Ethnicized un/employability: Problematized Others and the shaping of advanced liberal subjects

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abstract

This paper suggests some analytical tools for theoretically informed qualitative research of the nexus of employability and ethnicity. A governmentality perspective, inspired by Michel Foucault and others who have elaborated on his thoughts, constitutes the analytical approach of the paper. This approach directs the analytical focus towards problematizations and how the conduct of the governed subjects is guided. The analytical tools and approach are then employed using an empirical example. The analysis shows how a certain disadvantaged group – unemployed Somalis in Sweden – is problematized in the context of a labour market project co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF). The paper discusses how different techniques, such as resume-writing, personal action plan, guidance and job interview training are deployed in order to reshape these problematized and ethnicized Others into advanced liberal subjects, or ‘employable’ individuals.

To find out what our society means by sanity, perhaps we should investigate what is happening in the field of insanity. And what we mean by legality in the field of illegality. (Foucault, 1983: 211)

Introduction

How should we approach the concept of employability? One way of investigating what is meant by employability could be to scrutinize what is happening in the field of unemployability. In line with this idea, the aim of this paper is to analyse the problematization of ethnicized un/employable Others. The material analysed
The concept of problematized Others is inspired by Edward Said (1979) and his influential work on Orientalism. Throughout Western discourse, the Orient has been described and discursively produced as ‘backward’ and ‘static’ – an antithesis of the progressive, modern West. The Orient, under Western hegemony, emerged as an object of knowledge and hence was constructed through practices of power and knowledge (Hall, 1997). Throughout history, the inhabitants of the Orient – the Others – have been depicted as lazy and unreliable (Said, 1979). I use the term ‘problematized Others’ in order to grasp how Otherness (based on notions of ethnic differences) is constructed as problematic in relation to contemporary Western norms of defining which individuals are employable subjects. The un/employability of problematized Others is, so to speak, ethnically marked.

Furthermore, I have chosen to conceptualize the subjects who meet contemporary normative standards of being employable as ‘advanced liberal subjects’. This notion of advanced liberal subjects is inspired by the work of Nikolas Rose (1999) and his discussion of contemporary Western societies in terms of advanced liberalism. One of the pertinent features of such societies is to create and maintain a functional market economy. Rose argues that in advanced liberal societies:

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1 International Organization of Good Templars
2 I use the term un/employability as my objective is to focus on the whole spectrum, from those regarded as not employable to the ideals and norms of what/who constitutes an employable subject.
Social government must be restricted in the name of an economic logic, and economic government must create and sustain the central elements of economic well-being such as the enterprise form and competition. [...] All aspects of social behaviour are now reconceptualized along economic lines – as calculative actions. [...] All manner of social undertakings [...] can be reconstructed in terms of their contribution to the development of human capital. (Rose, 1999: 141)

The ideal inhabitant of such a society is characterized by the will to make an enterprise out of his or her own life. Rose (1999: 142) continues his argument by concluding that the ‘powers of the state thus have to be directed to empowering the entrepreneurial subjects of choice in their quest for self-realization’. The contemporary advanced liberal subject can be seen as being driven by economic reasoning (such as entrepreneurial attitude and competition), seeking to maximize himself/herself in order to provide for both his/her own well-being and for the economic growth of enterprise. Under advanced liberal rule, the individual becomes responsible for his/her own welfare, through the powerful discourse of individual free choice. Citizens of advanced liberal societies are socialized to perceive their lives as the outcomes of rational choices. As a consequence, they are made responsible for the outcomes of their free choice (Miller and Rose, 2008). Politicians exhort individuals to take responsibility for their own security (Rose, 1999: 160) such as preventing unemployment through strengthening their employability (Rose, 1996). The state still has a responsibility to provide opportunities for such activities through the funding of both private and public experts that stand willing to help and guide citizens in maintaining their employability.

The problematized Others are often subjects categorized as ‘immigrants’ or ‘ethnic minorities’. The advanced liberal subject, on the other hand, is not necessarily a native (although that may often be the case). The prominent feature of the advanced liberal subject is rather that the individual has adopted an attitude and a sense of self that is in accord with the prevailing norms of advanced liberal societies. The advanced liberal subject could be thought of as a subject position which is potentially reachable for each and all of us.

The two categories of advanced liberal subjects and problematized Others are used in the empirical analysis of this study to render a vision of those who are perceived today as employable citizens and those who are not but instead are problematized as unemployable. This conceptual dichotomy is not to be understood as a set of neat clear-cut categories but rather as a starting point for thinking about the issue of ethnicized un/employability.

The paper is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview of contemporary studies of employability, noticing that qualitative studies concerned with...
relations between employability and ethnicity are relatively rare. Second, I suggest an analytical approach drawing on governmentality that could be used in analysing relations between employability and ethnicity. Third, the paper engages with an empirical case, exemplifying how this approach may be put to work. The conclusion recapitulates and elaborates on the empirical findings and analysis.

Studies of employability

Employability discourse has both intensified in the political arena and generated increasing interest in academia during the past decade (Berglund and Fejes, 2009; Brown et al., 2004; Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004; Weinert et al., 2001). In studies on employability, attention has been drawn to various fields and phenomena. One common theme in these studies is the relation between employability and education. For example, Doyle (2003) investigates how economic and democratic values compete in discourses of higher education in policy texts from New Labour in the UK. Another study, Boden and Nedeva (2010), argues that higher education in the UK is becoming more neoliberal and that this is accompanied with a shift in defining employability. Although universities in the UK have a tradition of producing productive citizens, the neoliberal emphasis on employability affects power relations in the labour market in favour of employers. This adversely affects pedagogies and curricula of higher education. Boden and Nedeva (2010) conclude that some universities may become devoted to producing ‘docile employees’ whilst other produce employers and leaders. Within the Swedish context, Carlbaum (2012) analyses how representations of problems, goals and purposes are produced in Swedish educational policy and how this constructs ideals of the good citizen. The good citizen is depicted as employable and entrepreneurial and devoted to enhance business and growth. Another theme, related to education, is how employability relates to the notion of lifelong learning. Nicoll and Fejes (2008) explore how this notion figures in policy discourse and it constructs governable subjects.

Other studies have focused on the experiences of students. For example, Nilsson (2010) investigates how engineering graduates perceive employability. He discusses employability in terms of soft skills (interpersonal skills and personal characteristics) and hard skills (formal and actual competence) and concludes that the engineering graduates consider the hard skills less important in relation to their individual employability. Fogde (2009) employs a governmentality perspective when examining how a Swedish union gives career advice to university students. She concludes that students are encouraged to work with themselves in order to become sellable, flexible and employable. Furthermore, employability in the light of the knowledge economy has been studied by Brown
and Hesketh (2004). They analyse how university graduates use their employability when competing for prominent positions in multinational companies and public sector organizations. Focusing on the hiring process, they reveal the socially constructed nature of employability.

Employability has also been studied in relation to age. Nielsen (1999) examines the association between employability, workability and age and concludes that there is a strong relationship between these categories. In relation to gender, Carlbaum (2011) has analysed the gendered constructions of future workers in Swedish educational policy. How disability and employability are related has also been investigated. Holmqvist (2009) examines labour market policy programs targeting those regarded as hard to employ, often impaired people, by offering ‘dirty’ and stigmatized work tasks in order to strengthen their self-confidence and rehabilitate their working capacity.

In relation to what has been called ‘the age of migration’, research on ethnicity has also increased during recent decades (Castles and Miller, 2009). However, research on how these two concepts – ethnicity and employability – intersect is rarely investigated. For instance, Ashcraft (2009) argues that organizational and management studies in general have neglected ethnic aspects, and Nkomo (1992) stresses that reading mainstream organizational research would lead one to believe that organizations are ethnically neutral. This, of course, is a worrying situation.

Although under-researched, relations between employability and ethnicity have previously been investigated, commonly in relation to higher education and immigrants’ prospects in the labour market (Morley, 2010). Studies focusing on ethnicity and employability tend to engage in quantitatively describing the disadvantage of immigrants in the labour market (e.g. Leslie and Drinkwater, 1998; Conley and Topa, 2002; Carmichael and Woods, 2000).

What seems to be a distinguishing feature for quantitatively oriented studies on ethnically marked un/employability is a tendency to treat ethnicity as something ‘essential’, something that is – as a variable – rather than something that is being done. The concept of ethnicity is not problematized as such. The same goes for the term ‘employability’, which is conceptualized as ‘human capital’ that could be measured, and not as a problematic and normative category in need of critical investigation. As Brown et al. (2004: 7) put it, ‘A major problem confronting researchers interested in issues of employability is the lack of theoretically informed studies’. They argue that previous research on employability is dominated by large-scale surveys which fail to grasp qualitative aspects and that policy discourse on employability is dominated by an employer perspective.
From a research perspective, one fruitful strategy to outline different approaches to employability is to ask the question whether one is conducting research for employability or of employability (cf. Alvesson, Bridgman and Wilmott, 2009). Each of these two approaches will lead to different research questions and perspectives. The latter will lean towards a more critical understanding of the term employability – taking into consideration the continuum, stretching from what is constructed as unemployable to normative ideals of what constitutes an employable individual. This opens up the analytical scope to a broader view of how ethnicity and un/employability relate.

The study for employability could be seen as interested in ‘solutions’ to a political problem, namely how to make the population more employable. Migration, integration and employability are prominent areas in policy making, not least within the European Union (COM, 2005). The study of or for employability could therefore be understood in relation to what Martiniello (2010) discusses in terms of policy-relevant and policy-driven research. On the one hand, the study for employability would imply a more policy-driven research. The research questions would then be formulated with policy making and problem solving in mind. Policy stakeholders are often interested in quick solutions to the problems they are addressing (Martiniello and Rath, 2010); hence, the research would ideally function as a remedy to unemployability. On the other hand, the study of employability is concerned with developing a critical understanding of what employability could mean. The study of un/employability is relevant to, but not driven by, policy making. I will here conceptualize an approach concerned with the study of employability and ethnicity.

**Governmentality and un/employability**

The approach I outline here is inspired by Michel Foucault and those who have elaborated on his thoughts on governmentality. Foucault’s work on governmentality illuminates the dynamic and complex ways through which societies are governed (Foucault, 2007; 2008). This perspective evokes a broad approach to governing, ranging from government of ourselves and of others as well as states or organizations (Walters, 2012). Since the 1990s, Foucault’s concept of governmentality has attracted increased interest among scholars, mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world. The study of governmentality has become a ‘powerful current in the social and political sciences’ (Walters, 2012: 1), including organization studies, and can today be regarded as a field of research in its own right.
Foucault argues that since the eighteenth century, a specific mentality of government, targeting populations and their ‘wealth, health, longevity, its capacity to wage war and to engage in labour’ (Miller and Rose, 2008: 27) has been predominant in Western societies. Foucault (1997: 80) describes this particular governmentality as ‘techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour’. Governmentality, in short, can be seen as a way of linking the problematics of government of the state (Rose and Miller, 1992), the economy, populations and the individual (Dean, 2010). The meaning of governmentality is often boiled down to the ‘conduct of conduct’ which indicates a focus on how people are led, guided and directed, and/or encouraged to lead and guide themselves. This conduct of conduct always implies norms and standards by which the behaviour of the governed subjects can be measured and calculated (Dean, 2010).

A starting point for analysis of governmentality is to identify and examine problematizations within the specific ‘regime of practices’ that one intends to analyse. A regime of practices refers to a ‘fairly coherent’ way of doing things within a particular institutional setting at a certain time and place (Dean, 2010: 31). Practices also have a discursive character: language is mutually constitutive in relation to practices and techniques (Miller and Rose 2008: 29ff). Hence, there are no practices ‘free’ from discourse and no discourses ‘free’ from practice. To analyse a regime of practices also indicates a focus on ‘programmes of conduct’ (Foucault, 1991: 75) and how certain subjects are problematized within the regime one is investigating. In the case of employability training, the supposed lack of employability of people with a foreign background is being problematized. A focus on both constructions of unemployability and norms of employability provides a starting point for thinking about problematizations in this context. The experts engaged in practices of employability training (re)produce knowledge about what constitutes an employable individual.

Hence, governmentality can be understood in close relation to the production of knowledge – since any ‘effective power is [...] a power that knows the objects upon which it is exercised’ (Gordon, 1980: 248). This ‘close relationship [...] between techniques of power and forms of knowledge’ (Bröckling et al., 2011:2) constructs governable subjects. In the practice of employability training, specific techniques for governing and shaping the problematized Others are deployed. From this perspective, the crucial question to ask is how power is exercised (Foucault, 2000) within the specific practice one is investigating.

Techniques of power are thus an important aspect of such an analysis. In Discipline and punish (1979) Foucault investigates how, from the seventeenth century onwards, new and productive techniques of power became widespread.
These modern forms of power aim at enhancing the productivity of the ‘population’ – hence they need to target both the population as a whole and ‘gain access to the bodies of the individuals, to their acts, attitudes and modes of everyday behaviour’ (Foucault, 2000: 125). A focus on the techniques of government pays attention to how ‘authorities of various sorts have sought to shape, normalize and instrumentalize the conduct, thought, decisions and aspirations of others’ (Miller and Rose, 2008: 32).

**Foucault, employability and ethnicity**

Research that mobilizes Foucault within organization theory in a broad sense usually focuses on discipline and ‘visibility’, making use of Foucault’s analysis of Bentham’s Panopticon as a model of disciplinary power (McKinlay and Starkey, 1998; Barratt, 2008). Studies that elaborate on Foucault’s thoughts in order to investigate employability tend to focus on governmentality and processes of constituting subjects. For example, Fejes (2010) has conducted research on what types of subjects are produced as employable and who is constituted as responsible for the employability of citizens. Furthermore, Dean (1998) investigates how programmes targeting long-term unemployed can be perceived as a way to ‘rework the ethical life’ of the unemployed citizen. In the anthology *Learning to be employable* (Garsten and Jacobsson, 2004), a wide range of cases including EU policy (Jacobsson, 2004), the temporary staffing business (Garsten, 2004) and public employment service (Thedvall, 2004) are investigated through discourse analysis and Foucauldian approaches. Føgde (2009) discusses how university students are the target for career guidance given by trade unions in order to enhance their employability. Through a governmentality approach, she investigates how ‘the jobseeker’ as a subject is positioned within discourse. I shall draw upon such lines of thought as I investigate ethnicized un/employability. However, before I exemplify how this governmentality approach may be used in empirical investigation, I will first discuss how the concept of ethnicity can be mobilized in studies of governmentality and un/employability.

The term ‘ethnicity’ derives from the classical Greek word *ethnos*, which throughout history has had a variety of meanings – but always connoted around ideas of origin and the sense of ‘a people’. *Ethnos* has often referred to ‘foreign people’ in contrast to the majority, who are presumed not to be ‘ethnic’ (Fenton, 2010).

In more contemporary academic debates, the question whether ethnic groups ought to be understood from a primordialist or constructivist perspective has
been highly debated (Gil-White, 2001; Fenton, 2010). Fenton (2010: 72) suggests that the question whether one views ethnic groups as real or as socially constructed should be answered in order to conduct a coherent analysis. One way of answering this question has been put forward by Brubaker (2006: 9), who argues that ‘ethnic common sense’ (i.e. an essentialist view on ethnicity) is part of ‘what we want to explain, not what we want to explain things with’. Following a constructivist view on ethnicity, I find this answer useful as it directs the analytical focus towards how ethnicity is produced. Ethnicity is not produced out of context but is always contextual and relational. Stuart Hall (1991) has argued that ethnicities could be understood as relations of difference. I conceptualize these relations of difference as discursively produced and imbued by power. However, not all kinds of differences are of relevance when analysing ethnicity. Ethnicity in a broad sense connotes issues of race, nation, culture and religion. With a governmentality approach as point of departure, ethnicity may be analysed as a particular way of problematizing certain groups and individuals.

Instead of fixing the term ethnicity into a static definition and using it as a self-evident and descriptive category (Dahlstedt, 2009b), I find it more useful to conceptualize ethnicity as discursive practices of constructing difference (within social relations) based on ideas of ethnicity (including culture, race, nation and/or religion) – as practices of ethnicization. My aim with this strategy is to avoid a universal definition of ethnicity. The analytical focus will be directed towards how ethnicity is formulated as a specific problem in relation to un/employability. What I refer to when discussing problematized Others in this paper are subjects marked as ethnically different from a perceived ‘us’.

How do these practices of constructing difference relate to the concept of un/employability? I would argue that we need to focus on the conjunctions when these two categories encounter each other, when un/employability and ethnicity are constructed as meaningful in relation to each other. The outlined approach suggests that one could focus on how the making of ethnicity and un/employability are intertwined in different practices. Now it is time to turn our attention to the empirical analysis concerning this nexus.

**Ethnicizing of un/employability by the European Social Fund**

This analysis highlights how un/employability is constructed in relation to a particular ‘group’ I have called ‘problematized Others’. The empirical case consists of material relating to a labour market project in Sweden targeting unemployed Somalis. Traditionally, Sweden’s integration policies have not pinpointed any specific ethnic ‘groups’. However, Somalis’ low participation in
the labour market is seen as an argument to engage with integration measures targeting this specific group (Thörnquist, 2011). The project in question is co-funded by the European Social Fund (ESF).

To contextualize the project, I shall first outline a brief discussion of the ESF in Sweden and the main policy prioritizing the fund’s means. ESF is a major initiative when it comes to supporting the EU’s social policies through its member states. During the period 2007-2013, the fund will have distributed 75 billion euros in total. The aim of the fund is to strengthen economic growth, competition and social inclusion (EC, 2006).

ESF is an interesting case for examining employability and ethnicity because of the fund’s focus on ‘people with a foreign background’ as a specific target group, and the EU’s general embracing of employability as a way of governing labour markets.

The policy aimed at prioritizing ESF’s means in Sweden is named the ‘National structural fund programme for regional competitiveness and employment (ESF) 2007-2013’. Policy analysis from a governmentality perspective is not concerned with whether a particular policy is successful or not. Rather, policy production is seen as a characteristic of the mentalities of government itself (Rose and Miller, 2008: 29). Hence, policy becomes relevant to analyse as a way of governing different groups.

During the 2000s, the fund’s main goal was to realize the Lisbon strategy, making EU ‘the most competitive and dynamic knowledge-based economy’ (ESF, 2011) by the year 2010. The main policy for the 2010s is the Europe 2020 (Com, 2010) strategy. This policy includes giving EU citizens better skills and job opportunities and promoting entrepreneurship. In Sweden, a specific goal for the fund is to ‘increase the supply of labour’ as it is stated in the National Structural Fund Programme (ESF, 2007: 5). The target group for ESF in Sweden is described as being those who are ‘far outside the labour market’ (ESF, 2007: 5). Two groups of people are described as in especially precarious positions in relation to the labour market: young people and ‘people with a foreign background’ (ESF, 2007: 26). Regarding the latter, it is stated that the ‘integration of immigrants’ should be realized through ‘innovative and experimental methods of working’ (ESF, 2007: 7). The high rates of

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3 In 2010, Somalis’ participation in the labour market was 21 percent, in contrast to the population as a whole, where the degree of participation in the labour market was 73 percent (Carlson, Magnusson and Rönnqvist, 2012).
unemployment among people with a foreign background are perceived as a problem when seen through the lens of economic growth:

Amongst immigrants to Sweden, there are many whose skills and expertise are not utilised.

These people could contribute to economic growth if they had gainful employment. (ESF, 2007: 26)

‘People with a foreign background’ are thus constructed as a problematized ‘group’. Hence, they will receive ‘special priority’ in order to make it easier for them to ‘establish themselves in working life’ (ESF, 2007: 50). This statement connotes a ‘responsibilization’ (Rose, 1999) of the unemployed target group. They are supposed to ‘establish themselves’ – although with the helping hand of employability experts 4 such as job coaches and educators.

This demarcated target group is seen to be in need of change. As Rose (1999) remarks, contemporary unemployment is seen as a phenomenon which has to be governed not only on the macro level by providing more jobs, but also on the micro level. With a focus on the supply side of labour and the individuals’ employability, this strategy involves acting upon the conduct of the unemployed through various governing techniques such as job coaching, guidance and education. Hence not only unemployment but also the unemployed are perceived as problematic.

The ethnically-marked unemployed subject is seen as a particular kind of being, in need of ‘reconstruction of their subjectivities’ (Rose, 1999: 162) in order to be employable in an advanced liberal society. The population as a whole can be seen as divided between those who are able to live up to the ‘demands of the labour market’ and those who are not. Dean (2010: 195) discusses this division in terms of active citizens, meaning those who are deemed able to managing themselves and targeted populations, who are perceived as in need of some sort of intervention in order to be able to become active in the labour market.

The European Social Fund and its pinpointing of ‘people with a foreign background’ can be interpreted as such an intervention. This categorization of the population enables differentiated problematizations and specialized governmental techniques targeting specified segments of the population.

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4 Following Rose (1996: 39), I define experts as authoritarian subject positions ‘arising out of a claim to knowledge’.
The case of unemployed Somalis in Sweden

Those referred to as ‘people with a foreign background’ are often lumped together and described as more or less homogeneous, giving no consideration to the obvious heterogeneity within the ‘group’. However, one group is often distinguished and described as especially unfortunate and problematic in the context of the Swedish labour market – the Somalis (Thörnquist, 2011).

The labour market project that this empirical investigation has as its focus is called ‘Somalis go into business’. In the project description on the ESF website (ESF, 2010) it is stated that:

> [t]he members [of the Somali group] are frustrated over long time in unemployment, lack routines for a structured everyday life and have a weak belief in the future. [...] They also meet cultural, social and economic obstacles, which is part of the family tradition they carry. Their cultural codes often contradict the codes of the Swedish society. They have difficulties to incorporate the routines and rules of Swedish society and labour market. (ESF, 2010)

In this quote, it is clear how Somalis are depicted as ‘different’ and ‘problematic’ in relation to a normative conception of Swedishness. Later it is explained that the aim of the project is to ‘effectively reduce the exclusion of a group that has major difficulties getting into the labour market and hence has specific needs’ (ibid.).

The Swedish ESFs official website, in describing its own projects, identifies Somalis as one of the ‘foreign-born ethnic groups’ who are defined as the hardest to ‘integrate within the Swedish labour market’ (ESF, 2013). One particular problem this group has, according to the article, is the widespread use of the drug khat. The explanation given in the article as to why this group uses khat is that they do not ‘have a job or anything else to occupy themselves with’ (ESF, 2013). This idleness, sitting around and chewing khat, is clearly in stark contrast to ideals of the ‘active citizen’ (Miller and Rose, 2008) in advanced liberal societies, such as Sweden (Dahlstedt, 2009a). Khat is a bush grown mainly in East Africa and is mostly chewed in countries such as Somalia, Eritrea and Ethiopia. For some, then, chewing khat is considered a social activity and part of one’s identity, while in Sweden it has been classified as an illegal drug since 1989 (Osman and Söderbäck, 2011). This tension between the practice of khat-chewing considered as a social activity or as an illegal drug abuse is one part of what constructs unemployed Somalis as ethnicized and unemployable in the eyes of the project.

The project also has a focus on ‘entrepreneurship’, which is described as an ‘aspect of Somali culture’ (ESF, 2013). In the project description on the ESF
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website (ESF, 2010) it is stated that ‘entrepreneurship is the foundation of the whole project’. It is a widespread conception that ‘Somali culture’ is imbued by an entrepreneurial spirit. In a newsletter (IOGT-NTO, 2011) from the project, it is stated that ‘Somalis are entrepreneurs in their home country’ and that it would be ‘natural’ to start businesses even in Sweden if it would have been easier and not such a complex bureaucratic process. This shows that culture is not always depicted as problematic, but can also be regarded as a positive resource. However, once again we run into trouble since the target group is described as ‘mainly Muslim’ and as the ‘Koran prohibits interest’ (ESF, 2013). To get a loan without interest is as hard as to start a business without a loan, the article concludes.

ESF’s evaluation of the project (Wallin, 2012) concludes that actions and methods need to be better adjusted to the specific target group and their particular needs. The evaluation report also signifies that the project offered education in ‘norms for behaviour in Swedish society’. This indicates a will to direct the aspirations and behaviours (Foucault, 1997: 80) of the target group towards becoming more ‘Swedish’.

The project leader produced a ‘handbook’ (Rolfson, n.d.) on Somali culture and customs, sharing in this way a fund of knowledge acquired during the project. The handbook was intended to be used by government officials at the public employment office to improve service to Somali clients. It indicates a will to govern through knowledge – if there is sufficient knowledge about Somalis and their cultural specificity, they can be governed more appropriately. From the handbook we learn that the project participants have written job resumes and practiced simulated job interviews. Presenting oneself and appearing as an employable individual towards potential employers is a widespread technique in the practice of employability training (Fogde, 2009). The group is described as having had a difficult time producing job resumes that were deemed adequate, experiencing trouble ‘handling the computer’, writing down the names of former employers and stating the dates and locations of previous employment.

Another aspect which is problematized in the handbook is how the Somalis prioritize and balance work and family commitments. In contrast to Swedes, Somalis are said to give family a higher priority than work. The explanation given is that Somalia is a patriarchal, nomadic society, with Islam as its religion and the Koran as ‘the source of belief’. An effort has been made to solve this problem through the projects’ education in gender equality. Gender equality and democracy are part and parcel of a predominant self-image in Sweden. This discourse is also produced by other Western intellectuals who, as Pred (2000: 6) has argued, for a long time have stereotyped Sweden as ‘a paradise of social
enlightenment, as an international champion of social justice, as the very model of solidarity and equality’. In this context, it becomes clear that ethnicized Others are frequently problematized through images of not being properly democratic or adequately fostered in gender equality. Hence, the participants in the project will attend ‘scheduled equality education’ (ESF, 2010) and learn ‘the meaning of democracy’ (IOGT-NTO, n.d.) as it is stated on the project owner’s webpage.

Yet another problem associated with the particular target group and described in the handbook (Rolfson, n.d.: 2) is ‘difficulties of showing up in time’ for meetings and appointments – something deemed important in the context of contemporary Swedish working life. The handbook states that ‘it took enormous effort from the project employees to get the participants to the right place at the right time’ (Rolfson, n.d.: 2).

The handbook also contains a list of ‘code-words’ based on the participants’ ‘needs’ and ‘characteristics’. Code-words describing the participants include ‘distracted’, ‘lacking motivation to work’, ‘in need of personal support’, ‘bad health’, ‘depression’ and ‘slow’ (Rolfson, n.d.: 5).

Furthermore, the handbook asks the question whether Somalis ‘want to work’ (Rolfson, n.d.: 4). The project employees had noticed that when some participants were offered a job, they declined it or quit the job soon after starting, explaining that it was too stressful or that the job required them to wear unacceptable clothing.

One aim of the project was to ‘understand how Somalis think and act’ (Rolfson, n.d.: 5) and then to motivate and mentor the participants towards getting a job or starting a business. Techniques used to reach this goal consisted of personal motivation talks, daily telephone contact to get the participant to show up on time at the project, personal action plan, education and offering of psychological help.

The Somalis are described as coming from a society in ‘total decay’, lacking a functional government, judiciary, school system and ‘all that we in Sweden take for granted’ (Rolfson, n.d.: 5). The ‘group’ is obviously problematized through different ethnicized markers such as religion, culture and clothing. But what can the ‘Somalis go into business’ case tell us about ethnicized employability?

Discussion

Practices of reshaping problematized Others into advanced liberal subjects are informed by relations of power and production of knowledge, as we have seen in the handbook – written to spread knowledge about Somali culture in order to
govern the group in a manner deemed proper and effective. Within this practice of managing the unemployable, problematized Others, the objective is to make them adapt to the image of advanced liberal subjects. The ‘employability experts’ know how one should think and act in order to become employable in this context. In this section, I recapitulate and discuss the questions posed at the beginning of this paper.

How are the ethnicized Others problematized? In the case of unemployed people ‘with a foreign background’ in general, and unemployed Somalis in Sweden in particular, we have seen different aspects of problematization. In the policy focusing on ‘people with a foreign background’, a ‘they’ is distinguished, ethnicized and represented as a problem. ‘People with a foreign background’ are constructed as a particular group in need of specific measures in order to enhance their employability and contribute to economic growth.

In the project for unemployed Somalis, problematizations are made through the lens of religion, clothing and the use of recreational drugs. In addition, this group is thought of as coming from a society described as the opposite of the advanced liberal society. Somalia is depicted as a chaotic place which lacks all of the ‘modern’ institutions taken for granted in ‘the West’. In general, the Somalis are depicted as lacking desirable competences and characteristics that are valuable in the context of advanced liberal societies. This ‘discourse of lacking’ is something often identified in descriptions of ‘the Other’ (Mattson, 2001; Osman 1999). Somalis are described as lacking computer skills, lacking skills in the Swedish language, lacking motivation, having the ‘wrong’ priorities in choosing between work and family commitments, not being able to take financial loans with interest, chewing khat, being in need of personal support, slow, with bad health, depression and distraction. The participants are also described as not capable of ‘arriving on time’. These characteristics of the participant group are constructed from the experience and knowledge of the employment experts working on this project.

In relation to what are they problematized? A governmentality perspective renders visible the linkages among the government, the population and the individual (Dean, 2010). In the ESF policy, unemployed ‘people with a foreign background’ are problematized as an untapped, potentially productive resource that could strengthen economic growth. Somalis are constructed as a particularly excluded part of the population with extremely high rates of unemployment and thus considered in need of special treatment in order to become productive and contribute to economic growth. The target group is also problematized in relation to gender equality – ‘they’ are assumed to come from a patriarchal society and thus in need of gender equality education. This problematization of ‘the Other’
stands in stark contrast to the self-image of Sweden as a progressive nation where the discourse of gender equality occupies a prominent position (Johansson and Klinth, 2008).

What techniques are deployed to address the problems constructed? The practice of employability training for the unemployed Somalis consists of techniques such as resume-writing, personal action plan, guidance and job interview training. These techniques can be interpreted as a will of the employability experts to direct the mindset, aspirations and behaviour of the target group to become more aligned with the norms of advanced liberal societies – to conduct the conduct of the problematized Others.

What are the qualities and characteristics of advanced liberal subjects? We have seen in the empirical analysis how project participants need to be able to write up their own job resumes. This practice of resume-writing is a way of constituting oneself in order to appear as employable as possible in accordance with predominant norms; to define and ‘market’ one’s abilities and personality is an important aspect of the technique of writing job resumes (Fogde, 2009). The ability to think and act as a rational, calculating homo economicus, guided by values such as competition and entrepreneurial spirit is part of the norms of advanced liberal societies. The Somalis are described as ‘having an entrepreneurial culture’. However, this spirit runs into trouble since ‘they’ are ‘guided by the Koran’ which prohibits financial loans with interest – an assumed necessity in the Swedish context.

As Miller and Rose (2008) argue, Western advanced liberal societies socialize humans to seeing their lives as the outcome of rational acts and choices. Hence, the advanced liberal subject is fostered to make the ‘right’ choices from the myriad of available options and to accept the consequences of his or her own choices. In contrast, the problematized Others are seen as lacking this basic socialization and are constructed as in need of reshaping themselves in order to approach the coveted position of advanced liberal subject. In the empirical investigation, we have seen that the choice to chew khat is not legitimate since it is both illegal and assumed to go hand-in-hand with idleness – opposite to the ideal of active citizens in advanced liberal societies.

In what kind of practices does the fostering of employable, advanced liberal subjects occur? Labour market projects are similar to school and education. McDonald and Marston (2005) also highlight school and kindergarten as metaphors suitable for describing the employability practices targeting unemployed people in advanced liberal societies. There is a group of participants (students) and there are ‘leaders’ (teachers) who are employed in the project.
These employees come with different titles such as project leader, job coach, pedagogue or career counsellor\(^5\). Practices of employability training thus have a clear affinity to ‘learning activities’. Learning has become a central theme for contemporary advanced liberal societies. Politicians and practitioners deploy learning activities in order to ‘upskill the population’ (Fejes and Nicoll, 2008). The spread of learning activities and ideas of lifelong learning are directed to the population as a whole, but the learning activities that I have discussed in this paper are particular to a specific ‘group’ and therefore should be investigated as such.

**Conclusion**

This paper has focused on a particular aspect of employability studies which has been scarce in both theoretical discussions and empirical investigation – namely, ethnicized un/employability. The first aim of this paper has been to suggest some tools for analysing ethnicized un/employability. A focus on the continuum between those deemed unemployable and normative ideals of what constitutes an employable individual enables us to nuance the analysis more than would be possible if the focus were on only one of the two positions. This contrasting analysis has been carried out through the elaboration of two concepts: *problematized Others* and *advanced liberal subjects*, and discussing these concepts along with governmentality and constructivist theories of ethnicity. One way of framing the activity of transforming problematized Others into advanced liberal subjects is to understand such practices as learning activities. Such processes of re-socialization have as an objective that the target groups should internalize specific norms regarding what is seen as constituting an employable individual in a given time and place.

The second aim of this paper has been to use these analytical tools in discussing an empirical case. As we have seen, the construction of ethnicized Otherness becomes crucial in the government of unemployed Somalis. Somalis are, in many aspects, constructed as a group that is the direct opposite of the ideal citizen of advanced liberal societies. ‘They’ are constructed as patriarchal – in contrast to ‘us’ who are gender equal; ‘they’ are constructed as illegal and idle due to the habit of chewing khat; ‘they’ are described as distracted and unmotivated to engage in labour. Although ‘their’ culture is seen as a potential resource regarding entrepreneurialism, this aspect is seen as hindered from flourishing by the Koran’s prohibition of interest.

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\(^5\) An umbrella term that I have used to capture such positions in this context is ‘employability experts’.
The project to work with unemployed from a Somali background is permeated by discourses of Otherness. The participants are being Othered – seen as ‘different’ in terms of ethnicity. Nevertheless, the objective of these learning activities (to internalize prevailing norms of advanced liberal societies) may be the same for all participants engaged in employability training of different sorts. However, in order to reach this goal of producing employable subjects, the techniques used and problematizations made may differ across groups. Those regarded as ‘ethnically different’ often have other starting points than indigenous unemployed. The path to employability looks slightly different for different types of problematized groups, be they youths, the disabled, women, drug addicts or people with a foreign background. Regarding unemployed Somalis, I have pointed out the idea of gender equality and democracy, which in the project operates both as markers of Swedishness for ‘us’ and Otherness and difference for ‘them’. This is one nexus that would be of interest for further exploration.

We should keep in mind that different kinds of problematizations intersect and build up numerous potential target groups with complex relations to each other. The nuances, differences and intersections of employability training targeting problematized Others are clearly in need of more rigorous empirical investigation.

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