

The Psychologization of Student Subjectivity in the Finnish Academia

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Abstract

Public debate and media attention concerning mental health problems, stress, psycho-emotional vulnerabilities, and anxiety among university students has reached record level. Informed by media representations, student mental health guides, and our observations, we focus on the ethos of vulnerability as an articulation of psychologized student subjectivity in Finnish academia. We explore the multiple registers in which the ethos of vulnerability tends to operate as an assemblage to depict and govern student subjects.

Keywords

academic capitalism, power, psy-subjectivity, university, vulnerability

Introduction: the emergence of psychologization and the ethos of vulnerability

In liberal democracies, so-called psy-discourses (e.g. psychology, psychiatry, psychoanalysis) have been closely allied with educational research and governing education systems for over a century now. Psy-discourses have provided a grid of intelligibility for thinking about and governing pupils as individuals with certain identifiable and controllable propensities such as motivation, intelligence, and attitudes (Petersen and Millei,

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2016; Popkewitz, 2008). Especially children and youth 'at risk' have been subject to psy-intervention programmes in the education system (Brunila, 2020).

Since the turn of the millennium, researchers have noted that in many western education systems, psy-discourses are increasingly viewing more and more young people and young adults as being predisposed to developing mental health dysfunctions at some point in their lives (e.g. Brown, 2011; Frawley et al., forthcoming; McLeod, 2012). This resonates with an *ethos of vulnerability* which has come to play a prominent role in academic, governmental, and everyday accounts of the human condition (Brown et al., 2017; Valero et al., 2019). By the term *ethos of vulnerability*, we refer to political and educational claims that are increasingly made based on an assumption of inherent propensity of individuals to be subject to psycho-emotional risks (e.g. Ecclestone and Brunila, 2015; McLaughlin, 2012).

In this article, we analyse how psy-knowledges are contributing to the *ethos of vulnerability* in universities and how they articulate the student as a subject in need of developing cognitive-emotional coping skills. As a case example, we focus on Finnish universities that have recently taken up governing programmes typical of academic capitalism such as marketization, accountability, and reliance on private funding (Kauppinen and Kaidesoja, 2013). Resonating with the special issue theme, our analysis exemplifies how psy-discourses, often studied apart from national (and/or non-Anglophone) policy contexts operate in relation to nationally and institutionally delimited environments and their complex assemblages of psychological and pedagogic discourses.

The way the rise of academic capitalism and neoliberalism alongside changes in organization of academic labour, has increased stress and pressure as well as the experiences of both professional and personal identity among academic staff in universities is already well-reported (e.g. Bottrell and Manathunga, 2018; Gretzky and Lerner, 2021; Holmwood, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017; Urciuoli, 2018).

In this article, we take a slightly different angle as we examine psy-discourses as a part of a wider turn of the Nordic welfare state shift in Finland which alters the relationship between the state and the citizenry in the form of incentives to individuals to take responsibility for their employment as well as physical and mental health (Moisio and Leppänen, 2007). We explore (a) how psy-discourses operate in limning a psychologized student subjectivity in the context of Finnish universities, (b) how psy-discourses ingrain vulnerability among students, and (c) how psy-discourses reach out to academic staff to assume ways of observing and discussing with students.

Tracing assemblages

Our approach draws from a Foucauldian framework of examining subjectivities constructed at the intersection of power and knowledge. Previous Foucauldian research has shown how educational knowledge, institutions, and training have been central to the perpetuation of psy-knowledges (Harwood and Allan, 2014; Petersen and Millei, 2016; Wright and McLeod, 2014). Such research has highlighted the 'low epistemological profile' (Foucault, 1980: 108) of psy-sciences: the knowledge they produce does not merely represent psychic reality but is deeply imbued in the practices and spaces of governing subjects and has agency in enabling and delimiting certain forms of thinking, feeling, and acting. Together, psy-knowledges, policy, educational practices and academic theorizing

do not turn their human targets into passive objects; however, rather, psy-knowledges cannot work unless their participants are capable of action and unless they offer compelling forms of agency. In other words, it is important to remember that psy-knowledges work not only to render their targets as subjects of power but also to address them as subjects capable of self-reflection.

These starting points do not imply that mental health problems do not ‘really’ exist or that they are somehow merely ‘fabricated’ epiphenomena. Instead, we are inspired by Foucauldian philosopher Ian Hacking’s (2007) notion of the complex interactive nature of human kinds. The way people are offered different classifications through psy-discourses affects how they think and feel about and act on themselves. This may then be taken up in the ways people act and give accounts of themselves which, in turn, may eventually end up being reflected in psy-discourses about human kinds. While we do not intend to follow through all the intricacies of such ‘looping effects’ (Hacking, 1996) imbued in psy-subjectivity, we use Hacking’s notion as a methodological *modus operandi* that seeks to pay attention to the different registers where psy-discourses are produced, circulated, and altered. There is no single *a priori* ontological category or epistemic register where the ‘reality’ of mental health can be found or studied.

We have had regular encounters with students as researchers and university teachers and have provided various types of guidance and assistance. We have also noticed a change in the ways that the media presents university students as well as how university students talk about themselves which was the starting point for writing a joint paper. We began our investigation with the idea that contemporary psy-discourses always operate in a dispersed way: not through centres of calculation, but as assemblages made of heterogeneous objects, spaces, symbols, and strategies which do not have clear-cut external borders (Binkley, 2011: 86). We understand assemblage here as ‘an anti-structural concept that permits the researcher to speak of emergence, heterogeneity, the decentered and the ephemeral in a nonetheless ordered social life’ (Marcus and Saka, 2006: 101). As assemblages, psy-discourses are involved in constant territorializing strategies which delimit an area for the operation of knowledge and governance while enabling multiple combinatory potentials (Rose, 1999). Assemblages are deterritorializing as they draw elements away from their extant connections and attachments, and they reterritorialize as they draw together to form new connections, distances, and cuts in and between subjects, objects, and forms of knowing (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008: 559–562). Deterritorialization takes place when psy-concepts describe individuality in a universalized form, detached from specific personal, and cultural connections. Reterritorialization happens when psychological concepts and forms of reasoning become connected to the ways individuals reflect and guide their own thought and action.

We sought a form of writing and assembling material that resonates with such dispersed and inextricably provisional characteristics of assemblages. We ended up following Petersen and Millei’s (2015) ‘impressionistic’ strategy of exploring the operation of psy-discourses in an academic environment through assembling encounters, objects, affects, and thoughts in the form of a heterogeneous list. This strategy seeks to answer the call of writing more ‘messy’ social science that aims to respect the complexity of the social world (Lather, 2010; Law and Mol, 2002; Marcus and Saka, 2006). Lists consist of ‘disordered sketches of lines in complex indefinite assemblages, or put differently, of various cogs in the machinery, without assuming that a finished and complete picture

could ever be achieved' (Petersen and Millei, 2015: 12). Lists may contain items ranging from personal journal entries and email conversations to posters in faculty walls, textbooks, social media texts and images, to academic journal articles (see Petersen and Millei, 2015; Piattoeva and Saari, 2022). This way, listing can cut through settled categories of qualitative data and their epistemic value.

Listing also seeks to attune to a challenge of acknowledging that we as researchers and academic staff are all implicated – in more ways than we can be aware of – in such an assemblage (see also Piattoeva and Saari, 2022). It demands attention as it addresses us through emails from students, media headlines, and guides from health organizations. We end up having a relation with it even when we assume a critical, problematizing stance towards it. Through listing we want to address – without pretension of exhaustive description – our implication in the assemblage, not to give an impression of being able to make ourselves transparent, but to give an expression of the far reaches and the complexity of such assemblages.

The strategy of listing resists many of the settled accounts of what constitutes a qualitative 'method' in acquiring, classifying, and evaluating data. Nevertheless, a description of how we used the strategy of listing in assembling data is in order. We exchanged material we have acquired over the past 6 years: Finnish student health service guides for mental health, news reports about students' economic and mental health problems for field notes and observations from discussions with university students, as well as our own reflexive journal entries and compiled these into a list. At the same time, we kept in mind the always indefinite, always-emergent nature of such lists (Phillips, 2012; Piattoeva and Saari, 2022). We sought to abstain from a priori hierarchies and container metaphors of evidence that organize data into hard and soft, objective and subjective, exhaustive and lacking. So, instead of a (supposedly) comprehensive description of the operation of psy-knowledges in constituting psycho-emotionally vulnerable student subjectivity in Finnish universities or tracing our data inside a larger system or network, we highlight different points of translation – translation, following the Latin meaning of *translatio*, means to carry over and establish a connection between elements (Latour, 2005) – where psy-knowledges enable and delimit subjectivity. 'Facts' and 'data' about mental health problems find themselves on the same plane with personal field notes from experiences of conversations with university students in classes and one-on-one guidance sessions, as well as university student health guides for students about taking care of one's own subjective well-being.

These lists, rather than following a systematic methodological regime of coding and classification, were 'plugged in' (Jackson and Mazzei, 2013) to the existing theories of governing psy-subjectivities. Plugging refers to an analytic sensibility (instead of a 'method') where data, research literature, and researcher subjectivity are allowed to encounter each other in a co-constitutive, generative way, thereby avoiding the forcing of data into pre-established containers and registers of meaning. Along with the strategy of listing, such 'post-qualitative' sensibility towards analysis resonates well with the attempt to respond to the call for a 'messier' social science.

These encounters generate accounts of the 'hinge of power' in the governing of subjects: the point(s) of contact and translation where public programmes and discourses of vulnerability reach out, with psy-knowledges as active mediators, to the relation of self

to self (Binkley, 2014). We argue that the ethos of vulnerability values and highlights subjective experience as something private, but at the same time colonizes this sphere by restricting how it should be named and acted on (Brunila et al., 2021; Saari, 2018).

Our aim is not to take away something from the reality of psy-subjectivity and psy-discourses in general, but rather add different dimensions to them in a fashion that does not amount to forming a seamless whole but, a coming together of heterogeneous parts. Thus, we are not merely claiming that psy-subjectivity has become ubiquitous in academia. Instead, by looking at psy-discourses as assemblages, we wish to illuminate some of the subtle ways in which psy-knowledges speak through language and social relations in the university context, while also allowing us to think about how not only students but also we as teachers and researchers are implied in assemblages.

Broader societal trajectories: austerity and subjective well-being

Going through the list we found several issues resonating with trajectories cutting through contemporary academia and student subjectivity. Here, we encountered critical sociological analyses relevant for understanding the ways in which psy-knowledges operate in the Finnish academia. We narrowed our focus on two recent shifts in advanced liberal democracies, those of governing individual indebtedness and subjective well-being, both of which partially determine how 'social' and 'economic' questions of health, employment, and education can be thought about and acted on. The first involves the transition to an economics of austerity. Since the global economic crisis in 2008, many European countries have subscribed to the overriding imperative of reducing the national debt. As Lazzarato (2012) notes, the politics of austerity is not limited to the economic sphere. By destabilizing and overriding the structures of the welfare state, it fashions a new type of a citizen subject, one subjected to endless debt. Here, the term 'debt' refers to a host of techniques that impose economic indebtedness and its risks on individual citizens rather than on the system, intensifying individual responsibility and guilt, thereby obfuscating the possibilities of collective democratic interventions.

The strategies of inculcating individuals with debt are discernible in the higher education policies of many advanced liberal democracies. The UK subverted free higher education already in 1998, and since then the tuition has risen from £3000 (1998) to £9000 (2010; Anderson, 2016), forcing students to rely more and more on loans to fund their degrees. Whereas the UK has for long been in the vanguard in executing neoliberal, managerialist higher education policies (Fairclough, 1993; Willmott, 1995), Finland represents a more recent and partial shift from a Humboldtian ethos towards academic or cognitive capitalism (Aarrevaara et al., 2009; Välimaa, 2012). In the mid 1990s, in the throes of a severe economic recession, the Finnish Ministry of Education introduced a model of governing universities through measurable outputs. The role of indicators became ever more intensive in 2010 with the new University Act that stipulated detailed outputs that were tied to government funding. Among the main indicators were the number of student credits and degrees (Kallio et al., 2016; Rinne et al., 2014).

Since the onset of Finland's latest financial crisis which coincided with the new University Act in 2009, the Finnish student loan system has been moving towards a logic of subjective indebtedness. Currently, there are no tuition fees in Finnish universities, and student loans are guaranteed by the Finnish social insurance institution KELA. Yet, government and think tanks (see, for example, Määttänen and Vihriälä, 2017) have since late 2010s fashioned and implemented student loan-based systems to cover up the costs of higher education that the government supposedly can no longer afford. Until late 2010s, Finnish students have rarely relied on student loans, even by Nordic standards (KELA, 2019). Yet, the Finnish government 2015–2019 reduced monthly student allowance by more than a quarter, along with the total number of allowance months, and provided other incentives towards taking student loans. In addition to relieving the government economic burden, this was widely thought to precipitate a student transition to the labour market. Universities now also have an economic interest in efficient studies: from 2013, 12% of university funding has been made contingent upon the number of students who study the worth of 55 ECTS or more each year.

This shift has helped the rise of the neoliberal imaginary of resilient, self-reliant subjects (Brunila and Ylöstalo, 2020). Accordingly, the second trajectory is the transition in social and health care discourses from structural problematizations of health and employment to subjective well-being. This is visible in the calls for substituting structural indicators (such as employment, GNP) with indicators of subjectively experienced well-being (McKay, 2013). It is tied to an ethos of neoliberal governmentality that seeks to refrain from claiming it knows best what is good for individual citizens. Thereby, it values the technologies of self-reporting, that 'give voice' to those being governed (Cromby, 2011). This dovetails with expert discourses such as positive psychology and happiness economics that make subjective well-being thinkable and amenable to intervention (McKay, 2013).

In Finland, dominant social policy discourses are currently highlighting the role of subjectively experienced well-being that can be cultivated by 'enabling' and 'empowering' citizens to take responsibility for their own well-being (Saarinen et al., 2014). Mobilizing expert discourses of subjective well-being can form a closed circuit where the common aims, problems, and their solutions can be named and implemented (Saari and Harni, 2016). Mental health issues may be first identified as impediments to subjective well-being. Then, mental health programmes are designed to address them in the form of self-care practices of stress-release exercises and positive thinking (Saari, 2018). The outcomes of these programmes can then be assessed in terms of subjective well-being indicators. The Finnish Youth Barometer gathers annual statistics on Finnish youth's well-being. The study of 2021, charting subjective experiences of well-being, shows that young people in Finland are generally less satisfied with their lives than their European peers. This has been prominent since the economic crisis of 2008 (Kiilakoski, 2021: 76). The barometer reported that while most young Finns seek stability and predictability in their lives, many see their employment and personal financial situation as impossible to predict. Moreover, many see that the economic risks of personal investments in higher education must be carried individually (Aapola-Kari and Wrede-Jäntti, 2017). Naming subjective experiences and vulnerability as sites of governmental concern with respect to economic austerity may of course lead to making systemic changes

in student funding, for instance. Yet, it seems that often these changes are coupled with calls for empowering and enabling programmes that in turn call for the individual management of one's own mental health (Saarinen et al., 2014).

A firm grid of intelligibility has thereby been established for the problematization of student subjectivity in relation to different empowering and enabling practices supporting subjective well-being. Thus, among health professionals, concerns have been expressed regarding burnout, anxieties, and several stress-related symptoms among university students (Parikka et al., 2022). Majority of the reported well-being issues are seen as caused by challenges regarding distant learning, where some students seem to cope better than others due to their autonomy and self-steering capacities (Salmela-Aro et al., 2021). These concerns have also been raised in the discussion about how support measures and programmes could be made more accessible for students who struggle with different health-related issues and how their mental health could be maintained and strengthened through various well-being exercises (Korkeamäki and Vuorento, 2021).

Even in a system that still carries the structures of a Nordic welfare model – making the case of Finland unique with respect to many Anglophone higher education systems – the coupling of austerity and subjective well-being discourses may result in a unique set of double binds concerning the imagery of the student subject (see also Duffy, 2017). On one hand, recent discourses of happiness and well-being highlight the possibility of each individual experiencing happiness and encouraging affective expressions of thankfulness, elatedness, inspiration and internal motivation (Binkley, 2014). As Ahmed (2010) notes, happiness has become not only a supposedly universal goal for each and everyone but also an obligation: it is a universal duty to seek a work–life balance, a feeling of contentment, and to overcome stress and depression. Yet, on the other hand, the discourses of austerity highlight the looming risks of education as an economic investment, as everyone must calculate and bear those risks themselves. This inculcates an ethos of seeking 'useful' courses and degrees, and not wasting time and money. Berlant's (2011) oft-cited concept of 'cruel optimism' is helpful here. It refers to a particular feature of contemporary late-capitalist societies where injustices manifest themselves in ways that are increasingly hard to recognize and intervene in. The 'cruel optimism' describes affective operations of the prevailing neoliberal ethos. Taken into university context, the notion of 'cruel optimism' could be considered to rise from the observation that university students construct their lives, achievements, and identities around the pursuit of such desirable and socially esteemed objectives as academic job security and careers, economic, and other well-being. The pursuit of these objectives might give the university students a sense of purpose and meaning in life, but the downside is that because these objectives have become increasingly difficult to redeem, their pursuit merely engages the individual in a constant struggle of self-improvement.

Although the ways in which this assemblage shapes the lived experience of students (e.g. how they produce experiences of marginalization) is not the focus of this article, one can speculate that an upshot of such cruel optimism may be a sense of guilt and anxiety – of not being able to enjoy life or to be motivated, and a fear of not making the right choices that will pay off. It is here that the psy-discourses come to the foreground, aiding in identifying, classifying, and expressing those anxieties, as well as finding the means to treat them to attain happiness and well-being. This is territorialized in the individual psyche, first and foremost in its affects and emotions.

Media representations and statistical surveys

Returning to our list of different registers of representing student mental health, encouraging students to explore the assembled nature of psychologized subjectivity has been crucial because the media is active in reporting about a rapidly increasing mental health crisis among university students (see also Frawley et al., forthcoming):

More and more students suffer from mental health problems (Helsingin Sanomat, 2015)

Every third university student has psychological problems (Yle, 2017)

Students have lots of mental health problems – three most common causes. (Iltalehti, 2017)

University students' mental health symptoms have increased (Ilkka, 2017)

In Finnish media representations predating COVID-19 pandemic, the idea that students suffer from an alarming amount of mental health problems relies mostly on survey data mapping the experiences of subjective well-being. Surveys are epistemic strategies which represent the objects of governing as a population of individuals with 'experiences'. What gives weight to subjective well-being indicators is that subjective experiences are widely considered a certain truth value in themselves regardless to the existence of what these experiences are 'about' (Saari and Harni, 2016). Moreover, their representation through statistical measures lends legitimation to the forms of governing – subjective well-being surveys 'give voice' to those being governed. What also characterizes survey research that in policy and media arenas, they are often 'black boxed', deracinated from their theoretical and methodological assumptions. In media representations mentioned earlier, the results of these surveys are easily taken as a self-evident fact representing psychic reality, as there is hardly any attention paid to how students' vocabulary of giving an account of themselves may have also changed towards psy-discourses.

Student health organizations and programmes

Among media representations and the surveys, they report – and resonating with the Finnish trajectory of subjective well-being – there is a wide array of programmes, project networks, campaigns, and other mental health support systems available for Finnish university students. For example, Nyyti, a Finnish non-profit organization for student mental health provides materials and courses for student well-being. Courses and webinars are available for mental health problems (personality disorders, depression, and anxiety) and helping students to balance with studies and personal life issues. Exercises include training in different life skills: how to deal with emotional overload or how to develop self-regulation and self-compassion (e.g. Nyyti ry, 2022b). There is an agreement about their importance in helping students to cultivate their resilience, mental health, and employability. These form significant points of translation between governmental programmes and strategies of subjective well-being, psy-discourses, and subjects' relation to themselves.

Since 2015, and in tune with the Finnish politics of economic austerity, government funding for the Finnish Student Health Service (FSHS) (Ylioppilaiden terveydenhuoltosäätiö, YTHS) responsible for student health care, has been drastically reduced. Coupled with an increase in reported student mental health issues even before the COVID-19 pandemic, this posed a challenge for keeping up its mental health services. This provides an impetus to focus on cultivating practices of student self-care. Since late in this century's first decade, Finnish universities and the FSHS have published an increasing variety of guides for students on cultivating their mental health, the subjects of which range from social anxiety and depression to sex, psychosomatic symptoms, eating disorders, and fear of dentists.

In an FSHS guide for students with social anxiety, a medical doctor highlights that being a student is a particularly vulnerable phase of life that is prone to evoking some degree of anxiety in just any university student. First-year students are often only 20 years old and have just left their home for a new setting without social safety nets. 'It is hard to survive it without support', the guide claims (Martin et al., 2013: 6). In addition, as Nyyti claims, students may have to work alongside their studies in the evenings, on weekends, and on vacations, which is why they may not have the opportunity to vacation at all. This, in turn, is thought to be associated with exhaustion and burnout (Nyyti ry, 2022a). These are examples of a territorializing strategy in which vulnerability is situated in the student population as a ubiquitous, looming potential. Mental health symptoms assume many forms, but as they are regarded as stigmatizing, they often remain hidden from student health professionals as well as teaching staff.

As these guides explicitly address students themselves, they entice students to adopt a reflective stance towards themselves as a psychosomatic entity with certain identifiable features. Affective phenomena, in particular, are named using a psychophysiological vocabulary: describing hyperventilation, the operation of sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, the fight, flight, or freeze system. The guide for social anxiety contains a SPIN-FIN self-evaluation questionnaire containing items such as '7. Sweating in front of people makes me anxious' and '15. Being embarrassed or appearing stupid are among my worst fears'. These are given as reactions on a scale of 0–4 (0 = not at all true to 4 = very true). After completing the questionnaire, the students count their points and receive feedback on their level of their social anxiety (Martin et al., 2013). Students are also urged to reflect on the experiences of anxiety, stress, and fear, to study where anxiety is felt in the body and to determine whether this is really dangerous or visible to others (Martin et al., 2013; Martin and Kunttu, 2012). We see these guides as encouraging students to recognize their emotions and affects within a certain pre-given grid of intelligibility. A circuit of confession (Foucault, 1990) is in operation here: subjects confess their subjective states to expert knowledge, which in return gives them the real truth of their being (see also Saari and Harni, 2016). This also materializes the aforementioned hinge of power where the private sphere of subjectivity and emotions is recognized, all the while penetrated by psy-discourses.

In Nyyti webpages, there is also a section where students can post their own experiences of living and dealing with mental health and life management difficulties. Allegedly, this can inspire others to talk about their experiences and reduce stigmatization by challenging the stereotypes of people living with mental health difficulties. Some

of these experiences were expressed through a 'survival discourse' (Brunila, 2014), where students described their journey of how they learned to seek for help and how they had, through different psychological support, learned to take care of their mental health.

In such guides and net pages offering tips and tools, we recognize a movement of deterritorialization as student experiences and life narratives are cut off from their subjective everyday contexts, and a deterritorialization, as they find their place in the universal categories of psy-discourses about social anxiety. Then, these discourses can mediate the relation of self to self, to say that your affects, emotions, and thoughts are instances of psy-phenomena that can be identified within a certain grid of intelligibility and their affective correlates can be located in the body.

Academics' implication

We as academics are implied in assemblages that identify and govern vulnerable student subjectivities, as there are guides for teaching staff, such as a short guide for study advisors on how to ask students about their mental health (Martin et al., 2012; University of Tampere, 2017). Their function is to raise awareness of how academic staff can and should recognize mental health symptoms, to name them, and to reflect on how they develop and affect subjective experience. The first author of this article, in his role as a study guidance representative, has previously been responsible for enabling the smooth accumulation of ECTS and the completion of degrees among students. Finnish social insurance institution KELA has required that students acquire 45 ECTS per academic year in order to be entitled to a student allowance. Yet, Finnish university faculties have been awarded €6400 for each student that acquires 55 ECTS per year. For such economic reasons, study guidance representatives are encouraged to identify students who do not show steady progress or who show symptoms of distress. The guide provided for all study advisors of the teaching staff highlights the sensitivity of mental health problems. This topic should be approached with delicate opening lines, such as 'I have noticed that you have looked quite tired and worried lately. Do you feel that way yourself?' (University of Tampere, 2017: 3).

Based on our experiences of how students talk about themselves, we have seen a shift in the discourse across a course of a decade. We went back to notes we had written over the past 6 years when encountering students during courses, emails, faculty meetings, and other events. The notes showed how increasing number of students – even before COVID-19 – described themselves as anxious, stressed, vulnerable, and worried. They often described constant stress not only about their studies and course choices but also about personal failures and insufficiencies. They reported extreme pressure as well as the inability to cope, sleep, and think straight due to anxiety or burnout.

In the notes, individual student responsibility and vulnerability formed an entangled knot in the quest for (economic and psychological) survival. The sense of survival and heroism is increasingly intertwined with an imaginary of individual capacities for overcoming poverty, psychological trauma, social anxieties, and personal 'psychological' challenges (Brunila, 2020). This may be partly fueled by aforementioned trajectories of indebtedness and subjective well-being. Psy-knowledges provide young people with certain idea of how to identify and deal with feelings of insufficiency, frustration, anxiety,

and economic stress by seeking psychological support and developing skills of resilience and compassion. The sense of survival and agency is conditional, which means a subject needs to recognize the psycho-emotional deficiency within the self, within the body, to become aware of it to become healthier, self-compassionate, and resilient. Hence, in presenting oneself in the 'right way' has included various kinds of ambivalences such as exhibiting efficiency and productivity, as well as satisfaction and pride when getting it 'right'. Alongside the 'right way' are feelings of insufficiency, frustration, anxiety, stress, and uncertainty (e.g. Bottrell and Manathunga, 2018; Brunila et al., 2021; Davies and Bansel, 2010; Davies and Petersen, 2005).

Further highlighting our own implication in psy-assemblages, this vulnerability is also present in the way we as teaching and research staff are caught in new ethical dilemmas. In Finland, students in general still have a right to choose what minor subjects they take. The two first authors of this article have for a long time encouraged new education students to explore the wide range of disciplines and courses the university has to offer, so that they can 'find their own thing' and build their own unique expertise as education professionals. While seeking to sustain an air of Humboldtian ethos, we have done this also in an attempt to soothe typical freshman anxieties about making the right choices in terms of their future employment and career trajectories. However, since the widespread political demand for speedier graduation, administrative calls for 55 ECTS each year, and the diminished number of student allowance months, this exhortation to freely explore has begun to feel problematic. These shifts result in double binds which the student must learn to navigate: *Relax! Do your own thing at your own pace – but do not waste time irresponsibly, be efficient!* Thus, instead of a much-lauded academic freedom and 'slow time', students might be now caught in the midst of what Renata Salecl (2011) calls a 'tyranny of choice': making choices without means or time to reflect on the criteria and consequences of choosing. We have experienced this as an aporia – we would like to sustain the ethos of academic liberty, but while we are still free to do so, speaking about it to students has begun to feel like portraying unrealistic fantasies from the past, and as such, ethically dubious.

The strategic possibilities of psy-discourses

While becoming aware of our own implication in such assemblages has been a source of discomfort, we have also listed possible 'lines of flight' (Deleuze and Guattari, 2008: 560–652) that take parts of the assemblage to new, unexpected territories and uses. While psy-discourses delimit how subjects can recognize themselves, they are also always reliant on the recognition of individual autonomy: that instead of obligation, subjects willingly assume such discourses as truths about themselves (Binkley, 2014). Such freedom always leaves room for resistance and diversion. The ethos of vulnerability has, following Foucault's (1990) terms, 'tactical pluralism': it is not owned by anyone, and it can always be aimed at new objectives. The psy-discourses that govern how student subjects can be thought about and acted upon can also be used like a mirror that aids students in recognizing how they are being governed and to reflect whether they want to be governed in such a way.

In our teaching, we have sought ways to enable taking reflexive, yet ethically sensitive stances towards the ethos of vulnerability by discussing how students' own affects and thoughts may be imbued with psy-discourses that mediate between wider governmental problematizations and subjective experience. In our search for lines of flight, we are fascinated by the Institute of Precarious Consciousness (IPC), which proposes a critical stance towards the current celebration of the creative potential that capitalism is supposed to unleash in humans when the boundaries of fixed work frames are lifted, and immaterial labour can freely flow. Interestingly, they suggest that neoliberal capitalism's dominant affect is *anxiety*, emerging when individuals encounter the multiple, sometimes conflicting systems of communication that bind them to measurements of accounting, to visibilization, economic control, and productivity (IPC, 2014: 277). This is why we have started to discuss with students how these 'personal' affects and emotions are historical kinds, partly effects of the assemblages of psy-discourses, governmental programmes of control and personal life trajectories (see also Brunila and Ylöstalo, 2020).

Our discussions with students have broached encounters with various media representations about student mental health, which play a part in the process of becoming a recognizable university student subject. Recognition here means an ongoing process where students learn how to present themselves in the 'right way'. These discussions are also interesting because they demonstrate how the ethos of vulnerability operates and has the potential to make anyone feel at least potentially vulnerable, lacking, and insufficient. They led to further discussion into how these representations delimit how success and failure in student life is experienced as a deeply personal matter.

What these discussions aimed at was not predetermining forms of resistance towards the ethos of vulnerability. Nor was it to claim that the anxiety and stress identified in surveys and media representations is not 'real', that it is merely 'false consciousnesses' that the students should be freed from. Quite the opposite, such reflective discussions aim to show that the ethos of vulnerability is indeed very real – with palpable effects on the way students are addressed in the media, and how teaching staff is encouraged to identify and discuss mental health with students. These discussions can also be critically reflected upon and diverted for ways of thinking and being otherwise, of playing with the aforementioned 'looping' structure of the historical kinds that psy-discourses produce, circulate, and transform.

The ethos of vulnerability is part of the recent democratization of psy-knowledges in the sense that everyone – not just mental health patients with diagnoses – is now a potential subject of psy-knowledges and everyone can now be their own mental health counsellor (Binkley, 2014). While spreading the ethos of vulnerability to ever new areas of life, it also allows for certain lines of flight to problematize psy-knowledges themselves as the truth of our being, and to ask whether we want to be governed in this way (see Ball, 2017: 50; Olssen, 2006). This may create a space where one's freedom, subjectivity, and truth are left open to radical 'destabilization, a challenge to everything that makes us what we are, without any of the comforts of another way of being – that "other" remains "undefined"' (Ball, 2017: 36).

Conclusion

Several scholars have noted that psy-knowledges are working their way towards harnessing the whole personality of university students for its use, shaping that personality more effectively by focusing on the idea of stable identities as well as emotions to form flexible and adjustable student subjectivities. While the Finnish university system still has structures that are reminiscent of both Humboldtian ideals and a Nordic welfare model, there are trends towards encouraging students to take responsibility for the efficient progress of their own studies. A central driver in this development is psy-discourses which provide a grid of intelligibility to the opportunities and threats inherent in student life. It is crucial to understand this, as the choices that students make stem not so much from the individual alone – as if the choices were free decisions made to realize one’s own ambitions – but rather from the conditions of possibility within the institutional arrangements in which people and choices are emerging and developing: the discourses related to the academic capitalism prescribe not only what is desirable and wanted, but also what the acceptable form of subjectivity is.

We have characterized psy-subjectivities as imbued in assemblages of heterogeneous discourses, which enable affects, emotions, and practices that are not prescribed by any single interest, centre of calculation, or governmental programme. Through our strategy of listing, we have sought to throw light onto the dispersed, disjointed, and dynamic nature of such assemblages. Even though assemblages do not have clear centres or fixed borders, they operate as an adhesive that ties together different agents in the university – teaching staff, health officials, and students – with a common vocabulary and common aims. In the ethos of vulnerability, means and ends are sequenced so that it is possible to always begin and end with the psy: to identify common aims (happiness, well-being), raise concerns about existing difficulties (mental health problems) and prescribe remedies for them (technologies of the self).

Despite its obvious ubiquity in the university, we wish to highlight that the ethos of vulnerability does not imply a subjugating power that ends in absolute domination. Rather, the ethos of vulnerability operates on the assumption of individual freedom and responsibility: it is its starting point, its means and its end. Moreover, the circulation of psy-discourses does not operate in a vacuum: through encounters with other discourses they open up a reflective space in which to practice freedom, and perhaps to think about freedom and university studies differently. These tenets amount to the fact that the ethos of vulnerability and psy-discourses are made and re-made constantly. Such discourses do not radiate from a single point, but consist of multiple points of contact, interfaces that enable translations to novel systems of meaning (see also Petersen and Millei, 2015; Saari and Harni, 2016).

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