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The case of young Russian-speakers in Finland

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2019-05

Krivosnos , D 2019 , ' The making of gendered 'migrant workers' in youth activation : The case of young Russian-speakers in Finland ' , Current Sociology , vol. 67 , no. 3 , pp. 401-418 . <https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118824363>

<http://hdl.handle.net/10138/300628>

<https://doi.org/10.1177/0011392118824363>

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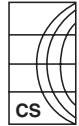
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The making of gendered ‘migrant workers’ in youth activation: The case of young Russian-speakers in Finland

Current Sociology

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Abstract

The article focuses on young Russian-speaking migrants’ day-to-day institutional encounters with labour market activation policies in Finland. The analysis contributes to the discussion on labour activation through analysing the workings of gender, migration and racialisation in welfare encounters through ethnographically grounded research. The argument of the article is two-fold. First, it argues that racialised populations are sustained in a ‘migrant worker’ subject position not only through exclusion from rights and legal status, but also through the targeted inclusion of the ‘undeserving’ poor with formal rights into worker-citizenship through workfare. Second, the article shows racialisation of ‘migrant workers’ as a gendered process with essentialised gendered logics of what skills migrant men and women supposedly possess ‘naturally’. Activation thus maintains and exacerbates the segregation of migrant and racialised youth into gendered and racialised labour markets. The analysis is based on ethnographic fieldwork in youth career counselling in a metropolitan area of Finland in 2015–2016.

Keywords

Activation, ethnography, Finland, gender, labour, migration, racialisation

Introduction

Victor: I am a musician, and I would like to work in the field of culture.

Career Counsellor (CC): What about construction? Service work, maybe?

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The dialogue is a representative illustration of an institutional interaction between young unemployed Russian-speakers and career counsellors in youth activation offices in a metropolitan area in Finland. The questions that career counsellors ask unemployed Russian-speakers¹ of migrant backgrounds demonstrate that institutional encounters with labour activation – that is day-to-day interaction in welfare and employment offices – is a process that goes beyond matching young people's skills with jobs. While there have been extensive studies of activation from the perspective of policy analysis (Greer, 2016; Kananen, 2012; Peck, 2001; Wiggan, 2015), this article fills the gap on the workings of gender, migration and racialisation in labour activation through ethnographically grounded research (see also Arts and Van Den Berg, 2018; Haikkola, 2018; Nordberg, 2015, for ethnographies of welfare).

The article analyses young Russian-speakers' encounters with labour activation in youth career counselling offices in the context of ongoing workfare reforms, which are state policies and schemes that require the unemployed to participate in work and work-related activities to be eligible for unemployment benefits (Adkins, 2015). Rather than a system based on the rights of citizenship, activation policies or workfare have reframed unemployment from a structural problem to an individual responsibility and moral failure (Adkins, 2012; Peck, 2001). Within this logic, the policy shifts the solution to unemployment towards the improvement of individual 'employability' through mandatory participation in courses and work-related activities. Workfare reforms organise the relationships between the state, market and citizens as contractual obligations, in which the unemployed must demonstrate their 'genuine' unemployment and commitment to finding work (Cooper, 2012; Wacquant, 2009). Unemployment benefits – rather than being framed in the context of citizenship rights – are seen as contractual and conditional upon participation in mandatory work trials and work counselling meetings. The essence of workfare is thus 'enforcing work while residualising welfare' (Peck, 2001: 10). Within these contractual obligations, 'failed citizens', such as the unemployed, have become an opportunity for neoliberal forms of governmentality and business enterprise through agreements with the private sector as the site for work placements (Tyler, 2013). As Cooper (2012) argues, workfare blurs the boundaries between welfare and work, free and contingent labour, turning 'welfare' itself into a site of labour exploitation. A key feature of workfare is the de-universalisation of citizenship rights and the subsequent discrimination between 'deserving' and 'undeserving' poor (Peck, 2001). Existing research has demonstrated that workfare schemes may particularly target migrant and racialised non-white groups, whose employment rates are lower than those of the majority population (Farris, 2017; Wacquant, 2009, 2014).

Once seen as a bastion of needs-based entitlement, wealth redistribution and universality (Esping-Andersen, 1990), Nordic welfare states have not escaped workfare processes and have been undergoing a steady neoliberal restructuring, with steep increases in income disparity. Unemployment has been one of the central arenas for neoliberalisation (Alanko and Outinen, 2016; Holmqvist, 2009; Kananen, 2012), and young people have been a specific target of labour activation. Workfare reforms were imported to Finland from the US in the early 1990s, which focused on the supply side of labour, 'active citizenship', moving people back to work and reducing spending on benefits rather than redistributing resources among the population (Kananen, 2012; Kantola and

Kananen, 2013). The Finnish government introduced the Youth Guarantee scheme in 2013 to implement labour market activation policies to tackle youth unemployment.² Its aim is to assist young people to acquire so-called ‘working life skills’ and to secure a study programme or job within three months of registering as unemployed through regular meetings with career counsellors and participation in different courses. How do these practices of distinguishing between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ unemployed affect young migrants and racialised youth who remain at the sharp end of unemployment?

The article draws on an ethnographic study of encounters between the municipal youth career counselling service and young unemployed Russian-speakers in a metropolitan area in Finland in 2015–2016. Russian-speaking migrants are the largest single migrant and minority group in Finland, who experience racialisation and discrimination in the labour market, and are heavily affected by unemployment (Kobak, 2013; Krivonos, 2017; Statistics Finland, 2013a).

The article contributes to the discussion on migrant labour through addressing it in the context of the current transition from welfare to workfare states and de-universalisation of citizenship rights (Adkins, 2012; Wacquant, 2009). The aim of the article is two-fold. First, the article argues that migrant labour can be produced not only through the exclusion of migrants from citizenship and legal rights (De Genova, 2004; De Giorgi, 2010), but also through targeted inclusion of migrants and racialised populations into precarious labour markets as contingent labour through workfare schemes. The article shows how young unemployed Russian-speakers are made into low-skilled, low-paid or non-waged gendered ‘migrant worker’ subjects even though many of them were already or soon to become Finnish citizens.

Second, the article shows that the production of migrant labour through labour activation is a deeply gendered process with different gendered logics used in relation to racialised male and female workers. While most of the literature has explored gender, migration and labour from the perspective of either migrant women (e.g. Erel, 2009; Lutz, 2011) or, to a lesser extent, migrant men (e.g. Charsley and Wray, 2015), this article traces the institutional making of both migrant male and female workers in labour activation policies through institutional interaction.

In what follows, I first position my research in relation to the theoretical discussion on migrant labour, citizenship, workfare and gender, followed by a discussion of labour activation classificatory practices in Finland. I then present the data and methods section, followed by findings and conclusions.

Production of gendered migrant labour in the context of worker-citizenship

The article engages with a theoretical discussion on migration, labour and activation, and shows how racialised groups can be made into gendered ‘migrant workers’ even when they have formal citizenship rights and access to welfare provision. There has been an ongoing debate in critical migration studies on the dependency of neoliberal economies on the availability of migrant labour and how migrant labour is produced through criminalisation, detention and stigmatisation (Anderson, 2010; De Genova, 2002; De Giorgi, 2010; Maury, 2017; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). The genealogy of Western capitalism

is inscribed in an ongoing struggle between capital and labour over the control of mobility (De Giorgi, 2010; Torpey, 2000). Borders have been conceptualised as representing a process of ‘differential inclusion’, in which subjects become labour through subordination, discrimination and exclusion from citizenship rights (Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013: 159). Bridget Anderson (2010) has, for example, demonstrated that uncertainty over visa renewals creates dependence on employers as well as structural precarity. As Jane Wills et al. (2010: 6) have summarised it, ‘migrant workers are attractive to employers precisely because they are migrants’, meaning that migrants are excluded from welfare rights and depend on their employers for their residence.

The article aims to examine what happens once formal citizenship rights and entitlement for welfare have been achieved, and explore this in the context of ongoing restructuring from welfare to workfare states. Racialised and migrant groups have lower employment rates due to discrimination and misrecognition (OECD, 2017; Statistics Finland, 2013b). This may subject them to activation measures that aim to push the unemployed to make a precarious living in the labour market rather than provide them with unconditional income support (Wiggan, 2015). Policy analysis of labour activation has demonstrated that rather than finding steady and secure employment, activation produces labour power for insecure labour markets, decreases the bargaining power of workers and re-commodifies labour (Greer, 2016; Wiggan, 2015). Insecurity is enforced by conditionality of unemployment benefits upon participation in mandatory work-related activities, courses and counselling meetings. Conditionality thus implies changing the relationship between rights and obligations of the unemployed. Some have referred to ‘conditionality’ as a form of coercive behaviouralism, that is, enforcement of compliance with behavioural rules (Fletcher and Wright, 2018). Worker-citizenship has been thus emphasised as the only legitimate form of social citizenship (Anderson, 2015; Lister, 2003; Lorey, 2015).

At the core of labour activation is an institutional logic of discriminating between the ‘deserving’ and ‘undeserving’ unemployed, which determines which members of the population should be required to earn a living in the labour market or get a training to enhance skills (Peck, 2001: 22). As a result, marginalised groups may be specifically singled out and targeted for labour activation (Farris, 2017: 119–123; Peck, 2001; Wacquant, 2009). Existing research shows how workfare policies in the US have been used to target Black and migrant mothers (Cooper, 2012; Reese, 2005) and Black youth through incarceration and ‘prisonfare’ (Wacquant, 2009, 2014). In Europe, labour activation is shown to target migrant women (Farris, 2017: 122; Nordberg, 2015), people with disabilities (Alanko and Outinen, 2016; see Soldatic and Meekosha, 2012, on Australia) and young people (Berg and Aaltonen, 2017; Fieldhouse et al., 2002; Haikkola et al., 2017), with research evidence of the unemployed being classified as disabled (Holmqvist, 2009). These developments suggest that formal citizenship rights do not protect groups classified as ‘inactive’ and the ‘undeserving poor’ from contingent labour since welfare itself has become a site for labour exploitation (Cooper, 2012). However, empirically grounded research on the workings of labour activation in relation to migrant and racialised groups in the European context has been surprisingly scarce (however, see Nordberg, 2015; Scrinzi, 2011), considering extensive evidence of migrants’ precarious labour market positions and lower employment rates (e.g. Heath and Cheung, 2007; OECD, 2017).

Feminist migration scholars have analysed the gendered logic of workfare and how economic ‘integration’ programmes, which target migrant women, in particular, are implemented through workfare policies (Farris, 2017; Nordberg, 2015; Scrinzi, 2011). Sara Farris (2017) has argued that while constructing non-EU migrant women as needing to be liberated and assisted into the labour market, workfare programmes steer them towards social reproductive sectors, which have traditionally been conceived as ‘feminine’. Francesca Scrinzi (2011) has also analysed how vocational training programmes targeting unemployed migrant women in France are based on an essentialist understanding of migrant women’s needs, which train them for domestic work and consequently reproduce racist organisation of domestic service. My analysis offers an ethnographic contribution to this discussion by showing how workfare functions through different gendered logics in relation to both racialised men and women in their day-to-day encounters with workfare.

In what follows, I discuss classificatory practices of labour activation in Finland and how they target migrant and youth as needing ‘skills enhancement’ through training and unpaid work placements.

Classifying the unemployed in Finland

Finland has not been an exception to neoliberal developments, with unemployment benefits becoming conditional upon participation in unpaid work placements and classification of the unemployed according to their assessed ‘employability’. Employability is a concept that derives from human capital theories to refer to individual capabilities to gain and maintain employment. It thus refers to the individual ‘lacking’ of the unemployed and is influential in the construction of neoliberal subjectivity (Brown et al., 2003). Young people have been a particular target of activation measures since the introduction of the Youth Guarantee programme in 2013. After registering a young person (under 30 years old) as unemployed, the Public Employment Office categorises them according to service lines with different service needs, which represent various degrees of ‘employability’. The first service line, ‘Employment and Business Services’, is designed for those considered most job ready, most employable and who do not require intense activation measures. The second line, ‘Competence Development Services’, is for those who are considered as ‘lacking skill’ and require skills enhancement and competence development, including youth career counselling, where the fieldwork was done. Even though this service is not authorised to cut young people’s unemployment benefits, the line reports the progress of the young unemployed to the Public Employment Office, which is mandated with cutting unemployment benefits if activation measures are not met. The service line for young people was developed in close cooperation with private companies (Haikkola et al., 2017), which created a direct partnership with low-wage jobs in retail, construction, logistics and care. The third service line, ‘Supported Employment Services’, is for unemployed people with disabling issues, deemed in need of intensive support and rehabilitation. This classification signals the de-universalisation of citizenship rights (Wacquant, 2009) and a corrosion of the universalistic principles of the Finnish welfare state, which now treats the unemployed on the basis of an ‘employability’ assessment.

Statistics on young clients channelled to the second service line, 'Competence Development Services', in the municipality where this ethnographic research was done demonstrate that 22%³ of young people attending this service for young people spoke a native language other than the national languages of Finland, with Russian and Somali being the largest minority backgrounds. The vast majority of the young people had attended basic school or vocational education, with 14% having attended higher education. The Finnish unemployed were predominantly from vocational backgrounds, not in education or employment and had not undertaken post-compulsory education. These groups of Finnish youth have been framed in Finnish discourses as 'socially excluded', those who need to be brought back to mainstream society through work or education. The classed logic of youth activation was identified by Berg and Aaltonen (2017) in their study on the majority Finnish youth position in welfare services, which showed that few young people attending youth activation were from upper/middle-class positions, who were aiming for higher education. The classed and racialised logic of employment was reflected in the counsellors' offerings of unpaid work placements in grocery stores and retail shops as well as educational opportunities in construction, logistics, bus driving and care work. The classification of migrants as needing 'skills enhancement' is a way through which labour fragmentation is accomplished.

Doing observations of youth labour activation

The data analysed in this article are part of a multi-sited ethnographic study on the politics of employment among young Russian-speakers in Finland. As part of this multi-sited ethnography, I did observations in youth career counselling, and CV, integration and language courses in the region of southern Finland and interviewed 54 young unemployed or precariously employed Russian-speakers in Finland (all but one born outside Finland: 20 male and 34 female participants) coming from Russia, Estonia, Moldova, Ukraine, Belarus, Kazakhstan and Armenia – the majority of my research participants came from Russia and Estonia, which represent the two largest migrant groups in Finland.

This article draws on participant observation of young unemployed Russian-speakers' encounters at a municipal youth career counselling office in a metropolitan area of southern Finland, which took place from April 2015 to January 2016. Altogether, I observed 35 meetings of young clients with career counsellors. All the meetings were individual and took place in closed rooms. I did interviews with some young people after the meetings if they so wished ($N = 9$) in Russian, which I refer to in the analysis. Besides Russian-speaking youth, I also observed some meetings with Finnish youth of majority backgrounds ($N = 6$) and other youth of migrant backgrounds ($N = 5$). Besides observing the meetings, I observed CV writing courses, education and job fairs as part of youth counselling ($N = 9$). I kept in touch through email with some of the young people I met at youth counselling. All the young people attending the service were under 30 years old, had permanent residence in Finland and were entitled to formal welfare rights through residence-based social security. Young people's unemployment benefits were conditional upon participation in regular meetings with career counsellors.

Access to the counselling was negotiated through a larger research project (Migrant Youth Employment: Politics of Recognition and Boundaries of Belonging [RECOGNITION, 2014–2017]). After I received official permission to conduct observations at the

counselling service, I also disseminated research leaflets with information about my research in the lobby. I introduced my research and myself at the beginning of every meeting and verbally asked permission to observe a meeting on conditions of anonymity. All but one person allowed me to be present. I did not use a recorder for ethical reasons and as the recording could have created more pressure on the young people, but made field notes in a small copybook. The meetings I observed were held in Finnish and Russian, as one of the counsellors spoke Russian. Most of the counsellors were of majority Finnish background, with higher education in social work and youth work.

The meetings with the career counsellors represented unequal power relations as the young people were constantly evaluated and pressured to apply for study places and jobs. Young people could lose their benefits if they failed to comply. The fact that I was a young female Russian national disturbed some of the power relations in the counselling meetings. In fact, young people seemed friendly and welcoming to have me at the meetings, and the conversations between counsellors and young clients proceeded with no or little reference to my presence. Young Russian-speakers would sometimes talk to me in Russian in front of the Finnish career counsellors, who would not understand our comments in Russian. The fact that I was of a similar age and a migrant in Finland myself put me in a position closer to that of the young people rather than to the position of the career counsellors who pressured them to apply for jobs and had power to cut their social assistance.

While doing my analysis, I typed my field notes into a computer file. I used thematic analysis to analyse the field notes, which meant reading and coding my ethnographic material along key themes which emerged from the data. I copied and pasted excerpts into a separate file with a thematic heading. Racialisation and gendering of skills was a key theme in the ethnographic data, which I then put in dialogue with the theoretical discussion.

The findings are not to critique the career counsellors as individual actors themselves. In fact, they did care about their clients, tried to develop friendly relations and genuinely seemed to want to help the young people. It is the institutional logic of first defining certain groups as lacking ‘employability’ and then putting them into unpaid work placements in the private sector as a condition to unemployment benefits that the article problematises. Although being sympathetic to young people, the counsellors often failed to recognise the skills that young people already had. As Lentin (2004) has argued, the processes of racialisation and othering do not need to be intentional to produce disadvantaged effects. The analysis focuses on several key ethnographic cases, which are informed by the project’s wider findings.

‘Nice girls’ who care and serve: Producing migrant female workers

Drawing on the classificatory logic of activation (Peck, 2001; Wacquant, 2009) and statistics of the service line in the municipality, the starting point of analysis is that youth activation targets migrant youth of various educational backgrounds as being in need of ‘skills enhancement’ and activation – usually, through unpaid work placements in the private sector. The fact that some of the jobs on offer in the youth counselling targeted young migrants was highlighted at one of the education fairs, which I attended as part of

a regular event in the counselling office. At the education fair, representatives of different educational institutions presented their services:

As I walk through the stands with vocational school representatives, I am sometimes misrecognised as a young person searching for a school place. I explain to one of them that I do research on young migrants' employment. The representative of a vocational school reacts: 'So do you know why so few migrants want to attend our school? We have integration courses where they can learn Finnish and learn a profession. For example, we have these cleaning courses where 90% of people are immigrants. Then they all get jobs after graduation; it is a great professional path. But they do not want to do this job because they think it is a dirty job – but it is not dirty! If you clean offices, it is not dirty at all.' (Field diary, 13 May 2015)

The representative of integration courses immediately associated young migrants' employment with cleaning, disregarding young people's skills in other fields. Young people attending the service line were racialised and othered through the negation of their skills and cultural capital.

However, these processes of racialisation have different gendered logics, as 'migrant femininities' were constructed in different ways compared to 'migrant masculinities'. Take the case of Marina,⁴ who was one of the first clients I met at the counselling. My field diary reads:

Marina was preparing her school application to become a cook when I met her in a counselling service. She was satisfied that the counsellor found this school. The counsellor was helping Marina with an application: 'Ok, now let's think what makes a cook a great cook?' The counsellor and Marina started coming up with adjectives such as flexible and stress-resistant. I was also invited to join the discussion, and there was [a] positive atmosphere in the room.

When I called Marina in a couple of months, she told me that she was studying to become a cook in a vocational school and was preparing for a job practice in a restaurant. (Field diary, April 2015)

Marina moved to Finland from an ex-Soviet republic. She completed high school in Finland and was raising a child. She was not sure about her future prospects as she was busy with reproductive work caring for her child. Marina's meeting with a counsellor, a rather friendly though unequal relationship, was typical for many young women of migrant backgrounds. Career counsellors constructed young Russian-speaking women as unproblematic and willing job-seekers and were supportive of them becoming pink-collar workers in the feminised fields of care and service, where one needs to be 'flexible' and 'stress-resistant'. Although the job of chef is constructed as a masculine profession, there are gendered hierarchies within professional cooking along the lines of cook/chef, domestic/professional, female/male: female cooks are more likely to be associated with domestic labour and are often denied the professional identity that male chefs enjoy by taking more prestigious positions within the culinary industry (Gunders, 2008).

Marina's story embodies certain logics of youth activation. Youth activation leads to sexually differentiated labour, which requires skills that young women are deemed to possess by virtue of being identified as women. The young Russian-speaking women

whom I observed were predominantly steered to become cooks, nursing assistants, kindergarten carers, cashiers or shop assistants – service sectors representing a high concentration of female migrant workers in Finland (cf. Näre, 2013a). The often-used category of ‘niceness’, which reflects affective, gendered and moral relations within youth activation, implies a construction of acceptable ‘migrant femininities’, as a counsellor’s narration about Anna shows:

She is just such a nice girl, she had worked in Finland since she was 13. She always needs to do something, she is very active, she is really willing to work. Really, really nice girl! (Career counsellor, field diary, December 2015)

During the meeting with a counsellor, Anna was offered a six-month work trial as a cashier, for which she would receive her unemployment benefits. Although the counsellor described her as a ‘hard-working, quiet girl’, which resonates with other findings on the construction of migrant women in education and the labour market (Farris and De Jong, 2014), there were structural reasons why Anna had to find work quickly. When I interviewed her the next day, I learnt that her family encountered economic problems after moving to Finland, and Anna had to start working early in life as a cleaner and shop assistant immediately after middle school. During the interview, she spoke about conflict at home, that she was living with a friend and urgently needed a job. She found a short-term work trial at a supermarket, which was offered through the counselling. She then changed to a job in a shop when the previous contract ended six months later. Despite the structural circumstances, Anna – like many other young women – embodied an essentialised position of ‘niceness’ due to her acceptable femininity and willingness to take on service jobs. The making of a female migrant worker is thus done through subjectifying them as ‘nice girls’, capable of performing care and service work.

Once analysed against the backdrop of young Russian-speakers with higher education, it becomes clear that gendered labour in feminised fields is offered to young women regardless of their cultural capital and background. Here is a snippet of Alisa’s story:

Alisa has a degree in linguistics and moved to Finland after finishing university. She did two years of integration and language training, after which an integration course offered her a work trial as a school teacher assistant. Thereafter, she was invited to attend the career counselling service. She was offered another work trial as a youth worker’s assistant. After that, she returned to the youth career counselling, where the counsellor offered her the possibility to become a kindergarten nanny – first through a work trial and then with a wage subsidy. When I met her in the counselling, she was doing a work trial as a kindergarten nanny and would soon apply for Finnish citizenship. Once she left, the counsellor told me that she really likes Alisa and thinks that she is a ‘very nice and responsible girl’. (Field diary, June 2015)

Alisa’s story turned out to be another typical path for young migrant women. Unlike Anna and Marina, who had high school education, Alisa had a university degree. Yet, a lack of recognition of her cultural capital restricted her labour opportunities. Despite Alisa’s linguistics degree, she was offered vocational training and jobs in care, similar to Marina’s experience after high school. These women’s different educational capital was not taken into account and led to same employment paths.

Conversely, when I met a native Finnish youth named Anniina with a degree in international relations, the counsellor said:

She is a university-educated young woman who has all the skills and can search for work on her own, which is why we decided that she will terminate our services. (Career counsellor, field diary, June 2015)

Anniina was constructed as a competent, skilled and highly educated young woman who did not require activation, while Alisa, who also had a university degree, was constructed as a 'migrant woman', positioning her in a lower-skilled and lower-paid feminised and migrant-dominated care sector. This exemplifies Alisa being essentialised, negating her education and not considering job opportunities, work trials or training in, for example, translation, editorial assistance or language teaching. Instead, she was channelled into care work, which is increasingly dominated by migrant women (Farris, 2017; Näre, 2013a). Moreover, the young person feels compelled to accept the offer due to the conditionality of unemployment benefits. Conversely, a young Finnish woman with a Finnish university education was not offered care work; she was excused from youth activation. Labour activation then categorises and targets certain groups as more or less 'employable' and skilled. Despite the fact that Alisa was soon to become a Finnish citizen, her perceived 'migrancy' (Näre, 2013b) was sustained by steering her into feminised, migrant-dominated economic sectors rather than helping her develop the professional skills that she already had. Alisa's story, compared with the counsellor's description of Anniina, shows that skills become racialised based on the holder's background and that racialisation works through the simultaneous gendering of labour and production of migrant workers with a gendered set of skills (Kofman, 2013).

Young Russian-speaking women were often compelled to invest in 'normative femininity'. For example, Olga, a management graduate, stated that she was not interested in applying for jobs or training as a nurse or shop assistant, illustrating young people's resistance to offered categorisations. Following Olga's departure, the counsellor turned to me and said:

She says she has a master's degree in management, but what are you *actually* able to do? Quite often, young people study some strange things like history without thinking about future employment. (Career counsellor, field diary, November 2015)

When Olga tried to keep her middle-class position and get a job outside the typical scope of job offerings in service and care, the counsellor was negative and demeaning. Although this comment could be directed against Finnish university educated youth, classificatory structures of unemployment prevent highly-educated Finns from such encounters. Olga was eventually offered a short course to get a 'hygiene pass' for restaurant work.

Controlling 'disobedient' migrant masculinities

In contrast to the production of caring 'migrant femininities', career counsellors constructed young male clients through the prism of their migrant masculinity as threatening, lazy and deceptive – the categories historically used to stereotype non-Western male

Others (Fanon, 1952). Due to the lack of space only several ethnographic cases have been selected to illustrate my argument. However, these examples reflect the general logic of approaching young, unemployed working-class and racialised men as being at a higher risk of social exclusion, being less responsible job-seekers and in need of activation in order to get ‘on the right track’ (see also Berg and Aaltonen, 2017). The feeling of suspicion and distrust dominated the relations between young men and the counsellors. Once, while waiting for Pavel, a counsellor with a foreign background told me:

This young man used to attend meetings with a Finnish counsellor. Now I am going to be his counsellor. Maybe they [migrant clients] are different with Finnish workers, but I won’t be tricked! (Field diary, November 2015)

Pavel had a night-time warehouse job, which he left due to exhaustion and disturbance to his day–night rhythm. He said that he had started attending Finnish language courses again and that he would like to get a better job with regular working hours or a study place. He said that he loved architecture and would consider studying in this field. Once Pavel closed the door following the meeting, the counsellor told me that she did not believe anything he said: ‘Every time I talk to him, I know that he is pulling my leg.’ The counsellor thought that he wanted nothing from life than to live off unemployment benefits.

When I interviewed Pavel the following day, he told me that after breaking up with his girlfriend, he was depressed and tired of his job, as it offered no prospects. He felt lost about the future and could not articulate what he wanted to the counsellor. He was exhausted having to work nights, which he did because of the extra money earned for night shifts. His mother was on a disability pension due to a knee injury sustained after years of cleaning work, so he gave some of his earnings to her. Although Pavel was emotionally and physically active, working and caring for his mother and had been building a relationship, the counsellor saw him as a liar and constructed him as inactive and lazy. In contrast to Anna, who started working when she was 13, Pavel’s work ethic was seen as inferior despite him working night shifts to help his mother. His care for his mother was not recognised, which further depicted him in the light of ‘young men without ambitions and morals’ (McDowell, 2014: 40). The counsellors deployed an essentialised gendered moral construction of young people’s work ethic and work abilities. The construction of a migrant’s work ethic, therefore, is not universal and is strongly gendered.

Attitudes towards young male clients suggest that the governance of young unemployed Russian-speaking men is premised on anxieties around young migrant and racialised men (Charsley and Wray, 2015). Essentialised constructions of gender capital regarding racialised young men had little exchange-value (McCall, 1992).

Victor’s story is representative. Before moving to Finland, Victor graduated from the conservatory in Russia with a higher degree in organ music. However, as with many other migrant male clients, the counsellor started steering him towards the field of manual labour. My field diary reads:

There is silence in the room as a counsellor types on a keyboard.

- Career Counsellor (CC): Would you like to do work outside the field of culture?
- Victor: Only if it is in the field of starting my own business.
- CC: Would you like to do service work? Construction maybe?
- Victor: No physical job for me, please. I was created for brain jobs. I want to study more Finnish, get to university and maybe develop my own project.
CC checks some information.
- CC: Would you like to work in a supermarket? Like a warehouse? You can learn Finnish there too.
- Victor: I am not sure I will learn that many words doing this job.
- CC: They don't exclude one another. You learn Finnish in a supermarket too.
I intervened in their dialogue and asked whether there were jobs in his field, as Victor asked. The counsellor answered firmly that these jobs were all in Finnish and required 'good Finnish skills'. Victor continued:
I know there is a vacancy in Sibelius Music Academy, I am interested in that.
- CC: There are too many applicants and there is only one job. [*CC then finds some courses in Finnish*]. These courses are really advanced, maybe you should attend courses for immigrants. (Field diary, June 2015)

Young male clients were offered jobs in the sectors representing a high concentration of migrant workers such as logistics, construction and warehouse work (Statistics Finland, 2013a) for short unpaid trial periods. The excerpt illustrates how Victor was persistently denied access to jobs for which he was qualified. Victor's place in the labour market was reified exclusively as a manual worker, as the counsellor disregarded his education and steered him towards work in construction and warehousing. In fact, Victor clearly contested being categorised as a construction worker, emphasising a disembodied mental acuity by referring to 'brain work'.

Even if there may be a limited number of jobs in culture and music, the counsellor did not consider offering training or a work trial in Victor's field, which would help him learn professional vocabulary in Finnish, build professional networks and improve his chances in the labour market. Victor was offered unpaid work in construction and warehousing to receive his unemployment benefits, which was asocial work performed individually with few opportunities for communication with others – a story similar to Sasha's. Sasha had moved to Finland with his girlfriend and was about to do his final exams for a law degree in Russia. Nevertheless, the counsellors channelled him into a six-month unpaid work trial in a warehouse. This is what he told me when I met him a couple of months later:

It was clear from the beginning that I would not be offered a job there. But then I thought that if I don't do what they say, I will have problems with the employment office and my unemployment money. I think a physicist would already learn something new in six months. But what skills was I supposed to learn in a warehouse? To put goods in their places? I learnt zero skills, so I finished my last day and just left. (Interview with Sasha, July 2015)

Sasha was then offered a study place to become a construction worker. His almost-completed degree in law was ignored. He had to wake up at 4.30 a.m. and do a six-hour workday, which shows the blurry boundaries between unemployment and work (Adkins, 2012). Indeed, like Sasha, many young men never returned to the fields offered in the counselling.

Umut Erel (2009) has explored creative ways that migrants may valorise their transnational capital despite being not recognised as having proper national capital for the labour market. I suggest that in the context of the spatially 'sealed' rooms where the meetings took place, and face-to-face encounters, it may become more difficult to resist offered categorisations, when means for life can be lost. Although as a researcher I had more power than the clients, I also felt that I broke the expected silence and typical dynamics of a standard meeting when I asked about jobs for which young people were qualified.

Conclusions

While there is extensive evidence of migrants' and racialised non-white populations' lower employment rates and labour precarity, there is little ethnographic research on the workings of workfare in day-to-day institutional encounters. The article has addressed this gap by showing that the strategy to tackle young people's unemployment has a racialised, classed and gendered logic. Contractual obligations and classificatory practices of labour activation work as a mechanism through which structural inequalities are reproduced by channelling racialised and migrant young people into low-waged or unpaid work placements in the private sector to make them eligible for unemployment benefits. While the field of activation is undergoing constant changes, the analysis has demonstrated that young people were directed not towards the sectors in which they had skills and educational qualifications but towards sectors with labour shortages, i.e. in care, construction and services.

The analysis has underpinned the gendered logics of racialisation of 'migrant worker' subjects, with stereotypical assumptions on what kind of skills and behaviour migrant and racialised men and women supposedly 'naturally' possess. Within this double gendered logic, young migrant women are depicted as a willing and unproblematic supply of labour for the care and service sectors (Farris and De Jong, 2014). At the same time, unemployed migrant men are seen as threatening, disobedient and in need of control through labour. McDowell (2000) has suggested that young men are more likely to be 'learning to serve' in service economy contexts rather than 'learning to labour', like in Willis's (1977) ethnography of British 'lads'. Unlike caring and serving migrant femininities, young migrant masculinities were regarded as appropriate only for manual labour. To continue the logic of Willis (1977) and McDowell (2000), I argue that in the

context of workfare reforms young people are *'taught to labour'* and *'taught to serve'* through being funnelled into gendered labour markets.

These findings have implications for the analysis of the production of migrant labour. It has been extensively and importantly argued that migrant labour is produced through the exclusion of migrants from citizenship and welfare rights and keeping them in an insecure migrant status (De Genova, 2002; Mezzadra and Neilson, 2013). Young people in this article had formal residence-based rights and access to welfare, which did not protect them from being made into low-paid or non-waged gendered *'migrant worker'* subjects. Young unemployed Russian-speakers who are channelled through youth activation policies are not excluded by the welfare state and formal citizenship rights. Conversely, the workfare state works as a mediator of market interests and integrates the *'undeserving'* poor with formal rights into *'active citizenship'* by making them participate in insecure, racialised and gendered labour markets. *'Fantasy citizenship'*, as Anderson (2015) has called it, holds that once migrants obtain permanent residence, they achieve equality and inclusion. This assumption sidesteps the changing meaning of citizenship itself and the post-Fordist state's concern with securing the state–market relationship rather than providing universal rights-based social welfare (Wacquant, 2009). Even with formal residence and citizenship rights, racialised populations continue to occupy the sharp end of unemployment (OECD, 2017; Statistics Finland, 2013b). This may further subject them to contingent labour and sustain them in a gendered and racialised *'migrant worker'* position through conditionality of social assistance upon participation in work-related activities. There is thus an urgent need to reframe unemployment benefits as an unconditional social citizenship right and recognise the skills and qualifications that migrant youth already have.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Lena Näre, Marguerite Van Den Berg, Michaela Benson, Anastasia Diatlova, Anastasia Golovneva, Josien Arts, and the two anonymous reviewers for generous and constructive criticism that greatly improved the text.

Funding

This research was carried out as part of the project *'Migrant Youth Employment: Politics of Recognition and Boundaries of Belonging (RECOGNITION, 2014–2017)'* funded by the University of Helsinki, Kone Foundation and Emil Aaltonen Foundation.

Notes

1. I use the term Russian-speaking to refer to young people from post-Soviet countries (including in this research Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, Moldova, Kazakhstan, Armenia and Estonia) whose first or second language is Russian. Finnish statistics do not allow registration by ethnic or racial background, which is why mother tongue is the best identification for *'ethnic origin'*.
2. Unlike in the US, for example, the governments of the Nordic countries, including Finland, have not used the term *'workfare'* but have used, instead, the term *'activation'* (Kananen, 2012).
3. For ethical reasons, I cannot provide the source of these data as it would disclose the site where I did my fieldwork.
4. All names are pseudonyms.

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Author biography

Daria Krivonos is a doctoral candidate in sociology in the University of Helsinki. Her research interests include migration, critical race and whiteness studies, labour, gender and racialisation. Her ethnographic research deals with the racialisation of young Russian-speaking migrants in Finland, which she has analysed from the perspective of legal status, whiteness, labour, gender and racialisation. Daria has also conducted ethnographic research in welfare offices and analysed the ways gender, racialisation, migrancy and class are constructed in the context of young unemployed migrants' encounters with activating labour market policies.

Résumé

Dans cet article, nous nous intéressons aux rendez-vous de jeunes migrants russophones avec l'administration dans le cadre des politiques d'activation du marché du travail en Finlande. Sur la base de recherches ethnographiques, l'article contribue au débat sur les mesures d'incitation au travail en analysant les mécanismes liés au genre, à la migration et à la racialisation qui sont à l'œuvre dans les entretiens avec les services sociaux. Deux thèses sont avancées dans l'article. Premièrement, nous montrons que les populations racialisées sont maintenues dans une position de « travailleurs migrants » non seulement par leur exclusion des droits et d'un statut légal, mais aussi par l'inclusion ciblée, par le biais du *workfare*, des pauvres « non méritants » dotés de droits officiels parmi les citoyens travailleurs. Deuxièmement, l'article montre que la racialisation des « travailleurs migrants » est un processus genré qui répond à une logique sexospécifique essentialisée des compétences que les migrants hommes et femmes sont censés posséder « naturellement ». Les mesures d'incitation à l'emploi maintiennent et exacerbent ainsi

la ségrégation des jeunes migrants et racialisés sur des marchés du travail sexués et racialisés. Notre analyse s'appuie sur un travail ethnographique mené sur le terrain en 2015–2016 auprès des services d'orientation professionnelle des jeunes dans une zone urbaine de Finlande.

Mots-clés

Activation, ethnographie, Finlande, genre, migration, racialisation, travail

Resumen

Este artículo analiza los encuentros cotidianos de jóvenes migrantes de habla rusa con las instituciones que gestionan las políticas de activación en el mercado laboral en Finlandia. A través de investigaciones basadas en la etnografía, el artículo contribuye a la discusión sobre la activación laboral mediante el análisis de los mecanismos relacionados con el género, la migración y la racialización que operan en los encuentros con los servicios sociales. En el artículo se desarrollan dos argumentos. Primero, se sostiene que las poblaciones racializadas se mantienen en una posición de 'trabajador migrante', no solo a través de la exclusión de los derechos y del estatus legal, sino también a través de la inclusión dirigida, a través del *workfare*, de los pobres 'no merecedores' con derechos formales entre los ciudadanos trabajadores. En segundo lugar, se muestra la racialización de los 'trabajadores migrantes' como un proceso de género con lógicas de género esencializadas sobre las habilidades que los hombres y las mujeres migrantes se supone que poseen 'naturalmente'. De este modo, la activación laboral mantiene y exacerba la segregación de los jóvenes migrantes y racializados en mercados laborales segregados por género y raza. El análisis se basa en el trabajo de campo etnográfico en los servicios orientación profesional de jóvenes en un área metropolitana de Finlandia en 2015–2016.

Palabras clave

Activación, etnografía, Finlandia, género, migración, racialización, trabajo