may be associated with cognitive development, social learning and socialisation (Helve 1993).

I began my world view research project, in 1975, with field research work in my home environment at Helsinki, collecting data from Finland’s first generation of suburban children and their parents (Helve 1987; 1991; 1993; 1995; 2000; 2005; 2014). The formation of world view constitutes such a difficult task that it cannot be studied using only one method. I used mutually complementary quantitative and qualitative methods, thus allowing for more varied research data. Data for the study has been obtained using questionnaires, word association and sentence completion tasks, and projective picture tests, as well as by conducting individual and group interviews, with pictures used as an aid. Questions were combined to measure dimensions of people’s world views: The conative dimension e.g. leisure time, friends and special interests; the cognitive dimension e.g. beliefs about the world; the social dimension e.g. relationships to other people; the cultural dimension, and the affective dimension e.g. attitudes towards life and the future.

The biggest difficulty in this longitudinal study was being tied to theories and methods used in the first phase which were no longer favoured after a period of 20, 30 or 40 years. However the general principles of the research design did not change much. Anyhow, the cognitive development of children and young people at different ages had to be taken into consideration in data collection; questions that were appropriate for a child would no longer necessarily be appropriate for an adult person, and might need to change radically for a retired senior citizen. It is difficult to use only one method to focus all of the questions of the longitudinal research, which does not have a coherent and internally consistent methodological and theoretical framework. There is far more than one type of becoming a senior citizen, and there is not necessarily even a dominant type of a world view among older people in modern society. The idea that research could find a whole, seamless structure of a world view, which somehow could hold the social world of a generation together, is impossible.
(cf. Durkheimian sociology). People have conflicting beliefs and values. The technical and methodological problem is how to research and analyse these interwoven beliefs and values which are revealed culturally and which produce more than one world view. Among the challenges for longitudinal research are how to avoid misunderstandings due to language, differences in culture, and problems of the data comparability, classification problems and missing information.

My longitudinal study gives evidence that the world view is born collectively in the process of dialogic interaction. The collective dimension of the world view can offer tools and orientation for developing a personal world view that helps in coping with shifts in older age, for example between dependency and independency as a result of aging.

This paper gathers from life-course perspective concepts of future expectations, attitudes, values and world views. These concepts are related to identity horizon, having influences on the sense of prospects for aging. The paper discusses about the different strategies people use in their transitions to individual and collective ageing in order to manage their life under conditions of uncertainty.