



Negotiating (Employable) Graduate Identity: Small Story Approach in Qualitative Follow-up Research

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INTRODUCTION

We know little about the longitudinal processes of employability that higher education (HE) graduates encounter as they enter the world of work. How do graduates interpret and manage their educational and working life trajectories? What kinds of graduate identities in relation to employability do they construct and negotiate across time? How do they negotiate continuity and/or change in relation to graduate identities? We examine these questions in this methodological chapter in which we apply and develop a small story approach in narrative life history follow-up research. This is important as there is a widening understanding that

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P. Siivonen et al. (eds.), *Rethinking Graduate Employability in
Context*, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-20653-5_16

employability should be viewed as a processual phenomenon referring to graduate identity and evolving across multiple contexts and over time (Holmes, 2013, 2015; see also Tomlinson, 2007; Tomlinson & Anderson, 2021). This chapter contributes, first, to the graduate employability literature by examining employability as a processual phenomenon, and, second, to the literature on qualitative longitudinal research methodology from a narrative-discursive point of view, which has only rarely been examined in extant literature (see, however, Korhonen et al., 2020). We will illustrate our reading of the follow-up interview data, which was generated as part of a larger research project on HE business graduates' employability, with one Finnish mature graduate's case example. We chose Joel's example as his educational and working life trajectory consists of breaks that create a need to be accounted for. Such ruptures require identity negotiation in relation to the normative ideals of employability.

In the competitive and crowded labour market, the construction and negotiation of graduate identities has become more salient and critical to pursuing opportunities and success in working life (Siivonen et al., 2020). The transition from HE to the graduate labour market and breaks in educational and working life trajectories compel individuals to critically reflect on themselves, envisage alternatives, re-consider their previous position and create continuity and/or change between the former and new positions of graduate identities (see also Korhonen et al., 2020). The follow-up aspect of our research focuses on graduates' educational and working life trajectories, including transitions through which graduates interpret and negotiate employability and, in doing so, construct continuity and/or change in their graduate identity.

Employability is understood here as a socially constructed and culturally mediated process. The term employability implies the positional dimension of being employable, but not necessarily in employment (Brown et al., 2003). The normative ideals of employability set new kinds of demands for graduates as they are in a continual need of development and assuring their suitability and worth for prospective employers. They need to become accountable, agile, active, autonomous, self-responsible, risk-taking, creative, innovative, problem-solving, decision-making, enterprising employees, who seek new challenges and show passion for and dedication to work (e.g. Laalo et al., 2019; Siivonen et al., 2022). Consequently, an HE degree is not enough (Tomlinson, 2008), but an individual must possess the right kinds of characteristics and abilities that make her/him appealing to potential employers (Siivonen &

Isopahkala-Bouret, 2016). This creates a need to constantly reflect on one's characteristics and abilities in relation to the normative ideals of employability.

By the concept of graduate identity, we refer to an interactional process of interpretation and negotiation of the question, "who am I?" through time in the narrative environment in which employability is being constructed (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; Gubrium & Holstein, 2008; Holmes, 2013). Understanding graduate identity as socially constructed, emergent and fluid opens up room for identity work (Bamberg, 2011; Holmes, 2013). In addition to making sense of "who I am", anti-identity positions focusing on "who I am not" in relation to the ideals of employability also play a central part in the identity work (Siivonen et al., 2020). Bamberg (2011) suggests that identity work as narrative interaction includes three dilemmas within which individuals must navigate in order to answer the question, "Who am I?". The first dilemma is between constancy and change, which refers to a sense of self across time: How am I the same person I used to be versus how have I changed? According to Bamberg (2011), identity construction takes off from the continuity and change dilemma. The second dilemma relates to sameness and difference: How am I with regard to others? The third dilemma deals with the perception of agency: Am I a subject who is in control versus am I an undergoer subjected to the situation?

Next, we will discuss our data and methodological approach and then illustrate our reading of follow-up interview data with Joel's case example. Finally, we will discuss the contribution of the small story approach to qualitative follow-up and employability research.

DATA AND METHODS

The data of this study were generated in a larger research project: Higher education graduates' employability and social positioning in the labour market (HighEmploy, 2018–2022).¹ We first interviewed the participants, 76 Finnish business graduates, at the time of graduation in 2019, and followed up on them in 2020 (n = 44). The interview themes covered education and working life trajectory, experiences about university studies, employment and working life, current life situation and future prospects

¹This work was supported by the Academy of Finland under Grant number 315796 and Grant number 315797.

and goals. The duration of the narrative life history interviews varied from around 1 to 3 hours. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. They were conducted and analysed in Finnish. The interview quotes presented in this article were translated into English by a professional. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

We chose the case example of Joel (aged 35 in 2019) for this study as it was analytically interesting in terms of continuity and change across time. Joel's educational and working life trajectory and his transition from university to graduate labour market did not proceed smoothly nor as expected. Instead, he talked about periods of unemployment and dismissals from his job, which created ruptures that needed to be accounted for. Such ruptures in HE-graduate labour market transition require identity negotiation in relation to employability, which makes normative ideals in relation to employability visible (Korhonen et al., 2020). Joel's case example also shows how the construction of employability and the related ideals pertain to specific contexts and, in this case, unemployment and dismissal in particular (see also Greenbank & Marra, 2020). Moreover, Joel's example is interesting in terms of age and class—he is a mature student and graduate, he does not have a middle-class academic background and his parents work in blue-collar jobs. Joel's case example is, thus, in many ways in contrast with the young middle-class business graduates in our data, who positioned themselves as easily employable and successful young employees equipped with such personal characteristics as social skills, enthusiasm and youthful energy and drive (Korhonen et al., 2023).

In our reading of the data, we apply and develop a small story approach and narrative positioning analysis (Bamberg, 1997, 2004; De Fina, 2013) to examine continuity and change of graduate identity in relation to employability through time in our follow-up interview data. The small story approach has the potential to make visible change and continuity in the construction of graduate identity positionings in relation to employability in situated interaction. Small stories refer to short narratives, descriptions or fragments of speech about past, present and future incidents (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) that are produced in social interaction in the narrative environment (Gubrium & Holstein, 2008) of the interview interaction and the wider social surroundings. We suggest that the small story approach is well suited for analysis of Joel's interview data that include fragments of talk as well as short sequential narratives (Riessman, 2008).

Small stories unfold interaction and narrative positioning vis-à-vis the story world, the storytelling world and societal master narratives (Bamberg, 1997; Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008), and allow the analysis of multiple identities, positionings and meanings in HE graduates', in this case Joel's, narrative life history. The story world refers to how the characters of the story are constructed: how they are positioned in relation to one another. The telling of the story focuses on how the narrator positions himself in relation to the audience, the interviewer and/or the imagined audience, in Joel's case, especially potential employers: What is the narrator trying to accomplish with the story? (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). The analysis of societal master narratives implies the analysis of narrative positioning in relation to the cultural discourses, and in this case, employability. Normative social positions may display neutrality or they may be embraced, distanced, critiqued, subverted or resisted (Bamberg, 2004). Although analytically relevant in concrete analysis, the distinction between the different levels is not straightforward (Bamberg, 2004), and, thus, in our analysis, we do not differentiate them.

Our analysis, then, consists of interpretation of continuity and change in a person's construction of meanings at two time points of the narrative life history interviews (2019, 2020), the educational and working life trajectory running from the past to the present and future. Our approach permits the analysis of continuity and change constructed in the situated interaction of small stories in the context of life history. The approach also allows the analysis of such life historical positions as class.

In practice, we first read both interviews thoroughly and identified all the small stories related to identity and employability construction. Second, we analysed the small stories that related to the same themes and that were told at two time points (2019 and 2020). This allowed the analysis of continuity and/or change of graduate identity positions across time. In the analysis of the small stories, we applied narrative positioning analysis and also read the negotiation of identity dilemmas suggested by Bamberg (2011). Next, we will illustrate our reading of the data with Joel's case example.

SMALL STORY APPROACH IN THE READING OF JOEL'S FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS

During both narrative life history interviews, Joel talked about periods of unemployment, ruptures that needed to be explained for the interviewer and the imagined audience, especially the potential employers. Such breaks in the working life trajectory create a need to reflect on oneself and negotiate continuity and/or change in the construction of graduate identity positionings. We interpret the small stories constructed in situated interaction through the lens of ruptures in Joel's working life trajectory.

During the first interview, back in autumn 2019, Joel talked about his winding educational and working life trajectory. In 2003, he completed vocational education in data processing, after which he worked as an IT designer until 2009, at which point he was made redundant. He explains this, first, with the financial crises that began in 2008 and, second, with the level of his degree that did not meet the labour market requirements. He was unemployed for 3–4 years, during which time he changed to a different field and started taking open university courses in law. He completed more and more courses and decided to shift to accounting and finance because getting into university to study a degree in law would have been “quite an impossible task” because of the selectiveness of admissions. He evaluated that accounting was more accessible and that “there are always vacancies in finance”. He sat for the entrance examination twice, after which he was accepted as a student in business studies in 2015. During his studies at the university, he changed his focus from finance to accountancy to ascertain his employability in the future. In the first interview, Joel told a small story in which he evaluated his current situation:

Successful Student and Employee 2019

Päivi: I just wanna start off and ask what's your life situation like at the moment?

Joel: Well, I'm about to start a new job [in the metropolitan area] next week on Tuesday. And—

P: Mm-hm.

J: I've been, like, polishing my MA thesis, so I need to go and present it at some point (...). Basically I'm not in a hurry or anything, so umm, it's okay as long as I do it in December at the latest, you know.

P: Yeah, yeah.

(...)

- J: Though I do have some other applications, applications in the works, so—
- P: How many jobs have you applied to?
- J: Well, I've applied to three, three jobs, three jobs elsewhere and to some audit firms, to those, to those and—

In his small story, Joel positions himself as a successful student and employee, whose future looks bright: he is about to graduate from the university with a master's degree in business and administration and he is starting in a new (although temporary) job. He also positions himself as an active and ambitious jobseeker who continuously applies for work in audit firms in order to progress in his career as a professional accountant. Moreover, he positions himself as a resilient job seeker, as getting work was not easy but demanded continuous effort: "that resilience, resilient, resilient attitude, not giving up, giving up, keep on, keep on applying". He encourages himself to continuously look for work and constructs his future aim to gain three years of work experience to be able to sit for an exam to qualify to audit accounts. In this small story, Joel positions himself as an active and agentive employee and jobseeker who is in control of his situation in relation to employability, also implying that he meets the expected norm.

One year later in the follow-up interview, however, the situation has changed: Joel had started working in a new permanent job in an audit firm but had been made redundant during the trial period. He evaluates his position in the labour market as discouraging:

Unemployed MBA 2020

- P: How's life been treating you since last time?
- J: I don't find the current situation a pleasant one or anything, as umm, my employment contract ended [in the summer], and umm, it wasn't renewed, the contract; it was like a trial period termination. I did auditing work for six months. Now I'm once again looking for work, so at the moment I'm like an unemployed economist, so that's...it's not a very good situation or anything, but I've been applying to like 20 places, but for most of them I haven't even got an interview. Basically it was like, (do) I have too little experience for the job, so they said that that was the reason for the, the termination, so it was like that, and the auditing work didn't just end because of covid, you know, so (—)

Joel positions himself as an unemployed master of business and administration who was made redundant from his previous job during the trial period. He continues to position himself as an active although now also unsuccessful and frustrated jobseeker who has sent applications to “20 firms” but who is often “not even invited for an interview” and for whom “looking for a job lasts and lasts” and he “does not find, find, find work”. He thus constructs continuity as an active and resilient jobseeker in the competitive graduate labour market, also implying that the fierce competition is beyond his control. Joel negotiates agency and whether he is an agent or an undergoer in the labour market. By showing resilience in job-search, he positions himself as an agent in the situation where he is unemployed and not even invited for an interview despite constant effort. This implies that he acts according to the expected norm: in Finland, due to the activation policy, unemployed jobseekers are expected to actively look for work.

However, Joel also positions himself as responsible for the situation and interprets his lack of work experience as a reason for his unemployment. Joel emphasises his self-responsibility by stating that the amount of work did not decrease due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so as to emphasise that this was not the reason for being made redundant. He repeats his evaluation of the situation as “not pleasant” to emphasise the gloomy situation. He hopes for “regularity in terms of income” as he has “had no income for two months”. Later on in the interview, Joel evaluates the redundancy: “I should’ve been asking for more, asking for advice right there and then when I got stuck, and like that (—) ask more and ask more on my own, be more independent and ask more, so there was like room for improvement in my actions as well, so yeah”. Joel, thus, negotiates his graduate identity in the small story and evaluates that he did not have enough work experience and that he was not “active” and “independent” enough as an employee, implying that he did not meet the expected norm.

To summarise, Joel accounts for his weakened labour market situation: at the time of the first interview, he was starting in a new (although temporary) job, whereas at the time of the second interview, he was unemployed having been made redundant during the trial period from a new permanent job. He would have been able to accumulate the necessary three-year work experience in the job in order to sit for an exam to qualify to audit accounts. Such work experience would have been crucial for his progress in his career as an accountant. His future prospects in relation to employability were, thus, gloomy during the second interview. This

reflects change in his graduate identity: whilst in 2019, he positions himself as a successful student and employee, in 2020, he positions himself as an unemployed master of business and administration who was neither active nor independent enough but who was still an active and resilient, and thus agentive, although unsuccessful and frustrated jobseeker.

The Creation of Accounts for Ruptures

During the first interview in 2019, Joel explains how he manages and accounts for the 3–4 year unemployment “gap” in his CV for potential employers. In this small story, he constructs the account in interaction with the interviewer:

First Account for Rupture 2019

- P: Yeah. So, you think there’s something that would have prevented you from getting the job you wanted or pushing your career forward in this case?
- J: Well, I guess there was the small, there was, umm, it wasn’t just a small gap in the work experience, so I guess that’s something I have to keep explaining, like what happened between there, so...
- P: You mean the unemployment period?
- J: Yes, yes.
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: Like why it has been so long—
- P: Yeah.
- J: So I guess that’s one but—
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: I’ve managed to explain it quite well, so—
- P: Mm-m, mm-m.
- J: It hasn’t been a problem, really.
- P: How do you explain it when you apply for a job?
- J: Well, I tell them that I started open studies in between jobs and that’s—
- P: Mm-hm.
- J: That’s usually when—
- P: Right, that the study path has been—
- J: Yeah.
- P: In that way—
- J: Yeah, right.

- P: Step by step—
 J: Yeah.
 P: Progressing.
 J: Yeah.
 P: That you've been looking for direction.
 J: Exactly, exactly, so...

The 3–4-year unemployment period creates a rupture in Joel's CV and working life trajectory that needed to be accounted for and legitimised; it was something he needs “to keep explaining”, for the interviewer who asks for an explanation and the imagined audience, especially for potential employers. He evaluates that he has found a way to explain the gap: open university studies that he started one course at a time provide a legitimate explanation. As forms of self-development and continuing learning (Haltia, 2018), the courses provided a positive way out by implying that they are means to construct employability, a new direction to become productive in working life. Also, during the second interview in 2020, Joel constructs an account for unemployment:

Second Account for Rupture 2020

- P: Yeah, right. What do you think is the reason that they didn't, you know, where you last worked, extend the contract after the trial period?
 J: It was actually, the work sorta burned me out, so umm, I, that's, that's why I went on sick leave for a week, and then I went back to work, and then they said that no need to, no need to, umm, that it won't be extended but that I can continue to the end [of the month] if I want, or I could've just quit right then if I'd wanted to, but, but (—) I needed a few more things to get the reference from there, so...
 P: Okay. So how did it like, what was it, from your perspective that led to this burnout at that point?
 J: Well, it was actually that there, that it, there wasn't much, there was so much work, and it just kept coming, and as I didn't have much experience of that job after all, I couldn't independently really, really manage the workload, so umm, there was still some uncertainty about the, you know, about the actual work, and they talked about it when covid came, that like, I could've used some extra help to succeed, but then covid came, so they couldn't really offer the help anymore, so that was it—(...) but in the end I keep looking forward about it all, I know that these things can sometimes just happen.

For the interviewer's question about having been made redundant during the trial period, Joel provides burnout and sick leave as explanations. However, by referring to the employer and what "they told me", he posits that the work contract was not continued after the one-week sick leave. He emphasises his rational and strategic agency as he does not give up but continues working till the end of the trial period in order to get the reference. He explains the burnout with a heavy workload and his lack of experience and negotiates agency in a situation where he was faced with a heavy workload in a hectic work situation. He negotiates his graduate identity and positions himself as an unsure employee who was unable to manage the workload and to work independently, implying that managing a heavy workload in a hurry is a norm. He provides the COVID-19 pandemic as a partial explanation for the situation: without the pandemic and working from home, he would have received more support at work, and managing the work would have been easier. Nevertheless, he positions himself as an agentive employee who looks ahead and who is resilient in the face of adversity.

To summarise, during both interviews, Joel talked about periods of unemployment that needed to be explained for the interviewer and the imagined audience, especially for the potential employers. During the first interview, he constructs a legitimate explanation about self-development and continuing learning that employers are also ready to accept. During the follow-up interview, Joel provides burnout and sick leave as explanations for having been made redundant during the trial period, implying that they were not legitimate explanations for Joel's employer in the audit firm. Joel negotiates his graduate identity: he presents himself as an unsure employee who does not manage the workload constructed as a norm in audit firms. Nevertheless, he positions himself as a resilient employee who looks ahead.

*Negotiation of Continuity Versus Change as a Good
and Valuable Employee*

In both interviews, Joel positions himself as a hard-working and meticulous employee. He thus constructs continuity in relation to his graduate identity as a particular kind of employee in his small stories. However, in the small story told in the follow-up interview, he also evaluates that he is lacking qualities needed to do his work well.

Hard-working and meticulous employee 2019

P: What would you say that your career means to you at the moment?

J: Well, it means quite a lot, a lot, that the work career, career, the future work career, that nowadays I try to do everything thoroughly and well, well and—

P: Mm-hm.

J: I try to work hard, you know—

Meticulous but not a valuable employee 2020

J: Something that I've noticed is that I have quite a few flaws when it comes to like, you know, being an employee in a way, so that's what actually scares me a bit, like how will I manage in the fast-paced, fast-paced work life?

Hurry is always reflected in mistakes, mistakes can, it can lead to mistakes, and the rapid pace of work always reflects that. And that's when you start fearing the mistakes, and as I usually, I prepare things very carefully, I check, make sure, that it must be correct (—) double check, so umm, that's the thing that you no longer have time for the double-check in a hurry, so that's on that, yeah.

In the small stories above, Joel constructs a future career that demands a lot of effort and positions himself as a hardworking employee who does his work as well and as meticulously as possible. This is in contrast with his past self that he described as “extremely lazy” in relation to studying in comprehensive school in the first interview. Joel explains that his current self “has grown as a person” since those times. We interpret that he positions himself as a traditional good worker, not as an ideal enterprising employee who actively innovates and presses forward in a hurry. Joel constructs continuity between the first and follow-up interviews in relation to his graduate identity as a hardworking and meticulous employee, but his evaluation of himself as a worker diminishes in the second small story. He positions himself as a good but not as a valuable and right kind of employee in the context of hectic working life.

In the follow-up interview, Joel negotiates his graduate identity and evaluates himself as lacking as an employee. Meticulous work with “double-checking” is no more constructed as unequivocally positive. An ideal actor is self-confident and agentive and manages a heavy workload in a hurry. However, he also positions himself as an experienced employee who knows that he makes mistakes when he is in a hurry and there is no time for “double-checking”, implying that he does not manage to do his work as well as he would like to in the busy audit firm. He evaluates the situation as scary: he is unsure how he will manage in hectic working life. The problems in working life are, thus, turned inwards, and they become the employee's internal barrier to manage the meticulous accounting in a hurry.

*Continuity in the Construction of a Jobseeker Who Is Not
Well-Networked*

In our larger data, most interviewees framed social networks as important in finding employment (Haltia et al., [In Review](#)). Joel, however, constructs continuity of himself between the first and the follow-up interviews as a jobseeker and employee in relation to social networks and relations, stating that they have played no role for him:

<i>No help from social networks 2019</i>	<i>No help from social networks 2020</i>
P: Yeah, yeah. So what do you think, have your social connections affected how, where you have found work? (...)	P: Yeah, yeah. Right, did you know anyone or have social connections that you could use to get that job?
J: But in my, in my case it hasn't been like that—(...) I've just had to like—	J: No, I didn't have any connections to them, so, or to the industry in the first place, so I sorta had to (—) from scratch, from scratch, so—
P: Mm-hm.	
J: Build it all myself, so—	
P: Mm-m.	
J: The story that I tell when I apply, you know, that—	
P: Mm-hm, mm-hm, right.	
J: So there hasn't been like, well, it's not that I have that many social connections, but I do have some, so—	
P: Yeah.	

In the small stories above, Joel positions himself as a jobseeker who manages on his own without social networks. He is an active agent who creates and performs his own story for the potential employers without help from others. Again in contrast to an enterprising, networking and extroverted employee, Joel positions himself as a traditional good worker who relies on his own merits rather than on his networks. However, as it has been argued in prior research, besides meritocratic competence and abilities, the so-called enterprising abilities, including social skills, have become more and more important to prove one's employability in the eyes of prospective employers (see, e.g. Komulainen et al., [2011](#); Korhonen et al., [2012](#)).

*Change in the Construction of Experience as a Jobseeker
and Employee*

As a mature student, Joel was older than most of his fellow students at business school, which was reflected in his educational and working life path. He had graduated in 2003 as an IT designer and had several years of work experience from the IT sector. He constructs change in his graduate identity in relation to age and work experience between the first and the follow-up interviews:

<i>Experienced jobseeker and employee 2019</i>	<i>Jobseeker and employee with too little experience 2020</i>
P: Yeah. Who do you think competes with you for the same jobs?	P: Hm. But how do you see your own age and education and experience, if you compare it to those, those umm, who went to university straight from upper secondary school and then got their like MAs quite quickly, so when you are competing for a job, where do you see yourself in that situation?
J: Well, I guess, well, the other students from there are actually my competitors, they compete for the same jobs, so—	J: Well, it's not that much better than what they have, so umm, it's like... like umm, I'm not quite sure, for my age I should have over 10 years of experience, but I have only four, so it's like, it can also be bad thing, like what have I done in between jobs, so (—) so.
P: Mm-hm.	
J: So I guess that played a role why I didn't really get along with them that much. So— (...)	
P: Mm-hm, mm-hm, mm-hm. Were you aware of it when you studied that they are like your competitors in the job market after you graduate?	
J: Yeah, definitely.	
P: Right, so you think that you have reflected, it has reflected on the relationships somehow?	
J: It might, well, it has actually reflected very much, so—	
P: Okay, yeah.	
J: So, umm, but I've tried to emphasise it at every stage, that I have [tries to find the word] previous work experience, so I've tried to use that to my advantage—	
P: Yeah.	
J: When it comes to work, you know.	
P: Yeah, yeah, compared to like younger people—	
J: Yeah.	
P: Then.	
J: That's something I've tried to use to my advantage, so...	
P: Right, so that's your trump card?	
J: Yeah, I do hope so—	

In the first interview, Joel negotiates sameness versus difference in relation to his fellow students who compete for the same jobs with him and with whom he preferred to keep some social distance. He compares himself with his fellow students and positions himself as more experienced in working life. He evaluates previous work experience as a merit that differentiates him from younger students and gives him a head start in the labour market. In line with our analysis above, Joel negotiates his graduate identity as a jobseeker: he does not construct himself as an enterprising jobseeker who is well-networked and would form social relations with his fellow students. Rather, he positions himself as a traditional employee who concentrates on accumulating work experience and merits to convince prospective employers.

In the follow-up interview, however, as Joel negotiates sameness versus difference, he constructs himself and younger jobseekers as being in the same situation with regard to employability. He no longer constructs age and work experience as his assets, but evaluates that he is lacking in work experience in relation to his age—he should have 10 and not four years of work experience—which is harmful in relation to his employability. This also reflects change in his identity positions: in the first interview, he positions himself as an experienced employee, whereas in the second interview he positions himself as an employee who lacks work experience with respect to his age. Linear accumulation of work experience without rupture and rapid progress in working life is constructed as an ideal that determines employability. Lack of work experience in relation to age needs to be negotiated in relation to fellow students and competitors as well as accounted for potential employers: “what I have done between jobs”.

Changing Positions Towards the Future and a Dream Job

In line with our analysis above, Joel’s positioning in relation to future prospects and employability changes between the first and the follow-up interviews.

Future 2019

P: Mm-hm, yeah, right, right. Well, how do you see your chances for employment and position in the job market?

J: Well, at the moment, it looks like they are quite good, like the jobs that I’ve applied to, applied to, I’d say the chances for employment are quite good (...) I see them as positive, so—

Future 2020

P: So, what do you think about your future work and working life?

J: Well, I’m slightly, slightly worried, worried about the future, as umm, I still can’t seem to find a job, but I still haven’t, I haven’t given up on it yet, you know?

Joel sees his future as positive in 2019, and his work prospects are good. In 2020, however, he constructs change in relation to his employability, “I still can’t seem to find a job”. He constructs the situation as more pessimistic than in the first interview: “There are simply so many applicants for a single job, so it’s always like they have someone, someone better, a better option, so I guess that’s the reason, the reason for it, so”. He negotiates sameness versus difference in relation to other jobseekers and positions other jobseekers as better and more employable than he is. The crowded graduate labour market also provides a legitimate explanation for the difficulties of getting a job: unemployment is, thus, not constructed solely as an individual responsibility. Joel also negotiates agency in relation to employability: Am I a jobseeker worthy of employment? Nevertheless, he positions himself as a resilient, hard-working and active jobseeker, encouraging himself that he does not easily give up, but keeps looking for work.

<i>Dream job 2019</i>	<i>Dream job 2020</i>
P: Well, what do you think, what would be your dream job in the future?	J: Well, my dream would be some easy job in the city, like teaching financial administration at a vocation school or somewhere, and if I could get paid three thousand for it, it would be OK, and (-) experience grows, then it rises to four thousand, so it’s basically quite, there’s no reason to work your fingers to the bone anymore, you know, like there are so many irreplaceable people at the cemetery, so it’s like, I guess that at that some point, (my) dream job is an easier job, so at the moment it’s like that—
J: Well, I guess auditing would be a dream job.	
P: Mm-hm.	
J: And if I could then progress into being a slightly more experienced auditor, I guess that would be one	

While reflecting on the possible future in the first interview, Joel constructs accountancy as his dream job in which he would like to work and progress in more demanding tasks. In 2020, however, the possible future has changed, and he positions his dream job in the public sector and in teaching financial management in vocational education. He dreams of an “easy job” in teaching despite weaker wage developments. An easier job would enhance quality of life, and there would be no risk of burnout or falling ill. “Working your fingers to the bone” can be interpreted as an enterprising employee position in the hectic and stressful business world

that Joel constructs as undesirable. Instead, he prefers a teaching job that would allow easy work in the public sector. His position in relation to work has changed, and other things in life have become more meaningful: “The hurry actually had an impact, as it made me look at life outside of work, take care of this other life better, so in a way it shifted to a situation where work, work wasn’t as meaningful in life anymore, so”.

NEGOTIATION OF GRADUATE IDENTITY IN RELATION TO EMPLOYABILITY IN SMALL STORIES

In this methodological chapter, we chose Joel’s narrative life history interviews conducted in autumn 2019 and 2020 as a case example to illustrate how the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis can be applied in the reading of follow-up interview data. Joel’s case example illustrates the temporally evolving positioning in relation to employability and, as such, reveals continuity and/or change in the ways graduate identity is constructed in situated interaction in the context of life history.

In contrast to the other participants in our larger HighEmploy research project, Joel’s educational and working life trajectory was not successful in the sense that the transition from HE to working life with a master’s degree in business and administration did not progress smoothly and as expected. His educational and working life trajectory consisted of many changes, and he had also been made redundant that created ruptures that needed to be legitimately accounted for the interviewer as well as for the imagined audience, especially prospective employers.

Our analysis illustrates how such ruptures as unemployment are negotiated in situated interaction in the small stories across time (Bamberg, 1997, 2004). This is fruitful, as such analysis makes ideals related to employability visible in a situation where these ideals are broken (Korhonen et al., 2020). We read Joel’s small stories as accounts for making a difficult and tragic situation understandable in relation to enterprising ideals of employability (Laalo et al., 2019). A good and valuable employee is active, independent but also networking, resilient and hard-working, and manages a heavy workload in hectic working life; he continually develops himself and accumulates work experience without “gaps” in the CV. The small story approach makes visible the socially constructed conditions for identity negotiations: Am I good enough as an employee in the graduate labour market and in the world of business?

Based on the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis, two main narratives can be interpreted across the small stories analysed in this chapter. Joel's interpretations construct continuity in relation to his graduate identity as a traditional good worker and as a resilient and active jobseeker and change in his identity positioning in relation to employability. These narratives also clash: the graduate identity of a traditional good worker is not positioned as employable in the graduate labour market that demands such qualities as being active, autonomous, innovative, problem-solving, enterprising, energetic and well-networked (Laalo et al., 2019). Despite and because of difficulties in job-search, however, as a traditional good worker, Joel constructs agency as a resilient employee and jobseeker. He also constructs an alternative possible future as "easy" teaching in the public sector, as other things besides work have become important in life.

Joel constructs continuity in positioning himself as a traditional good, hard-working and meticulous employee, not as a middle-class enterprising employee (see also Skeggs, 2004; Siivonen et al., 2016). In the small stories constructed in the follow-up interview, he positions himself as a good but not as valuable and the right kind of worker who manages in hectic working life. As Skeggs (2005) argues, the possibility to position oneself as an "enterprising self" is quite different for those coming from a working-class background. Also Joel's "traditional" rather than "enterprising" graduate identity can be interpreted in relation to his social background; his family background was non-academic and his parents worked in blue-collar jobs.

CONCLUSION

As we have tried to make visible in this chapter, the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis permit subtle and systematic reading and analysis of graduate identity in relation to employability in narrative follow-up research. The chapter contributes to extant literature in two important ways. First, it provides a contribution to employability research on graduate identity as a process across time (see also, e.g., Holmes, 2013, 2015). Our reading of Joel's case example illustrates how graduate identity is under continuous negotiation in the labour market, relating not only to employment and/or unemployment (cf., Holmes, 2013, 2015), but also to the ideals related to employability that a graduate worthy of employment is expected to meet. The need for continuous negotiation of graduate identity implies that there is no single end-point in employability,

such as a set of skills or attributes (see, e.g., Holmes, 2013, 2015), that could be developed or measured as an HE outcome. Instead, employability is a socially constructed and mediated process in which identity work has become salient and critical to pursuing opportunities and success in working life (Siivonen et al., 2020). Moreover, making visible the negotiation of graduate identity in relation to normative ideals also brings forth inequalities related to, for example, the social class inherent in the employability discourse: enterprising graduate identity is not equally available for those coming from a working-class background. Consequently, good employees may be viewed as not good enough if they do not display enterprising qualities related to the neoliberal ideals of employability. This is a challenge for both employees and employers: the former looking for work, the latter looking for capable workforce. This is also a challenge that cannot be solved by graduates alone.

Second, the chapter contributes to the literature on qualitative longitudinal research methodology, which has only rarely been examined in extant literature (see, however, Korhonen et al., 2020). Follow-up interviews generated at two time points (2019, 2020) allow the analysis of continuity and change of graduate identity across time, while the small story approach permits the nuanced analysis of juxtaposed accounts generated at these two time points and pertaining to the same themes. The small story approach allows the narrative analysis of continuity and/or change of graduate identity as an emergent phenomenon, making diverse positionings in relation to employability visible. Moreover, the theory of identity dilemmas (Bamberg, 2011) provides a useful tool to analyse the negotiation of continuity and change of graduate identity across time. In the qualitative research methodology literature, life story research has often focused on the creation of coherence (Linde, 1993) rather than on interaction-oriented analysis of temporally evolving positioning activities through which continuity and/or change in relation to graduate identity is negotiated. Such tendencies have been criticised as middle-class as the focus on the creation of coherence marginalises different kinds of stories told by diverse individuals and groups (Hyvärinen et al., 2010). The small story approach, however, does not exclude or marginalise but includes the diversity of stories and fragments of talk in the analysis as the interest lies both in the multiplicity and in the sameness.

Combining the small story approach and narrative positioning analysis with the reading of narrative life history allows the analysis of the meanings constructed in the situated interaction of small stories in the context

of life history. This approach also allows the analysis of such life historical positions as class. In this chapter, our aim has been to illustrate with Joel's case example the construction and negotiation of continuity and/or change across time in relation to (employable) graduate identity in a situation where the HE graduate labour market transition has not progressed smoothly or as expected. However, we acknowledge that although Joel's case example is interesting in terms of continuity and change, the small stories consist of only a little reflexivity and negotiation. In our project, it is also an exceptional case. Nevertheless, we suggest that the methodological approach presented and illustrated in this chapter is an important contribution to future research for examining employability as a processual rather than possessive phenomenon (see Holmes, 2013), as it permits the analysis of different kinds of stories and positionings across time.

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