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‘Some people may feel socially excluded and distressed’: Finnish business students’ participation in extracurricular activities and the accumulation of cultural capital

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‘Some people may feel socially excluded and distressed’: Finnish business students’ participation in extracurricular activities and the accumulation of cultural capital

Abstract:

A growing number of scholars have investigated how extracurricular activities (ECA) are intimately tied to graduates’ positional competition and enhancement of employability. Prior studies have shown that the strategic tendency towards ECA especially applies to privileged, high-achieving students from a high-status university. Yet studies considering ECA as a site of gendered practices have been scarce. We explore how graduates have accumulated cultural capital through their lived experiences in ECA and how ECA practices construct classed and gendered dispositions and distinctions among graduates. We draw on Bourdieu’s conception of cultural capital, as well as contemporary feminist debates over gender and capital. Analysing 32 graduate interviews from four business schools in Finland, we found that through participation in student associations’ ECA, our interviewees learned distinctive values, preferences and behaviours. In addition to ‘instrumental’ cultural capital, such as leadership skills that enhance CV, ECA provided opportunities to accumulate embedded cultural capital and confirm membership/learning to become a member in the professional middle class. Moreover, especially the female interviewees learned to adjust to masculine business culture and develop aspirations towards prestigious job positions.

Keywords (3-5): *extracurricular activities; cultural capital; positional competition; employability; gender*

Introduction

Universities are crucial sites for constructing graduates' social status in the labour market. At university, graduates' attitudes and aspirations are funnelled towards more unified and narrow ideas of future work and careers (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016; Lämsä et al. 2008). In the current article, we focus on how students' participation in extracurricular activities (ECA) is affiliated with graduate employability.

The dominant approach to graduate employability involves how participation in ECA can develop valuable skills, abilities and attributes while enhancing individuals' ability to gain and maintain a fulfilling job after graduation (e.g., Dickinson, Griffiths, and Bredice 2020; Tran 2017; Kafta and Taksa 2015). However, as Tholen (2017) and Brown, Hesketh and Williams (2003; See also Brown, Lauder, and Ashton 2011) have stated, this approach is unsatisfactory because it lacks attention to the differences in the power of social groups when it comes to enhancing their employability at the expense of others. Instead, Bourdieu's (1984) theory on the forms of capital has been significant for studying positional conflict in graduate employability; the accumulation of economic, cultural and social capitals can explain how individuals and social groups fare within the 'rules of the game' in educational and job market competition (e.g., Tomlinson 2017; Tholen 2017; Brown, Power, Tholen, and Allouch 2016; Kalfa and Taksa 2015; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003).

A growing number of scholars have followed a critical approach in their investigations of ECA; they define ECA as one of the exclusionary processes by which the middle class systematically restrict upward mobility from the rest (Liu 2021; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013; Stevenson and Clegg 2011; Tomlinson 2008). In addition, feminist scholars have argued that the formation of the middle-class advantage is influenced by gender (e.g., McLeod 2005). Yet studies that consider ECA as a site of both classed and gendered practices have been scarce (Stevenson and Clegg 2012).

In the current study[1], we draw on Bourdieu's (1984; 1986) concept of 'cultural capital' and insights from contemporary theories of gender and capitals (e.g., Wulff et al. 2021; Ross-Smith and Huppatz

[1] The present study is part of the larger project: *Higher Education Graduates' Employability and Social Positioning in the Labour Market*, funded by the Academy of Finland (2018–2022). The purpose of the research project was to investigate the positionality of employability and graduates' early career trajectories. Altogether, we conducted 76 graduate interviews in 2019 and, in addition, 44 follow-up interviews in 2020 with business graduates from Finnish universities and universities of applied sciences. In the current paper, we have excluded UAS graduates and mature students (aged over 30 years old).

2010; Skeggs 1997). Our aim is to explore how graduates have accumulated cultural capital through their lived experiences in ECA and how ECA practices construct classed and gendered dispositions and distinctions among university graduates. Our analysis is based on 32 graduate interviews conducted at Finnish business schools. In our study, ECA refer to cultural and social activities organised by student associations affiliated with Finnish universities. Student associations range from student unions and subject organisations to hobbyist clubs and special interest groups; they are an interesting site for studying ECA because they represent student-led activities targeted at fellow students. Moreover, student associations monitor the students' interests at the university and in society (Brooks, Byford, and Sela 2015) and are keen to enhance graduate employability (e.g., see Siivonen et al. 2020; Padilla-Angulo 2019).

ECA have not been critically investigated thus far in the Finnish context, even though there are plenty of student associations and activities. The current study provides an advanced theoretical perspective on how participation in ECA is structured by classed and gendered practices. Moreover, the results contribute to a current sociological concern of 'intraclass' differences among university graduates and an increasing positional competition inherent in the middle class reproduction through higher education (Brown et al. 2016). Furthermore, the current study advances the critical, gender-sensitive approach to cultural capital and ECA research.

Lived experiences of extracurricular activities and accumulation of cultural capital

Bourdieu (1984) has defined 'cultural capital' as cultural knowledge that includes cultural attitudes, preferences and practices. Such capital can be slowly accumulated over time through family upbringing and schooling, as well as broader cultural socialisation. Cultural capital confers social status and power, thus comprising the social dispositions and distinctive cultural 'taste' that can be mobilised for social selection into high-status employment. Lamont and Lareau (1988) have further defined the Bourdieusian cultural capital conception as 'widely shared, high-status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviours, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion' (156). Although we do not explicitly focus on it, the concept of 'social capital' relates to the accumulation of 'cultural capital', which is key in the context of our study. Social capital refers to the possession of a network of social connections that is convertible, at least in certain conditions, into economic capital (Bourdieu 1986). Active participation in ECA enables students to mobilise social networks among alumni and corporate partners, allowing them to use such connections to improve their employability and get entry into the graduate labour market

(Tholen et al. 2013). In the field of business, people without adequate social and cultural capital are excluded from full participation.

Feminist scholars have further interpreted Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital as embracing women's agency; they have examined femaleness and femininity as forms of embodied cultural capital (e.g., McNay 1999; Skeggs 1997). Ross-Smith and Huppatz (2010) have defined 'female capital [as] the gender advantage that is derived from being perceived as female, but not necessarily feminine, whereas feminine capital is the gender advantage that is derived from a skill set that is associated with femininity or from being recognised as feminine' (556). Accordingly, women can draw on their feminine dispositions to navigate the boundaries of a field established by men, such as the field of business administration and economics. Moreover, women can combine masculine, female and feminine capitals in their strategising for professional advantage (Wulff et al. 2021). Thus, gendered dispositions are not straightforwardly reproduced but are resisted and transfigured in women's daily enactments at work (Skeggs, 1997).

In the current study, class and gender are not seen as static positions but are understood as discursively constructed processes that are lived within on a daily basis (see also Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2016). Class and gender provide relations in which cultural capital comes to be hierarchically organised and valued (Skeggs 1997). Moreover, cultural capital materialises as a resource that gives or denies access to different ways of being and becoming (Skeggs 1997); it is used to exclude and unify people (Lamont and Lareau 1988). Embedded cultural capital forms the condition of the possibility to talk and act upon in diverse social fields, such as the field of business. For example, a middle-class background and masculinity are strong assets to capitalise upon in the business graduates' labour market.

Cultural capital provides a framework for understanding power and exchange in the construction of social dispositions in relation to ECA and graduate employability. Moreover, the gendering of capitals supports a deeper understanding of how power operates in accumulating advantage and in the reproduction of gender segregation (Wulff et al. 2021). As acknowledged in earlier studies, privileged, high-achieving students from a high-status university—male students in particular—are among the ones able to generate valuable capitals through various social and cultural activities (Stevenson and Clegg 2012; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2012; Tomlinson 2008). For example, Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller (2012) investigate how students spent their nonstudy time, comparing the different experiences of students from different class backgrounds, from one 'elite'

university and one ‘new’, post-1992 university, in the same English city. In particular, students from a nonprivileged background and nonelite institutions often spend their leisure time outside the university, generally finding it difficult to use such ECA to demonstrate that they possess the skills, values and attributes that graduate employers are looking for (see also: Greenback 2015; Lehmann 2012; Stevenson and Clegg 2011). Therefore, Bathmaker Ingram and Waller conclude that the current emphasis on ECA and graduate employability compound, rather than alleviate, social inequality:

> Those in dominant and dominated positions are likely to remain so based on the capacity to generate and exploit differing capitals, with middle-class advantage over priviledged access to capitals (through economic support from parents, through priviledged networks, through long-term investment in leisure activities), meaning they can mobilise these to further weight the game to their advantage. (2012, 741)

With a focus on at-campus ECA, the formation of middle-class disposition and advantages is ever more present. For example, according to Liu (2021), leading Chinese universities hold rich cultural programmes and social activities as part of university life to enhance the moral, intellectual, physical and aesthetic training of university students. Urban, middle-class students apply for membership in a variety of student organisations, seeking student leadership positions because such responsibilities increase their odds of higher scores in the annual assessment, potentially leading to a scholarship; in turn, this can provide an advantage in their future job search. In contrast, rural, underprivileged students often fail to involve themselves in such cocurricular activities.

Moreover, Stevenson and Clegg (2012) show that in the ‘new’ English university, there is a gendered bias in the sorts of ECA that are counting as ‘valuable’ among university students. Male students consider their leisure activities as being valuable ECA more often than women, regardless of class or ethnic background, whereas women often undervalue their hobbies as adding value to their employability, rarely considering their caring or other domestic responsibilities as a form of capital (Stevenson and Clegg 2012). Eder and Parker (1987) demonstrate in the high school context in the United States in the 1980s how ECA is integral to gender socialisation and reproduction of gender dispositions and distinctions in value preferences and social practices. Based on their extensive ethnographic fieldwork, Eder and Parker argue that the activities and events widely attended by male students are the most central and prestigious, providing the most visibility for the active members and the leaders of such activities.

We focus on ECA organised by student associations at a university. In this field, women take part in similar student-led ECA as their male peers and recognise the value of converting their participation in ECA into experience for CVs. However, as McNay (1999) has argued, women who enter into traditionally nonfeminine spheres of action, such as the leadership roles in business administration and economics, experience a lack of fit between their gendered dispositions and the social field (see also McLeod 2005; Ross-Smith and Huppatz 2012; Wulff et al. 2021). They need to negotiate between the ambiguity and unevenness of gender norms and deal with the tensions inherent in such negotiations (McNay 1999, 112).

Finnish student associations in the fields of economics and business administration

Each university has its own organisational contexts and cultural practices; thus, they form differing sites for socialisation and capital accumulation (Reay, David, and Ball 2001). In general, universities with high resources have organised many ECA opportunities, hence providing economic, cultural and social advantages for the graduates who actively take part in such activities (e.g., Liu 2021; Brown et al. 2016; Reay, David, and Ball 2001). Moreover, there are national differences in how ECA are integrated into student life and what type of activities are recognised and valued the most.

In Finland, business programmes that award degrees in 'Business administration and economics' are offered in 10 out of 13 universities. In every business school, there are plenty of student associations affiliated with the universities' student unions[2]. These include subject organisations (each major subject in the business schools having an organisation of their own), clubs (gathered around special interests), sports teams (including various kinds of sports, from individual to team sports) and different kinds of projects (gathered around annual events and traditional festivities). All unions publish student magazines and offer sports facilities for students. All associations have formal representative and decision-making organisations and several possibilities for business students to act in positions of trust: as chairs, board members and responsible persons.

[2] In Finland, all universities have an independent student union, and membership is mandatory by law. The university's student unions are represented by the National Union of University Students in Finland (SYL), the largest national student organisation providing benefits and services for all 130,000 Finnish university students (www.syl.fi). Student unions coordinate and finance ECA of smaller subject organisations and clubs.

Relatively egalitarian access and flat institutional hierarchies characterise the Finnish system of higher education. However, the status differences between universities seem to be more evident in the field of business than in other fields of study in Finland (Nori 2011). The leading business schools are well positioned as part of established universities and have succeeded in attaining high positions in international rankings. The business programmes of new regional universities are smaller in size and relatively less competitive. Accordingly, the oldest student union of the leading university has over a hundred-year history and accumulated wealth: it owns properties in the centre of the capital city and has business activities of its own. Despite having different resources, the younger institutions imitate the activities of the older ones. The student associations of different universities are also well connected to each other, and they co-organise nationwide events.

Participation in ECA is part of organisational context and practices because it forms a part of the learning environment for the students within the institution (Reay, David, and Ball 2001; Siivonen et al., 2020). A review of the websites of the Finnish business students' associations shows that at least some of the hobby clubs concentrate on activities aimed at cultivating the capital needed in business life. These clubs include investment clubs, different kinds of culinary clubs, cultural clubs or sports clubs related to sailing or golf. New arrivals include women's career society, which was established in 2019. As presented on the society's webpage, the aim is to 'help close the gender gap in specialist and leadership positions and we aim to unite, empower and inspire talented individuals'. (https://womenscareersociety.com)

Moreover, student associations are important actors in bringing students and business firms into contact with each other. Student associations have business partners who sponsor their activities. Companies can have their job postings on the student associations' websites and take part in organising student events. Student unions also have close connections with the trade union for graduates and students in economics and business administration (*Ekonomiliitto,* in Finnish).

Data and methods

To study how graduates made sense of their lived experiences of ECA, we conducted 32 in-depth, narrative interviews. Our interviewees were from four Finnish universities, including both the leading Finnish business schools and newer business programmes located in the regional cities[3]. We

[3] We conducted the interviews at the university or interviewees' workplace; some were conducted online or by phone because of long distance. The duration of the interviews varied from around one to three hours and produced rich data.

conducted the interviews in March–October 2019. The interview schedule was formulated around the sequences of educational and professional trajectories and thematic questions related to perceived abilities, the influence of family background, gender and age and experienced positional competition in the labour market. In particular, questions related to study experiences, feelings of belonging and networking with peers prompted discussions around ECA, though we did not systematically ask our interviewees about their participation in students associations' activities. Our narrative approach to interviewing oriented around the issue of ECA in an open-ended way as we focused on interviewees' own meaning making. Therefore, with some interviewees we asked about ECA, with some we asked about their student life and they discussed about ECA among other things, and with some ECA did not come up in the interview.

Our interview data feature diversity. We interviewed almost an even number of men (17) and women (14). The ages of the interviewees varied from 23 to 30 (median age was 26). We excluded people over 30 years old because they were usually studying part time and did not participate in ECA on campus. We roughly classified the interviewees as working class (16) and middle class (15) by looking at their parents' educational and occupational status. However, this task required some simplifications of class positions because the classifications are not clear-cut (see Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Mutanen, under review; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). We also leaned on how the participants talked about their backgrounds, that is, what they said about the economic and cultural resources of their families. Most of our interviewees had graduated within six months before the interviews and had relevant work experience prior to their formal graduation.

We analysed the interviews thematically and focused on the narrative content (Riessman 2007). We began our analysis by reading the interview transcripts and identifying different types of student associations' ECA. Then, we thematically coded such activities and the rationale that the graduates used for indicating accumulated cultural capital and attributed employability to ECA participation. We were also interested in accounts in which the graduates explained why they did *not* take part in student-led ECA. After initial thematic analysis, we selected the most informative case narratives and further interpreted them from the perspective of classed and gendered distinctions. Although we were focusing on the specific narrative content, we also paid attention to the interview context and discourse: how the interviewees talked about their ECA experiences with words, concepts and

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We recruited the interviewees using multiple channels: student registers and the email lists of alumni and graduates' professional associations. The interviews were recorded, transcribed verbatim and pseudonymised. The original interviews were in Finnish, and the extracts used were translated into English by a professional. Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics.

forms of speech within the shared cultural context of the business schools (Gubrium and Holstein 2008).

FINDINGS

In what follows, we present the graduates' lived experiences of ECA in two parts. First, we exemplify how participation in student parties and other social events and activities familiarised students with dominating cultural preferences, valuations and behaviours in the field of economics and business administration. Second, we show how leadership activities on the board of student associations and in student-led projects were significant, especially to female students because they built their self-confidence and aspirations towards more demanding and prestigious job positions.

Participating in ECA and socialising with the distinct culture of the business schools

Most of our interviewees, who entered university soon after general upper secondary school, expressed membership in student associations and participation in a variety of ECA as a natural part of student life. This resonates with Bathmaker, Ingram and Waller's (2013) findings that privileged students are typically involved with ECA in a taken-for-granted way, without necessarily expressing conscious effort for the cultivation of capital. The cultural expectation to participate in the activities organised by the student associations on campus is firmly expressed in the following narrative of Maria, a 27-year-old working-class graduate, who had moved from the countryside to a relatively big city to carry out her business studies:

> Maria: Actually, I think it all began at the very first student party. So you can't really deny or belittle their influence. Naturally, student parties do revolve around substance use, but if you don't go there, you will be left out, out of everything … (it's like falling) off the boat.
> Interviewer: Yes … How would things change if you didn't go?
> Maria: You wouldn't get any friends. There wouldn't be groups for assignments. I mean, naturally, there would be groups because we have group assignments at school, but you would always be the person waiting for someone to invite you to the group. So these phenomena we all know from elementary school, when teams were formed in sports, like soccer teams, or when we were finding partners for art class or similar cases, so we still have the same phenomena. If you weren't from day one, from the first day of school

> participating in those make-a-friend activities, where tutors put us in pairs and groups, and we had speed dating and all sorts of things. If I weren't there, I would have been left out. Or it would have been more difficult to get to know people and be 'in'.

Maria stated that without being involved with ECA, including student parties, early on, one is 'excluded from everything'. Consequently, as she vividly elaborated, social relations inside and outside the classroom would be affected as well. Without getting to know one's fellow students via ECA, one will always be the last to be selected in a peer group, just as in sports or in art projects in when in elementary school, as Maria made the comparison. Here, the accumulation of cultural capital goes together with social capital because being an 'outsider' would not be only a social problem, but a barrier for the assimilation of the valued knowledge and dispositions as well. Within the ECA of student-run associations, new members were receptive to the influence of fellow students and became familiar with the dominant culture and kinds of style, preferences and behaviour that were highly valued in that community. By hanging out with other students (and being and becoming like others), new members learned the 'feel for the game' and cultural expectations and norms: how to have fun and be relaxed in the right way, how to look and talk and what kind of social relations were desirable (see also Siivonen et al. 2020).

The valued qualities and practices of business students were normalised as part of one's own conduct; meanwhile, they excluded people who did not fit in. Miro, a 27-year-old middle-class graduate, described business people's dispositions, looks and passion in a sarcastic manner: 'Well, this stereotypical image of a business school student still holds quite true, unfortunately. I mean, you see a lot of people going around in suits and who are very passionate about money and so on'. A peek at the Finnish student associations' websites also indicates something about the style, manners and conduct within the field. In pictures where the boards of student associations are presented, both men and women often wear formal uniform-like suits, indicating the dress code of the business life. Miro did not associate himself with a stereotypical business student 'in a suit', which is associated with masculinity, but had found his ECA and group of peers from student theatre and other cultural activities.

Through participation in social events and activities, students start liking what one is supposed to like. ECA becomes enjoyable. As Emil, a 26-year-old working-class graduate, along with our other high-participating, male interviewees, stated, 'We did invest in having a good time'. The metaphor of 'investment' is illustrative here. With his choice of words, Emil shows that he has become

familiar with the business language. Moreover, he has literally invested time and effort in socialising with the dominant student culture and the prevailing social dispositions. The game is uneven as middle-class students possess~~ed~~ already prior to accessing university the cultural capital that has made it easier for them to belong in the group of active business students. Working-class students, such as Emil, had to first overcome some class-related boundaries, such as dissonance in dispositions between old friends from upper-secondary school and business school students, before their could fully enjoy and benefit from student associations' ECA.

Another example of the working-class students' stance was the lived experiences of those who did not participate and felt discomfort and alienation. The 'right' attitude, affect and behavioural codes functioned as excluding practices for students without embedded cultural capital. According to Lamont and Lareau (1988, 158), Bourdieu introduces 'self-elimination' as a complex process of exclusion; accordingly, people adjust their aims to participate and invest in the accumulation of cultural capital to their perceived changes of success. People with less capital do not engage in activities in specific social settings where they are not familiar with specific cultural norms (see also Lehmann 2012). The cultural practices of student-led ECA and social events were exclusionary for those who did not know or recognise the right kinds of behavioural codes and did not meet the cultural conditions of belonging in the 'inner circle' of student culture, as Tea, a 27-year-old graduate with a working-class background, noted:

> Tea: I did participate in all kinds of student activities, like, I was sitting on the board and committee and also in all sorts of student parties and events (…) And I did have a lot of fun those days (…) Well, in general, student culture is, well, quite party orientated and cruel in a way. So in hindsight, afterwards, I have started to think about [it]. Or after following, for example, discussion on an event of sorts, called a 'sitsit' party, which were a really central part of that [student culture]. So in a way, it was self-evident for everyone to act in a certain way. So still, those parties can exclude some people and even make them feel uncomfortable. So in that way, it is quite a harsh and rude culture, like …
> Interviewer: What are the 'sitsit' like?
> Tea: They are these seated meals that have very strict rules; you sit at a table, drink alcohol and sing. (…) And then, if you break the rules, let's say you leave your seat or do, well, not sit still when you are supposed to, if someone is performing and, and you just keep on mumbling, you might be punished. (…) And these punishments are, apparently, something

> that just, just, umm, I recently read about it that these punishments were apparently very distressing for some people—like even humiliating.

As Tea reflected on, the unwritten rules of the students' formal dinner party made the event distressing and humiliating for people who were not familiar with the behavioural codes and ways of socialising. Moreover, Tea further explained that formal rules and punishments for misbehaviour were needed because there were 'guys over 20 years old drinking enough alcohol [to get drunk]'. As such, she made reference to gendered outlook and practices. The prerequisite for partying and drinking turned out to be an exclusionary practice to participate in social activities, especially for some male interviewees (see Siivonen et al. 2020). Heavy drinking as an exclusionary cultural practice was brought up by the minority who did not drink alcohol, like Roope, a 26-year-old final-year student with a working-class background:

> Roope: Most of them (business school students) appear to be party people. Like, I have thought about it, like 'Well, do I want to be involved with people like that?' if I have been quite reserved and negative towards it (drinking), my stance, so—
> Interviewer: Would it be possible, like in that financial world and business world, there are, after all, quite a few of these, like old boy networks for party people, where people solve many things. What do you think of this?
> Roope: Well, umm, I don't actually have any clearer image of it … In a way—I do feel this certain injustice, too. But in a way, you kind of just accept it, like …

As Roope—and the other interviewees who did not want to or could not participate in student-led ECA—some students recognised the cultural demand and rewards for being an active member of students associations and social networks. They acknowledged that missing out may have had some impact on their career trajectories. They felt such consequences as unfair, but at the same time, they accepted the situation as they were, like Roope: mutual deals in business life are made between people who know each other and like to party together. The social and cultural capital accumulated in the student-led ECA was mobilised at the entry to employment and in terms of good business deals in the corporate world (see also Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Mutanen, under review).

Female business students' leadership roles in student associations

Participation in ECA provided opportunities for some students to carry out different kinds of administrative and coordinating responsibilities. They were appointed to the boards of student associations and carried on specific projects, such as organising a yearly gala dinner or theatre production or publishing a student magazine. The board had a predefined organisational structure, and board members had formally dedicated roles and responsibilities for providing all aspects of leadership for the student association. Of course, there were differences in the individual interests and amount of time and resources that people could dedicate to their leadership responsibilities.

Board membership was highly valued, not least for the additional value that such positions brought for one's CV. The business graduates could convert the cultural capital that they had accumulated in positions with leadership responsibility into economic capital as they transitioned to the employment market (Bourdieu 1984). Some of our interviewees had experienced fierce competition among peers for attaining leadership positions in student associations, like Birgitta, a 26-year-old working-class graduate: 'When we had like, we were holding elections for new boards, to some student organisations and so on, there was this competition going on, when people wanted those positions'. The point was, as Birgitta continued, that positions of trust 'help those employers to see that maybe this person can carry responsibilities'. Involvement in ECA was about developing professional skills and attitudes that one could learn of only outside of the classroom, as Mette, a 26-year-old middle-class graduate from the leading business school, exemplified in the following:

> It was really important to have these … umm … we kind of had these different organisations and clubs and so on, things universities usually have. So we organised events and so on, so … although people think that we just party, we learned quite a lot about everything, so … (---) we had, for example, one of—, an event where I was responsible for business connections, so I organised sponsors for the events, so I phoned different companies. So I'm sure those things will definitely help me in my current working life, too. Things that you learn and did not learn in a lecture hall, so like … [but in all other activities].

Moreover, in Mette's example, she was working on a project that organised student events. She was responsible for business relations, contacting potential firms and negotiating whether they would like to sponsor the student events. Because she was directly in contact with corporations, she accumulated capital that enhanced her employability and future career. Mette recognised that ECA, especially leadership roles, are embedded in the cocurricular of the business schools aiming to develop future leaders. Graduates who have learned to strive for success and to be ambitious about

their own career goals were key to the societal reputation and prestige of the leading business schools. Moreover, corporate sponsors and their involvement with student-led ECA were a key to ‘career funnelling’, that is, the general process in which a large number of business graduates gravitate towards a narrow range of career choices (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016). Mette also explained how the institutional objectives and the personal ambitions are aligned:

> Mette: Of course, we were taught to be quite ambitious in business school, like … Like, it just doesn’t work like that; if you sit in a corner, no one is going to give you a promotion. You must want the promotion yourself and be goal orientated and ambitious. [--- The business schools’] atmosphere is like: people are ambitious. And although we might not compete with one another, so … so umm … It’s just that we organise different events, and then, you start to believe in your own abilities, like ‘okay, if I can do this, I can do everything!’ So I have gotten so much confidence from my time in business school, like okay, I am given certain resources, and I can do whatever I want with them. Or if you are leading an organisation, like if … like … you have a lot of power and responsibility. And like that, umm, an individual does become goal orientated and ambitious, and … Certain people there are like that. So that is how it (participation in ECA) makes an impact.

Mette admitted that she was not that ambitious, competitive and career orientated before she started her business studies; however, she adopted ‘the right kind of mindset’ along the way. The young female graduates whom we interviewed, such as Mette, pointed out that positions of trust were significant for them because they forced women to adjust their aspirations and career choices towards more demanding and prestigious job positions. However, the culturally valued attributes, such as being ambitious, self-determined, self-responsible and self-assured, are especially culturally attached to men. Ross-Smith and Huppertz (2010) have argued that when women have successfully taken on leadership and management roles, it is because they have assimilated masculine values and utilise masculine tools of power (i.e., masculine forms of cultural capital). Mette had recognised and adjusted to the demands of masculine business culture and what it takes to succeed in such an environment. The site—high-status business school—is crucial for this recognition because it provides the resources for student associations, which, in turn, provide opportunities for students to participate in ECA that are highly valued by employers.

Our female interviewees never openly criticised the fact that the accumulation of cultural capital in the field of business administration and economics required adjustment to the masculine norm.

Sometimes, such adjustment was, nevertheless, not easy. Some of the leadership responsibilities were more attractive and rewarding than others, and there was competition among the board members about who was doing what. In some cases, there was an unfair or gendered distribution of tasks, as in the case of ECA at student theatre: Birgitta (female, working-class) had carried the responsibility of the masks and make-up of the performance artists, whereas Miro (male, middle-class) had been in charge for one summer for a full artistic production in a cultural summer festival. The 'feminine capital' was unrecognised, as Tina, a 28-year-old middle-class graduate, whose graduation was delayed because of burn out, revealed:

> Already in my freshman year, I was on the board of our [student organisation]. That was basically a 24/7 job. And then, the next year, I was [on the board of the union], which was even more 24/7 [laughs]. And then, after that, I did a lot of different other voluntary things. (…)And then, this ended up backfiring a couple of years later. (…) Maybe there was something like that, despite it being nice. So because I hadn't done anything like that before, it was really taxing. And since I am a person who likes to do everything perfectly. Then, perhaps that [being a member of the board], maybe there were also contradictions, things that I didn't even want. Or something, very political things that did not interest me the slightest. (…) To be forced in the middle of it all, and I didn't want to offend anybody. So perhaps that was something that also (tired me out).

In her narrative, Tina described her participation in voluntary ECA by using an analogy of a real job that requires constant availability ('24 hours a day, seven days a week'). She also expressed how she was given an unfair amount of duties, more than she could handle. Moreover, in her leadership role, Tina wanted to do her tasks as well as possible, 'to do everything so perfectly'. Perfectionism is often taken as typical, especially for women; women are also blamed for not being confident enough and, therefore, trying too hard to perform well. In addition, multitasking, consensus building and generosity—the characteristics that Tina noted—are culturally associated with female leadership and feminine capital (Ross-Smith and Huppatz 2010). Tina just wanted to be nice with everyone ('didn't want to offend anybody'). Eventually, Tina found herself in the middle of organisational politics and power conflicts, which she was not interested in and did not want to deal with. Her feminine skills could not compensate for the lack of masculine capital, such as assertiveness and aggressiveness. Thus, although she was carrying a position of trust, she felt powerless.

Discussion

In the current study, we have examined how the lived experiences of student-led ECA enabled the accumulation of cultural capital and how ECA practices constructed classed and gendered dispositions and distinctions. The present study was based on thematic narrative analysis of 32 interviews with young female and male business graduates coming from different social backgrounds and differently ranked Finnish business schools. Our study has confirmed that actively participating students accumulated highly valued knowledge, preferences and behaviours as a natural part of their own conduct. Furthermore, our analyses showed how social connections were intertwined with the accumulation of cultural capital, even though the conception of social capital (Bourdieu 1986) was not our main focus. Through ECA, Finnish students socialised with fellow students and alumni, creating important networks with corporate sponsors, which allowed them to accumulate cultural capital across class boundaries (see also Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Mutanen, under review).

ECA had two roles in the processes of capital accumulation. First, ECA provided opportunities to learn the employer-relevant 'instrumental' cultural capital. Activities, such as running the student associations' board meetings, recruiting corporate sponsors, organising social events and editing a student magazine, for example, offered experiences that strengthened business graduates' CVs. Second, ECA were critical for the learning of embedded cultural capital of the upper middle class. Through participation in ECA, middle-class students confirmed their high societal status. Earlier research has addressed that participation is more 'natural' for middle-class students because they have socialised at home to high-status values and norms; they are able to build their renewed class position on their existing social and cultural advantage (e.g., Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2013). In the current study, active participation in ECA was equally important for the working-class students because it enabled learning to become a member of the professional middle classes in the field of business administration and economics (Haltia, Isopahkala-Bouret, and Mutanen, under review).

By analysing graduates' lived experiences through Bourdieu's cultural capital conception, we have made visible the exclusionary practices in ECA. Some of the practices in ECA encouraged 'self-elimination' of those students who lacked some of the valued capitals (Bourdieu 1984; Lamount and Larou 1988). Exclusion was not about direct discrimination because all Finnish business students were legally eligible to have membership in student associations. However, the cultural

capital involved in processes through which people with less valued resources refused to take place in active participation ('self-elimination') or were asked to 'compete in the same game', meaning that they had to work harder to adjust themselves successfully to the prevailing culture (Lamont and Lareau 1988; Lehmann 2012). Our study showed, for example, how a sitsit, a student dinner party with a formal dress code and heavy alcohol use, includes behavioural rules that are exclusionary for those who have not been socialised for such 'fun'.

Furthermore, we approached student associations' ECA as a site of gendered practices. We did not identify particularly male-dominated and female-dominated activities; our point was not to draw a gendered distinction through a hierarchy of types of ECA in the field of business administration and economics (see Stevenson and Clegg 2012). Our analysis did not confirm either an emphasis on 'gender capital' or 'feminine capital' because the young women attributed participation in ECA to graduate employability (Skeggs 1997). As Kivijärvi (2020) has claimed, Finnish female business students do not want to use the 'gender card' and point to any structural inequalities in business studies or business life; rather, they emphasise the character of 'strong Finnish women' and individual merits.

Yet we argue that throughout their business studies and participation in student-led ECA, the women adjusted to masculine cultural capital deemed valuable in their future business careers (Ross-Smith and Huppertz 2010; see also Lämsä et al. 2018). Leadership roles in student associations and student-led projects were especially important for young women because they needed to acquire valuable employability skills, adjust to the masculine business culture and refine their aspirations towards ambitious career goals. Thus, throughout their participation in student-led ECA, women could attain masculine cultural capital deemed valuable in their future business careers (Ross-Smith and Huppertz 2010). Simultaneously, our study showed that the selection of leadership roles and internal division of labour in the boards of student associations can be unequally distributed and gendered.

To reflect on our research methods, we did not systematically ask questions about participation in ECA, but our narrative approach focused on interviewees' own meaning making. This can be seen as a limitation because we do not have consistent information about who participated, how much and to which kinds of activities. On the other hand, when the interviewees talked about student associations and ECA they organised, they raised the theme by themselves. Thus, we can say that in these cases, ECA truly were a meaningful part of their experiences of business studies and

employability, so the data have authenticity. In the future, however, one option for enriching the study of ECA would be a critical ethnography that enables observation and deep analyses of the classed and gendered practices of various kinds of ECA.

Another future line of research could be to study how ECA relate to other practices aimed at enhancing graduate employability, such as internships and paid employment during studies (see Jackson and Tomlinson 2021; Bathmaker, Ingram, and Waller 2012). These might be, in the Finnish context at least, even more significant for positional status competition than participation in student associations' ECA. Furthermore, in the future, it would be important to extend the scope of research and compare the practices of ECA in other disciplinary fields, such as medicine, social work, literature and arts. We have focused on business administration and economics, which is a professional field mainly representing the private sector. There is a close connection between students, alumni and business sponsors, as well as high economic resources to organise a variety of events and activities, which may not be true in other fields of study.

ECA organised by student associations are not merely a natural part of student life; there are social and cultural structures that define the relative chances of individuals, social classes and different genders in participating in ECA, accumulating capital and finding valuable employment (Brown, Hesketh, and Williams 2003). Our study implies that although student unions have independence in organising their ECA provision, universities should acknowledge their responsibility in enhancing inclusive and equally accessible ECA for all students. Universities' role as an important site for ECA and enhancement of employability needs to be addressed in future research.

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