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Young and/but successful: business graduates performing themselves as valuable labouring subjects

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ABSTRACT

This article advances critical theoretical and methodological approaches to employability. From the perspectives of neoliberal governmentality and positioning analysis, we investigate graduate employability as a process of creating value for the self in the labour markets. The study analyses how young Finnish business graduates (n = 19) who work in business organisations perform themselves as valuable labouring subjects in their interviews. Based on our analysis, we develop an argument that being a young business professional is simultaneously presented as a problem and a virtue in terms of a valuable labouring subject. The analysis shows that graduates cultivate themselves as easily employable, mature job seekers and successful young employees equipped with personal social skills, enthusiasm and youthful energy and drive. They draw on the neoliberal discourse of employability to negotiate issues identified as problematic – their young age and lack of work experience – in terms of their value. Their performances of the self are thus purposeful responses to the contextual expectations and pressures they encounter while competing for jobs and striving to gain recognition as novice professionals in organisations. The study reveals that graduates' whole subjectivity is at the core of the process of value creation in contemporary labour markets.

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Introduction

Higher education (HE) institutions in Europe, including Finland, are increasingly expected to serve the knowledge-economy. They have adopted practices directed towards producing subjects capable of sustaining business and growth (Varman, Saha, and Skålnén 2011; Tomlinson 2017; Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019; Hartmann and Komljenovic 2021). Therefore, universities aim to foster their students' employability, that is, the acquisition of the skills, competencies and attributes deemed attractive in the labour market (Holmes 2013; Tomlinson 2017). The dominant discourse of employability, conjoined with the

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neoliberal ideal of the enterprising self, infuses individuals with the responsibility to continuously self-improve and develop skills and mindsets to succeed in a competitive and uncertain working life (Laalo and Heinonen 2016; Burke et al. 2017; Handley 2018).

In this article, we investigate employability as a *process of creating value for the self* at the times of labour market entry. We take a critical approach to the dominant idea of graduate employability as a self-evidently desirable response to labour market requirements (Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2016; Burke et al. 2017). Our starting point is that as graduates enter the labour market, they must not only get jobs – they are also urged to construct a *sense of the labouring self*, compatible with the ideals of economic productivity and value generation (Farrugia 2018; Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019; Farrugia 2019b). Being economically productive and the related demand for value creation for the self is a particularly pertinent issue for *young* graduates. The employability discourse both encourages young graduates towards the ideals and induces them to problematise their own employability (Hall 2020). Graduates as novice professionals may be constructed as imperfect and unfit for productive labour due to their lack of work experience. Thus, part of the graduates' performances of the valuable labouring self is to actively ignore and combat negative socio-categorical assumptions of young age and the novice position (c.f., Siivonen and Isopahkala-Bouret 2016).

The study provides a novel approach to employability literature and research by combining the perspectives of governmentality and positioning analysis that focuses on how the self is acquired in discursive practices (Davies and Harré 1990; Bamberg 1997; De Fina 2015; Komulainen and Korhonen 2021). Governmentality approach links the discourse of employability to the neoliberalisation of HE and examines it as a technology of governance – a practice aiming at constituting and shaping the graduate subject in particular ways (Peters and Besley 2013; Hall 2020). Prior governmentality-inspired employability studies mainly investigate the policies and macro-discourses that shape subjects in their wider socio-economic landscape (Handley 2018; Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019), with a few exceptions focusing on a graduate perspective (Varman, Saha, and Skålen 2011; Breathnach 2014; Laalo and Heinonen 2016; Oinonen 2018; Komulainen and Korhonen 2021).

Our study examines graduates' *discursive positioning of their selves*, which is here perceived as an active response to the prevailing technology of governance. By utilising positioning analysis, we inspect how the discourse of employability with its ideals is taken up and enacted by graduates in their performances of the valuable labouring self. This bottom-up methodology enables us to conceptualise employability as a form of (re)constitution of the self in which graduates interact with the demands placed on them in social and power relations (Hall 2020).

More specifically, our study explores how Finnish business graduates ($n = 19$) who work as novice professionals in business organisations construct themselves as valuable labouring subjects. We will cast light on the following two questions based on the young business graduates' interview data: (1) How do young business graduates perform themselves as labouring subjects through the discursive acts of positioning? (2) What kinds of labouring selves become constructed as valuable and non-valuable or problematic? *Based on our analysis, we develop an argument that being a young business professional is simultaneously presented as a problem and a virtue in terms of a valuable laboring subject.* We start by linking the perspectives of neoliberal governance of employable subjectivities and the construction of valuable labouring subjects as discursive work on the self.

We then present our data and method. After that, we illustrate the subtle ways in which business graduates construct their value as novice professionals, and negotiate issues identified as problematic – their young age and lack of work experience. Finally, we discuss the implications of our methodology and findings for the critical employability studies.

Discourse of employability and the ideal labouring subject

In the discourse on employability, the individual is constructed as responsible for their own employability, while the HE and employers are perceived as enablers who make it possible for individuals to develop their skills and qualities that make them more employable (Varman, Saha, and Skåln 2011; Laalo and Heinonen 2016; Tomlinson 2017; Hall 2020). In its tendency of responsabilising an individual graduate, employability discourse, thus, epitomises a neoliberal technology of governance that shapes idealised subjectivities and outlines particular performances of the self (Handley 2018; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019; Hartmann and Komljenovic 2021). These performances are means to work toward ideals that align the values and aims of individuals with those of broader neoliberal rationality and political objectives (Foucault 1991; Miller and Rose 2008).

The discourse of employability thus guides the self-understanding and conduct of graduates in a way that establishes new standards for being a ‘valuable graduate’ in the labour market. It promotes new types of valuable labouring selves who are enterprising – creative, flexible, and autonomous, and who take responsibility for capitalising on their own potential, capacities and desires through market-oriented self-optimisation (Rose 1992; Vallas and Christin 2018). Moreover, the governing discourse entitles graduates to make appropriate choices to protect against various risks (Vallas and Christin 2018). By conceiving of employability as the pursuit of self-transformation, the employability discourse simultaneously induces young graduates to problematise their own employability and to reconstitute their selves for value accrual (Hall 2020).

Currently, the neoliberal governing of graduates reaches far beyond specific skills and competences usually regarded as productive (Farrugia 2019b). Because the properties of human being have become critical to the production of value of labour in contemporary capitalism, individuals are called on to utilise new and intimate dimensions of their subjectivities – personal characteristics, relational styles, and affective experiences – in their work (Weidner 2009; Vallas and Cummins 2015; Farrugia 2019b). The neoliberal labouring subject is presented as an age-neutral construction, but young graduates who enter working life are called to compensate for their inexperience in order to meet the demands of the labour markets. Young people in particular are supposed to create value from their affects and relations, such as their capacity to express themselves, communicate and cooperate with others, and be creative (Vallas and Christin 2018; Ikonen and Nikunen 2019; Farrugia 2019a, 2019b; Sofritti et al. 2020). For young, the affective experiences such as passion and drive, as well as ‘authenticity’ of the self, have become the basis for labour market engagement and for work (Farrugia 2019a, 60).

The governmentality approach has so far been on the margins of employability research with few exceptions focusing on policy discourse (Fejes 2010), perspective of HE institutions (Hartmann and Komljenovic 2021) and employers’ views (Handley 2018;

Gebreiter 2020). Although studies have explored the ways by which neoliberal governmentality formulates the general ideals of graduates (Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019), only a few studies have so far been concerned with the perspectives of governed subjects (Varman, Saha, and Skållén 2011; Breathnach 2014; Laalo and Heinonen 2016; Oinonen 2018; Komulainen and Korhonen 2021). Still, as Handley (2018, 241) summarises, 'a key debate within the governance perspective is how individuals become exposed to, accept, or resist subjectivities appropriate to their socio-economic context'.

In our study, we illustrate how the discourse of employability as a technology of governance shapes the self-knowledge and self-conduct of individuals. We conceptualise graduates' performances of themselves as active, socially situated acts of positioning (Davies and Harré 1990; Bamberg 1997), in which graduates draw on interpretive resources, such as the discourse of employability. As an interpretive resource, the discourse of employability is not deterministic and graduates can either embrace it and conform to the ideals, adopt the discourse for strategic purposes or refuse to perceive themselves according to the ideals (Vallas and Christin 2018; Komulainen and Korhonen 2021).

Our perspective suggests that graduates are not 'sovereign selves acting freely and independently but social selves located within a set of social relations' (Hall 2020, 115; see also Holmes 2001). These include the social relations at the labour market entry and in work organisations within which graduates as young professionals strive to gain recognition. From this perspective, being employable is not merely a question of demonstrating human capital or possessing individual qualities. It is a process of social self-construction that comprises negotiation of the knowledge(s) of what it is to be employable in the labour market contexts, social situations and power relations within which graduates find themselves as novice professionals (Hall 2020). We will present our method of analysis in more detail later in this article.

Data: business graduates' interviews

This study is part of a larger research project on graduate employability and social positioning in the labour market (*HighEmploy*, 2018–2022). The purpose of the project was to investigate graduates' employability and early career trajectories in the Finnish labour market. Finland has a binary system of HE, which consists of 13 and 24 Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS's). In our project, altogether 76 HE graduates with degrees in business and administration were interviewed in 2019 for the first time and 44 of them in 2020 for the second time.¹ The participants had been studying in four different Finnish universities and two Universities of Applied Sciences (UAS).

For the purposes of this article, we selected the first interviews with university graduates who were under 30 years of age and who did not have a previous university degree. Our final data set consists of 19 interviews (eight women and 11 men) aged between 24 and 30.² Most of them came from middle-class families. Sixteen of them had graduated in 2018–2019 and three were about to graduate in 2019–2020 from university with a master's degree.³ The interviews covered themes such as the participants' educational and work trajectories, experiences related to university studies, employment and working life, current life situation, and future perceptions and goals. The interviews ranged from 1.5–3 h, and were conducted face-to-face, on the phone or via video conference call. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the data was pseudonymised.

In Finnish universities, most students are accepted into both bachelor's degree and master's degree programmes simultaneously, with the assumption that the master's degree is the entry requirement into the labour market. Business and administration is one of the high-status fields in Finnish universities and graduates with a Master's degree have generally a smooth transition from education to work (Vuorinen-Lampila 2016). Almost all graduates find a job that corresponds to their education ahead of the formal graduation, and this was the case with our interviewees as well. According to our earlier study, Master's degree graduates have high prospects of ending up in the leading professional jobs (Isopahkala-Bouret, Aro, and Ojala 2021). Moreover, a business degree does not prepare graduates for specific professions and activates a multitude of career options. Our interviewees were employed in business organisations with titles such as assistant controller, HR specialist/coordinator, business consultant, project manager, IT advisor and data engineer.

The selection of the data was informed by our research design. Business education is an important symbol and loudspeaker for the neoliberal ideals of employability as it aims to convert students into enterprising selves (Varman, Saha, and Skållén 2011; Fotaki and Prasad 2015; Laalo and Heinonen 2016). Business organisations are contexts where the enterprising self is built in and naturalised (McCabe 2008; Yoon et al. 2019). Moreover, we focused on graduates under 30 years of age because our aim was to analyse how young adults construct themselves as labouring subjects at the times of labour market entry. Second, our method of analysis requires detailed reading of language use and, therefore, the manageable size of data is relatively small. The purpose of this sort of analysis is to provide an in-depth illustration of the studied phenomena rather than present generalisable facts, although the results of the study may be transferable to similar contexts. The chosen dataset permitted rich and nuanced positioning analysis of the interviews.

Positioning analysis: constructions of the self as discursive performances

In this study, we develop a positioning analysis as a methodology for examining how graduates strive to achieve, contest or reaffirm specific versions of selves performatively in their interviews (De Fina 2015). Positioning activities are the basic mechanism by which the self is acquired in narrative and discursive practices (Davies and Harré 1990; Depperman 2013). To analyse positioning as a series of discursive performances means that positions and related versions of the self are understood as multifaceted and situationally flexible – different versions of the self are appreciated and contested in different contexts (Depperman 2013; De Fina 2015). Positioning also includes context-specific functions: through positioning, people aim to respond to the demands of the situation, deal with issues perceived as problematic and negotiate how they want to be known in the eyes of others (Bamberg 1997; Korhonen and Komulainen 2018). Perceived in this way, positioning in terms of employability is about how graduates present themselves to others, and in relation to others, in a positive and attractive way (Handley 2018).

Practices of *membership categorisation* (Sacks 1992) are core practices of positioning (Depperman 2013) and enable to make sense of the self and others. Categorisation of the self and others invokes assumptions about particular features, characteristics and actions bound to them (Sacks 1992) and produces social identities and related

expectations for people (Korhonen and Komulainen 2018). In positioning activities, membership categorisation is used as a resource to explain and evaluate actions, attribute moral responsibility and engender inferences and expectations regarding actions of category members (Depperman 2013). Thus, categorisation is tied to the notions of normality and deviance (Korhonen and Komulainen 2018) and, therefore, reveals the ways by which business graduates create value and non-value for their selves.

Our analysis of the interviews proceeded with the following steps. First, we conducted in-depth reading of interview transcripts and marked all speech episodes in which the interviewees talked about their own or others' characteristics and ways of thinking and acting in the labour market. We then labelled how the different versions of labouring selves were being talked about in these episodes. Second, informed by governmentality approach, we looked at how interviewees drew on, resisted and/or transformed the discourse of employability as they constructed their selves and experiences during the entry to the labour market and early career trajectories. The analytical focus was thus on how interviewees negotiated their selves in relation to the subjectivities promoted through the employability discourse.

The third step included identifying acts of positioning of the self and others within the interview episodes. We specified category-bound features and actions and paid special attention to age-related categorisations. Because categories come in 'standard relational pairs' (Sacks 1992), we also explored the ways in which 'Others' were categorised: if one was construed, the 'Other' was simultaneously made relevant without necessarily mentioning it. It was presumed that category-bound features and actions attached to the young labouring self and 'Others' (such as employee-employer or novice-expert) stem from the employability discourse as well as from a specific discursive context and the related socio-categorical relationships (Depperman 2013) in which the self was negotiated. Finally, we compared similarities and differences of the positionings and categorisations to form an overall view of the labouring selves that the interviewees constructed in their meaning-making. In this phase, we refined some of the previously identified categorisations and our original interpretations. All the authors participated in the analysis of the data and the interpretations were discussed in joint sessions.

As a result of the analysis, we discovered that the interviewees positioned themselves in terms of two contexts: *labour market entry and current work organisation*.⁴ In the context of labour market entry, they performed themselves as *easily employable and 'mature' young persons* – job-ready and self-confident business graduates and socially intelligible jobseekers. In the context of work organisation, they constructed themselves as *successful young employees* who are enthusiastic novices and (emerging) academic experts. In the following sections, we analyse the positionings and membership categorisations in close dialogue with the data examples that best illustrate our findings. All the identification information has been removed to protect the participants' anonymity.

Positioning in terms of labour market entry: easily employable and 'mature' young persons

In the interviews, the business graduates first evaluated their own experiences, skills and strategies related to their jobseeking and negotiated the requirements of the current labour market more generally. In their constructions of an easily employable young

person, graduates dealt with the implicit problem of being (too) young or 'student-like' for working life. They performed themselves as sufficiently competent and experienced enough for the world of work, thereby producing a morally valuable identity of a 'mature' young person. The way of performing oneself related to reflecting on the question 'Who am I as a unique individual compared to others?' and exceeding expectations that are socially attached to the relational categorical pairs of a student/a professional employee, or young person/adult (= mature person).

The job-ready and self-confident business graduates

Firstly, the interviewees interacted with the discourse of employability by negotiating the demand of field-specific work experience while reflecting on their value in terms of employment. They positioned themselves as job-ready and self-confident business graduates who select jobs based on their own interests and desires. Through social comparisons with peers of the same age and co-students, the interviewees differentiated themselves from *ordinary*, 'student-like' HE students (as 'Other'), who they saw as focusing solely on studying and graduating rather than on gaining work experience and orienting towards the world of work.

For example, Emil performed himself as a self-confident actor in the labour market who chooses the jobs that he personally considers interesting opportunities:

Emil (26⁵): I actually applied for three positions in earnest and I was chosen for two of them, so I could maybe pat myself on the back – I mean, I was asked over there, by my then-supervisor, who I worked with at my previous job – so they heard that I'm looking for work and asked me to hear them out, what it would be like, and it seemed interesting to me and I thought that it must be a good opportunity.

Julia positioned herself as an experienced jobseeker who has progressed rapidly and smoothly in work. Self-confidence was perceived as a result of successful employment and was articulated through the admiring voices of others:

Julia (26): So I've built up some work experience, and in a short time too – and I've had people praise me for my work so I'm also confident that I'll always be able to get a job – even though I resigned from there, which is something many people have wondered – how I had the guts to do that – but I'm – personally I'm used to being able to [laugh] go window shopping for jobs – I'm a bit of an exception as a student since I've never been to a student party – I've worked the whole time – had work as priority number one – like if I've had a boss say that we need you at work now – so I feel I'm quite a bit further in my career and more mature too in terms of working life than many others.

Julia dealt with the problem of being a young by positioning herself as a venturesome consumer in the labour market who chooses her job among various options. In Julia's interpretation, her co-students were othered as student-like young people who lack self-confidence, courage or the ability to take risks in the labour market. Julia presented herself as an 'exceptional student' who prioritised work over pleasure and was mature enough for working life despite her young age.

Some interviewees also negotiated the problems in the labour market entry that may result from being a young female. Although in the Finnish context an emphasis is given to equal employment opportunity between genders, business graduates recognised that women are regarded as 'problems' who do not have the same opportunities as men in

working life (Vuorinen-Lampila 2016). For example, Sara reflected on hypothetical problems that she could have encountered and stated that being young and female potentially complicates access to work and to permanent jobs in particular:

Sara (24): My assumption was that, yeah, I probably won't be able to get a permanent job anywhere – that a young woman, won't be able to get any job, even a temporary one or really get any hold on employment – employers will think that she'll just start a family or something and go on maternity leave – but maybe it depends on the person, you make all the choices for yourself – you have a dream and a goal that you want to reach.

Sara positioned herself as a lucky but at the same time self-determined young woman who successfully encountered the uncertain labour market and managed to overcome gender and age barriers. Sara's interpretation constructed her own superiority compared to Others, that is young women who do not dare to pursue their own goals. Thus, according to the dominant discourse of employability, the social problems of working life related to age and gender discrimination were seen as something to struggle against and overcome by means of individual motivation, effort and ambition.

Socially intelligible jobseekers

In addition to maturity and job-readiness, the interviewees aimed to construct their value as young jobseekers by highlighting specific personal characteristics, mindset, and skills which they have exploited to succeed in recruitment situations. Many of them portrayed themselves as conscious and self-determined actors who diligently engaged in various employability-enhancing practices and who knew what kinds of activities were worth investing in in order to enter working life. As Tina put it: 'you know a little bit about where to put your efforts – what to do to stand out from the masses'.

The interviewees performed themselves as *socially intelligible jobseekers* with a personal CV and the ability to create a good impression and be convincing to employers in job interviews due to their communication skills and 'authenticity'. For example, Sara constructed her value in the eyes of potential employers by stressing her authentic self: 'in the interview – just being yourself – to be a genuine person which inspires confidence in others'. Thus, access to employment was seen to depend on one's social skills and persona, in particular. The 'Other' was categorised as a *socially clumsy and old-fashioned jobseeker* who submits job applications everywhere and stands out only 'on paper' with a boring CV. In this way, graduates also presented themselves as mature and awakened labour market actors in contrast to an *over-adaptable and humble young jobseeker* who is desperate to get any job.

While reflecting on his job seeking skills, Miika positioned himself as a 'proactive' and competitive job-hunter who stands out in the labour market by marketing himself with a self-confident attitude:

Miika (25): The first summers – [laughs] I kind of – marketed myself a little bit like 'yeah sure, I'll do anything and everything and I really want to work for you.' The closer I got to graduating, the more I started to think like, 'Hey, do I actually want this job ... ?' and 'What can this company offer me?' because I knew that I'll be employed anyway – I wanted to trust that I'd find a place that's a good match for me and that the company gets the kind of employee they want to have as one of their own. Not so much me fine-tuning my CV until it's flawless and building a CV for the sake of having one.

In addition to his own skills and potential, Miika also negotiated his employability by reflecting on what work organisations would have to offer for him. He anchored the valuable labouring self to collective 'our company' and thus distanced himself from the unwanted category of a desperate young jobseeker. The 'Other' was characterised through a life-historical comparison: whereas the younger Miika lacked self-confidence and sought to passively adapt to the demands of employers, the current adult Miika was seeking a job that had something to give him and he expected to be 'found' by interesting employers.

Tina positioned herself as committed to diverse self-marketing practices, implicitly othering those who are passive in terms of job seeking activities and invest exclusively in their degree:

Tina (27): I made a video application. I tailored my résumé. I tailored my application. Then I even made a website for myself [laughs] – put a crazy amount of effort into it – but it did pay off too, getting so far – [getting employed] was probably definitely partly due to my personality, the kind that – the [employer] saw a kind of potential in me – I maybe got the idea that they don't care about the degree so much – more about the things I'd done – that I'd been active – not just a couch potato.

Some interviewees also constructed the valuable labouring self by stressing their interpersonal skills. For example, Ken emphasised his ability to 'be convincing to other people in face-to-face situations'. As the value of the labouring self was built in this way, a lack of extrovert sociability and shyness (category-bound features attached to 'Other') appeared as problematic in terms of labour market success:

Kasper (30): I may not be someone with a naturally socially outgoing personality, which can easily make it feel like I get overshadowed in some situations where you have someone really, really extroverted who is a natural at small talk compared to me.

Proper *social networking*, which, according to the interviewees, is strongly emphasised in business studies, was also included in the category-bound features and actions of a socially intelligible jobseeker. The interviewees performed themselves as capable of networking, but some also criticised this attribute of the ideal employable graduate. This was probably because of the value gained by authenticity, whereas pretence – and 'student-likeness' – sometimes associated with networking represented the morally deviant side of employability that was rejected. For example, Rebecca (26) categorised herself as a respectable networker who does not 'network just for the sake of networking' or to 'benefit from other people'. Whereas networks created through work experience appeared to be 'serious' and valuable, networking limited to the world of studies was considered worthless: 'There's no point running around student parties – just for the sake of networking – it's been happening automatically for me – because of having this much work experience – it's, like, an actual, useful network' (Juulia, 28).

Positioning towards the organisation: successful young employees

When the interviewees positioned themselves towards their current work organisations and categorised themselves as *successful young employees*, they negotiated their status and value in the organisation and its social and power relations ('who am I as a recognisable member of the group'). They argued for their capacity to bring value to an

organisation, although they were young and inexperienced novices, both by evaluating themselves in terms of their personal characteristics and soft skills, and by emphasising the merit of their academic education.

Enthusiastic novices

Graduates' lack of in-depth work experience required justification especially when the interviewees aimed to respond to the expectations and demands of their organisations. While trying to solve the problem of being young and inexperienced, they categorised themselves as *enthusiastic novices* with soft skills. Passion and drive, boldness, eagerness to learn and the ability to act flexibly – attributes culturally associated with youthfulness – appeared to be important resources for the creation of one's value in an organisation.

Tea negotiated her value in the organisation by highlighting her courage in the face of new and challenging work tasks. She compared herself to her senior colleagues and positioned herself as a self-sufficient young employee who sees risks as learning opportunities and is capable of compensating for her lack of work experience with her outgoing and social personality. In Tea's interpretation, an experienced *senior expert* with a lot of in-depth knowledge of the specific field but who may lack enthusiasm as well as social and problem-solving skills was categorised as 'Other'. Tea constructed herself as productive and useful for the organisation because of her passion for developing herself.

Tea (27): I don't have the strongest position – when it comes to experience in years – but they don't necessarily look at it that way, that they'd pit a senior expert and – a non-senior expert against each other to solve a problem and see who can solve it faster – apparently they had also thought about taking someone with more seniority or experience – and then they took a risk and hired me – but I've received a lot of praise – that it was – like personality – kind of extroversion – I've developed in my job by taking up challenges, things I'm not ready for yet, taken on responsibility that felt scary at the time – and the chance of failure is pretty close there too – but my enthusiasm comes from the fact that I get to learn and trusting that – I can do it – that's been a really big source of drive to do well – and it shows others that you might do well.

Sakari also compared himself to more experienced co-workers. He positioned himself as a young novice who does not yet have the experience required for the tough demands of the job, but who has other skills that make him a good organisational 'fit'.

Sakari (29): They expect a lot more from me than my level would require – there are many people here – who are better and more capable consultants than me – but maybe – the problem for consultants is also figuring out how to present something so that it can also be understood by someone who's not an expert – I joined my old company as a very young consultant – but I never saw it as an issue – for someone to think, like, 'Wow, he's so young!' Because – I'm socially really skilled – I can talk about things that I don't actually understand completely – in a natural, convincing way – and get credibility that way – you can always develop your expertise, but if someone's like a shitty person and doesn't fit into an organisation at all, then – that benefits no one.

Sakari negotiated his credibility, status and trust in the organisation by referring to the deviances of senior experts. He rejected the implied argument that a young and inexperienced employee is not valuable enough to the company by stressing his independence, flexibility and (exceptionally) impressive social skills.

Some of the interviewees negotiated the problem of being inexperienced by performing themselves as entrepreneurial 'leader types' with soft skills, such as interpersonal and organisational skills as well as passion and drive towards their work. For example, Miika drew on the discourse of employability in constructing himself as a socially talented and passionate employee. He compared himself with more technically oriented business graduates: 'I can create the – drive to have the entire team move forward – and share that joy with others, too'. Joakim categorised himself as both an interpersonally and logically/mathematically skilled employee, emphasising his fearless and open-minded attitude:

Joakim (25): I'm like a conductor, trying to organise everything and guide people in the right direction and such – I need to have a lot of, like, logical and mathematical thinking in my head – to be able to organise things and work with different kinds of people – it's just that boldness – when you face new things, you don't get scared, you have an open mind about everything new – you try to get a new perspective on things.

The interviewees also aimed to create their value as young employees by negotiating freedom and responsibility for work. They categorised themselves as actors who were not only eager and willing to learn and take up challenges, but who were also exceptionally independent, self-directed and self-responsible for their young age. For example, Miro portrayed himself as a mature professional actor who bears responsibility for his work performance and for self-development, to which he is committed not only at work but also in his free time. He justified the lack of field-specific competence by arguing that the organisational culture of his workplace appreciates a spirit of learning amongst its employees.

Miro (27): Responsibility and freedom go hand-in-hand in the way that there's no one watching over you to make sure things get done – you have to manage yourself. We at least have a really strong culture of – there's a push to learn something new all the time, the industry is one that's changing constantly – so it may not be enough just to show up at work and put in your eight hours – you have to be actually interested in it. In the evening, you're probably on social media reading about something that's related to your work.

Sara also constructed herself as a self-directed and mature employee, simultaneously othering her 'younger' colleagues who were categorised as incapable of acting in a self-responsible way: 'Especially younger people like, they're on their phones and don't understand – that you're there to work, that it's your responsibility – you have to – be able to inspire confidence – which may be why I was chosen, is – my being able to manage my work'.

(Emerging) academic experts

To account for the absence of work experience, the interviewees also addressed their labouring value in relation to the merit and academic expertise produced by HE. In the context of their current professional job, categorising oneself as an *academic expert* with a valuable university degree served as a means to create credibility in the eyes of others. In Miika's interpretation, features and actions that were associated with the category of an academic expert were analytical and theoretical thinking and – above all – the ability to learn and be realistic of one's own competence.

Miika (25): The thought processes might be deeper – more analytical – of course, it's theoretical competence – but what I've learnt at university is more about how to learn and to know

what I really can do – for me, [the university degree] is proof that I've been tested too – and of more extensive studies and challenging yourself.

Some of the interviewees negotiated the limits of their academic expertise, however. Emil, for example, constructed himself as an *emerging* academic expert with general cognitive and learning abilities, who acknowledges the limits of his expertise, and is able and willing to absorb and utilise new knowledge. By comparing himself with his colleagues who had a lower level of education and by highlighting his capability to take responsibility for the organisation's development, Emil justified his value within the organisation. 'Others' became categorised as *workers* without an academic degree and without leadership responsibilities at work.

Emil (26): Well, I'm not an expert in everything or even too many things. But in a way, I think that my ability – to like find information and learn and have perceptive skills – you get that [expertise] through experience, and I still don't have too much of it. But then there's the ability to – absorb information – especially with a Master degree of economics, you should have the ability to recognise the need for change and carry it out in an organisation – and if I had bachelor's degree in business administration, my only responsibility would be just to get through my tasks, nothing more.

In Sara's interpretation, emerging academic experts were constructed as young employees who enjoyed a certain level of trust and an advisory position in the workplace because of their university education and constantly developed themselves at work. Others, here implicitly young workers with a vocational degree, were categorised in need of external advice:

Sara (24): Those who have university degrees – the other colleagues [with lower level of education] saw us as experts – in fact, most came to us for advice – of course you constantly learn on the job and have the opportunity to look more deeply into it.

Concluding discussion

In this article, we have analysed how young business graduates construct themselves as subjects of value in the labour market. Young people's orientation towards the world of work and their employability is typically perceived in terms of the accumulation of skills and resources that can be possessed and exchanged in the labour market (Farrugia 2019b, 714; Holmes 2013). So far limited attention has been paid to employability as an ideological construct with which graduates interact as they form and communicate perceptions of themselves as labouring subjects. Our governmentality approach and analytical focus on graduates' discursive self-performances makes it visible that being an employable graduate is much more than the acquisition of the right set of skills. It is an active, strategic and purposeful process of social self-construction (Hall 2020) in which the HE graduates negotiate their value in relation to the self, others and the demands of labour market contexts. In addition, our study illustrates how age-negotiations are embedded in the construction of a valuable laboring subject.

Business graduates in this study performed themselves as autonomous and self-reliant labour market actors with virtuous personal characteristics, such as social intelligence and enthusiasm towards self-development. The study shows that to become recognised as a valuable young labouring subject requires cultivation of a wide range of mentalities and

affects not usually regarded as productive 'skills' and qualifications (Farrugia 2019b). For example, the youthfulness brought a particular form of value to their labouring selves. Business graduates' interpretations of themselves showed the value of positive affect for the young labouring selves in current working life where young labour is valued for the flexibility and enthusiasm that young employees are seen to possess (Farrugia 2018).

The results also indicate that the application of psychological constructs, such as a sense of freedom from constraint and a growth-oriented mindset, contribute to the normalisation of neoliberal selfhood (Adams et al. 2019; Vassallo 2020). We argue that the psychologisation of neoliberalism intensifies the tendency to emphasise the persona and mindset over academic degree and qualifications (see also Laalo, Kinnari, and Silvennoinen 2019). Also Farrugia (2019b, 714) has claimed that especially middle-class youth who have been successfully employed construct work as a realm of affective commitment in which they express their 'passionate selves' rather than specific competences or qualifications. Probably because of their social position, our interviewees also showed very little resistance to the neoliberal ideals. For people representing different social backgrounds as well as more precarious labour market positions, the ideals of employability may seem less accessible and liberating (Mertanen, Pashby, and Brunila 2020). Studying graduates of different ages and from different social and ethnic backgrounds as well as those who have had difficulties with employment could make the resistance to the ideals of employability more visible.

Through its theoretical and methodological approach, this study makes an important contribution to critical employability literature. It shows that graduates' performances of the self are purposeful responses to the contextual expectations and pressures they encounter while competing for jobs and striving to gain recognition as novice professionals in organisations. We argue that the business graduates drew on the neoliberal discourse of employability to negotiate issues identified as problematic in terms of their value, such as young age, being too 'student-like' and not having enough work experience and to perform a socially and morally desirable version of the self. From this perspective, graduates are neither passive nor naïve adopters of neoliberal ideals. Instead, being an employable subject necessitates agentic engagement in the verbalisation of the self through which graduates deal with the social and power relations within which they are located at work (Hall 2020). Moreover, the business graduates who participated in this study were already under employers' and work organisations' managerial control, which is increasingly based on the portrayal of labour as a means for self-fulfillment (Sandoval 2017). Accordingly, graduates must become particular type of persons who are passionate, bold, committed and flexible (Handley 2018).

Based on this study, the positioning analysis is a particularly fruitful tool for showing how neoliberal subjects are constituted through exclusionary dynamics, which also produces its 'others' (see also Scharff 2016; Komulainen and Korhonen 2021). Firstly, a lack of self-confidence, social clumsiness and dependency come to represent the undesired characteristics of the labouring self. Interestingly, these attributes may contrast with what is valued in today's working life, but they are also culturally associated with youth. To cultivate oneself as a legitimate labour market actor is thus to construct oneself as a mature person. In such a construct, one's employability is performed by othering the world of university and being a student and young. Cultivation of oneself as a mature person offers a possibility to anchor the labouring self to collective 'us' and 'our culture' of the organisation (Handley 2018).

Moreover, female gender combined with a young age appears a problematic subject position. Category-bound features and actions that are attached to the valuable self among female business graduates, such as independence and risk-taking ability, are equated with masculinity (Katila and Eriksson 2013). The young women in this study often aimed to neutralise and deny the effects that being female may have on their labour market value. In neoliberal working life, people are supposed to believe that success depends on one's own effort and merits and is not affected by gender or other social differences (Scharff 2016). Moreover, the neoliberal governance of employability, with its ideal of responsabilised autonomous individuals neutralises inequalities and leaves power relations in working life untouched. In our research in progress, we have analysed young business women's negotiations of top-performativity and well-being and discovered that neoliberal selfhood is associated with problematic psychological consequences, such as anxiety, stress and insecurity (see also Adams et al. 2019; Vassallo 2020) among young women.

Findings gained in this study indicate the pervasiveness of the neoliberal discourse of employability and its expansion into the new terrains of productive subjectivity. This expansion gives rise to increased possibilities for governance and self-governance and creates the potential for further categories of inclusion and exclusion. Further research is needed to analyse graduate employability as a process of social self-construction and negotiation, which manifests itself in different educational and labour market contexts and their social and power relations.

Notes

1. We recruited the participants for this longitudinal study by using multiple channels: student registers and the email lists of alumni and graduates' professional associations. The ethical approval for the study was obtained from the University of Eastern Finland Committee on Research Ethics (Statement 10/2019).
2. HE students are generally older in Finland than in many other countries and the average age of a first-time tertiary graduate is 27 years. Only 75.8 per cent of first-time Master's degree students graduate under the age of 35 (OECD 2021).
3. The remaining 57 interviewees from our larger data set ($n = 76$) are either UAS students or adult graduates who may have a previous degree and who already have quite a lot of work experience (vs. novices). Their social positioning in the labour market differs from the first-time Master's degree graduates whom we selected to focus in this study.
4. The interviewees' positioning in terms of future career was excluded from the analysis at the early stage of our work because the focus of this study is the interviewees' meaning making of themselves as novice professionals.
5. We included the age of graduates during the first interview (not necessarily the same as the graduation age).

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