The Soft Skills Perception Gap between Employers and Young People: Findings from Turkey*

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Abstract

Building on research highlighting the importance of soft skills in school to work transitions and employers' hiring decisions, this article examines the perception gap between young people's and employers' ascriptions of soft skills (operationalised in transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values). Theoretically the study builds on social construction of soft skills and considers employers' and young people's judgment of soft skills. The study uses secondary data from young people (aged 15-18) and employers in Turkey. Findings show that, employers' and young people's (particularly young women's) ascription diverge on all three categories of soft skills. The study contributes to the evidence base on social construction of soft skills, contextualised in the Turkish youth employment system.

Keywords: Soft skills, young people, employers, social construction, transferable skills, personal attributes, work-related values
JEL Codes: J24, M10, M51

Introduction

Over the past few decades, due to continuous technological change, innovation and globalization, the world of work as well as the very idea and nature of work has changed. Qualifications and technical knowledge are no longer sufficient to secure employment (Succi/Canovi 2020) and judgments about applicants' transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values, i.e., soft skills (Heckman/Kautz 2012), are important determinants of hiring decisions (Tsirkas/Chytiri/Bouranta 2020; Roslansky 2021; Ingram/Choi 2022). The distinction between qualifications and soft skills as proxies for employment decisions reflect achieved vs ascribed skills, respectively (Warhurst/Tilly/Gatta 2017). Empirical research points to a perception gap between employee vs employer ratings of ascribed skills (Tsirkas et al. 2020). Individuals may lack self-awareness and/or overestimate their skills, abilities and attributes (Mayo 2016), while employers may have unrealistic expectations and/or may be biased in their judgment (Doyle 2021). Such perception gaps suggest that skills are socially constructed, i.e., how skills are defined and valued depends on the context of their use and who is defining and valuing them (Warhurst et al. 2017; Lui-Farrer/Yeoh/ Baas

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2021). An implication of this non-objective process of construction of skills is that demographic differences and associated stereotypical expectations, such as those based on gender, race and ethnicity, influence ascribed skill judgments and is evidenced in the persistent inequalities in access to jobs (Moss/Tilly 2001; Warhurst et al. 2017; Daune-Richard 2020). This research examines the perception gap between employers and young people's ascription of young people's soft skills.

Young people (15 to 24 years of age), especially in emerging economies, experience prolonged transition from school to work due to difficulties in securing work (Lodovici/Semenza 2012; ILO 2020). Lack of soft skills is a key challenge for young people's employability (Clarke 2016; Kobylińska/Rollnik-Sadowska/Samul 2017). On the one hand, employers report difficulty evaluating young people's soft skills, and on the other hand, young people struggle articulating their skills (Rudiger 2013). Conceptual (e.g., Warhurst et al. 2017) and policy (e.g., ILO 2015) discussions suggest social construction of skills, and therefore, a perception gap between employers' judgment and that of young people. Thus, the aim of this research is to examine to what extent young people's self-ascriptions of soft skills (i.e., transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values) match employers' ascriptions in Turkey.

Drawing on employer and young people data on young people's soft skills, the article contributes to the evidence base on social construction of skills. Soft skills are conceptualised in work-related transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values. This broad conceptualisation allows a discussion of young people's soft skills development opportunities, as well as the subjective judgment mechanisms in play in hiring decisions. Hence, the paper contrasts perspectives of the key stakeholders (young people and employers) and presents a nuanced understanding of social construction of young people's soft skills. The paper contextualises young people's soft skill development within the Turkish family and education systems and discusses Turkish managerial assumptions relevant for hiring decisions, based on cultural values. It is hypothesised that there will be significant perception gaps in ascription of soft skills between employers and young people (H1 – H3) but employers' perceptions will be nearer to ascriptions of young men's than they are to young women's (H4).

Defining Soft Skills

There is ambiguity over conceptualisation of soft skills. Some definitions take a broader perspective to support life-long learning and transferable skills relevant for a well-functioning society (Martin 2018), while others focus on specific skills demanded by employers (Groh/Krishnan/McKenzie/Vishwanath 2012) and yet others include individual characteristics, such as personality traits and motivations (Heckman/Kautz 2012). Our conceptualisation of soft skills in this

paper acknowledges the different perspectives and includes transferable skills, as well as personal attributes and work-related values.

Transferable skills refer to generic, non-technical abilities, e.g., communication skills and problem solving, that are required to perform almost any job (Succi/Canovi 2020). Transferable skills (also referred to as 21st century skills or employability skills) are argued to be those that are relevant for productivity and competitiveness in the face of increasing ambiguity in labour markets (Tight 2021). Highlighting the social construction of skills, the list of transferable skills deemed to be essential in the workplace differs based on who is judging. For instance, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD 2019) refers to three broad categories of transferable skills: cognitive and meta-cognitive skills (e.g., critical thinking); social and emotional skills (e.g., empathy and responsibility); and practical and physical skills (e.g., using information technologies). By comparison, transferable skills discussed by employers may be much more granular, e.g., as long as 20 items (Succi/Wieandt 2019) and may show variation based on national/cultural context (Teng/Pahlevansharif/Turner 2019) as well as industry and occupation requirements (Ashton 2023). Moreover, candidates' and employees' perception of important soft skills may also diverge from that of employers (Succi/ Canovi 2020).

Personal attributes, refer to the relatively stable individual characteristics e.g., conscientiousness and proactive personality (Seibert/Kraimer/Crant 2001), that determine employability (Römgens/Scoupe/Beausaert 2020). There is, however, little convergence in defining these attributes and their importance between stakeholders (e.g., individuals vs education institutions vs employers) and across national borders (e.g., Moreau/Leathwood 2006). There is also considerable overlap in how personal attributes and transferable skills are defined and discussed (Tymon 2013).

Work-related values refer to the goals individuals seek to satisfy through work (Brown 2002). Individuals make important choices about their careers and work settings in line with their values, that is, their guiding principles in life (Schwartz 1992). Values are vital for managing our attitudes, motivation and behaviours at work (Consiglio/Cenciotte/Borgogni/Alessandri/Schwartz 2017), and for achieving person-organisation fit (i.e., value congruence) (Verquer/Beehr/Wagner 2003). For employers, values-based hiring practices can predict performance and retention, (Groothuizen/Callwood/Gallagher 2018). There is also the possibility that such practices unfairly discriminate against jobseekers from certain ideologies and backgrounds (Van de Werfhorst 2020) and that applicants may respond in socially desirable ways (Anglim/Molloy/Dunlop/Albrecht/Lievens/Marty 2022). A distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic work values can be made (Ryan/Deci 2000). Intrinsic work values are concerned with intangible rewards achieved through work, e.g., recognition and meaningful

work. Extrinsic work values revolve around tangible outcomes associated with work, e.g., income and status. Work-related values are constructed at the intersection of an individual's self-construal and the national culture (Gahan/Abeysekera 2009) and are therefore socially constructed.

Our conceptualisation of soft skills in this paper acknowledges the different perspectives in defining soft skills, all of which are socially constructed, depending on who is judging. Employing this broad conceptualisation of soft skills allows incorporating the contextual nuances from both young people's and employers' perspectives. More specifically, due to their chronological age, young people have fewer opportunities and experiences to develop and consolidate their transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values (Okay-Somerville/Selenko/Searle 2022). Hence, young people's understanding of what soft skills are and to what extent they possess them may differ from the wider working population. Employers may have soft skill requirements and expectations associated with the nature of the work, however, these may be unrealistic considering the limited opportunities young people on average may have had, and/or biased based on personal, professional and cultural experience.

Young people's self-ascriptions of soft skills

Young people are in the process of developing career competencies, including knowledge, skills and abilities relevant for securing jobs and hence may not demonstrate transferable skills (Savickas 2002), as competently as the rest of the working population. Moreover, they are in a transition state through which they situate themselves in society and construct careers (Savickas 2013). This transition involves considerable exploration of the self and the world of work. Young people's personal attributes relevant for employability may still be in the process of being shaped and defined, as part of this career identity construction. Finally, it is acknowledged that work-related values change as we age (Carstensen/Fung/Charles 2003). When time is perceived as open-ended (as it typically is in youth), expansive goals relevant for knowledge striving are pursued and young people may therefore value growth and intrinsic development opportunities higher than extrinsic rewards, such as pay and benefits (Carstensen et al. 2003).

It is also shown that people generally rate themselves and their potential futures more favourably than that of an average peer (Sedikides/Alicke 2012). This is referred to as the better-than-average effect, which is considered a form of bias of inaccuracy in self-assessment: while most people are average, only a minority of people recognise this reality. Particularly young adults, who are in the process of developing their interests, abilities and self-awareness, may over-estimate their skills and abilities whereas older adults may be more modest in their self-evaluations (Sedikides/Alicke 2012). For instance, some new graduates have

been reported to have unrealistic expectations for access to managerial positions without realising that they do not yet possess the appropriate competencies (Schultz 2008).

Young people's ascriptions of their soft skills may therefore be informed by the limited experiences they have for developing soft skills, in which case we would expect relatively poor self-ascriptions. However, based on the better-than-average effect (Sedikides/Alicke 2012) and considering that young people are in the process of developing self-awareness, we may also expect inflated self-ascriptions in how they construct their soft skills.

Employers' ascriptions of young people's soft skills

It is reported that most employers value ascribed skills (e.g., transferable skills) over achieved skills (e.g., qualifications) in hiring (Tsirkas et al. 2020). Ascribed skills allow employers to differentiate candidates from a pool of increasingly highly qualified applicants, whereas achieved skills are instrumental in screening applications (Cole/Rubin/Field/Giles 2007). There is, nevertheless, debate around the relevance of these soft skills for job performance and work-related outcomes (Okay-Somerville/Scholarios 2013). Even among employers that claim to be objective and rigorous in employee selection, there is evidence that social considerations of applicant fit are in place in hiring decisions (Brown/Hesketh/Williams 2004). Ascribed skills are not as readily quantifiable as qualifications, and hiring decisions therefore involve some degree of subjective assessment (Warhurst et al. 2017). Young people in the workplace are sometimes perceived as not having the right skills for work, not being work-ready, trustworthy and committed at work (Finkelstein/King/Voyles 2015; Suttill 2021). Several mechanisms can be considered in explaining how subjective assessments of fit may be at work in employer ascriptions of young people's soft skills.

Firstly, a discrepancy between expected and actual skill levels negatively impacts employer attitudes towards other newcomers who share similar characteristics (Tesch/Jiang/ Klein 2003). For newcomers in general, and young workers in particular, the discrepancy between expected and actual transferable skills and personal attributes is likely to influence and reinforce hiring managers' assumptions about soft skills (Singh Dubey/Paul/Tewari 2022). Hence, employers may socially construct their ascriptions of young people's soft skills based on observations of the previous cohorts of young people they engaged with.

Secondly, hiring managers may selectively process stereotypical information (e.g., interviewers may be more receptive to cues that confirm stereotypes and actively seek to confirm stereotypical expectations) (Koomen/Dijker 1997). This may impact ascription of personal attributes and work-related values. Young people, by virtue of being in more exploratory stages of career development (Savickas 2013), may demonstrate lower organisational commitment and higher

willingness to change jobs and employers while establishing their career interests and identity (Kuron/Lyons/Schweitzer/Ng 2015). For some hiring managers, these voluntary and involuntary job transitions may signal lack of commitment and trustworthiness. Although vast majority of empirical research considers age-related stereotypes concerning older workers, stereotypes about young workers at work have been reported to be less positive than those about middle and older age workers (King/Finkelstein/Thomas/Corrington 2019).

Finally, selection practices are influenced by the internal and the external environment of the organisation (Kim/Ployhart 2018). In particular, the recruitment and selection criteria are argued to be 'culture-bound'. Internally, skills required in selection may mimic that of managerial competencies in organisations (e.g., decision making), and hence may be gendered, classed and racialised (Brown et al. 2004; Moreau/Leathwood 2006). Externally, cultural norms and expectations may influence hiring decisions, e.g., higher likelihood of subjective judgment in collectivistic cultures (Aycan 2005). It is unlikely that young people, with their limited opportunities and experiences, have developed soft skills that warrant their social fit based on personal attributes and work-related values.

Employer ascriptions of young people's soft skills may be informed by their experience of young people in the workplace and/or the unconscious biases that are inherently involved in hiring decisions. Such beliefs and assumptions about young people may be explained using the model of culture fit (MCF; Kanungo/Jaeger 1990; Aycan/Kanungo/Mendonca/Yu/Deller/Stahl/Kurshid 2000), according to which managerial assumptions are formed based on availability of resources (e.g., previous experience and inherent biases in judgement) and the cultural context that an organisation operates in (Keleş/Aycan 2011). For instance, managerial assumptions on employee proactivity vs reactivity have been shown to influence the extent to which employees are provided with job enrichment, empowered through supervision and offered performance-based rewards (Aycan et al. 2000). Moreover, assumptions about employee goal orientation (i.e., that employees value clear objectives to attain) increased likelihood of structured performance management practices, including feedback in job design, clear goal setting and performance-reward contingency (Keleş/Aycan 2011). Accordingly, managers may have assumptions and skill ascriptions about prospective candidates, which may have implications for hiring practices.

Considering the different frames of references used in constructing social skills by young people and employers, there is little reason to expect employers' and young people's self-ascriptions to correspond. This paper contextualises this perception gap in the Turkish context.

The present study: Young people's soft skills ascriptions in Turkey

Turkish population is very young; 15- to 24-year-olds made up 15.2% of the population in 2022 (TUIK 2023). The proportion of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) is more than double the OECD average, with young Turkish women being almost three times more likely to be in NEET category than men (Kitchen/Bethell/Fordham/Henderson/ Richard 2019). Research on employer demand for skills in Turkey highlights the importance of transferable skills and personal attributes for hiring decisions (Atilla-Bal 2020). Employers report new hires' transferable skills and personal attributes to be lower than expected (Bilgin/Danis 2018; Ergün/Şeşen 2021). In fact, soft skills deficits have been estimated to account for 35 per cent of the barriers in hiring (Randstad 2019). The importance of developing soft skills through pre-labour market entry experiences has been recognised (Robles 2012), especially for emerging economies, such as Turkey (Singh Dubey/Paul/Tewari 2022). This section first discusses the impact of the traditional Turkish family and the education system for soft skills development. It then focuses on employee-related managerial assumptions, before introducing study hypotheses on the perception gap between employers' and young people's ascriptions of soft skills.

Turkish culture can be described as authoritarian and patriarchal (Sunar/Fisek 2005). Children are brought up with an emphasis on obedience, dependency, conformity and quietness, meanwhile autonomy, initiative taking, and curiosity are discouraged (Kağıtçıbaşı/Sunar 1992). Family plays a crucial role in Turkish adolescent's social identity and behaviour (Güneri 1999). Most young people are not socialised via family upbringing to the transferable skills and personal attributes that are valued at hiring. Not surprisingly, the great majority of vocational and technical education students report that family and relatives determined their educational choices (Olkun/Simsek 1999).

Turkey has a highly centralised education system (Kitchen et al. 2019) where the dominant pedagogy has traditionally been teacher-led. In recent decades, an intention for more 'progressive', student-centred pedagogy has become part of the national curriculum for primary and secondary schools (MEB 2005). Nevertheless, difficulties in implementation of the new curriculum, such as poor teacher training, large classes, as well as parental resistance have been reported (Altinyelken 2011). Moreover, Turkish school leavers who choose to attend secondary or tertiary education, must take an annual nationwide, centralised multiple-choice examination which is highly competitive and carries high stakes for students (Kitchen et al. 2019). Contrary to policy aspirations of competency development, this exam tests subject knowledge, e.g., on social sciences, mathematics and science. Hence, most young people in Turkey become avid test-takers, with little/no opportunities to develop the soft skills that are relevant in the labour market (Kılıç/Işık/Tuncer/Özbek/Özgen 2015). Access to career

counselling is a further challenge for most Turkish pupils in secondary schools, as there is a shortage of qualified careers counsellors (Yesilyaprak 2019). Accordingly, Turkish school leavers report high employment-related anxieties (Olkun/Simsek 1999) and a desire to improve transferable skills (Kuran 2020).

This brief review shows that Turkish young people may not necessarily be socialised into the soft skills that are in demand by employers. Neither the traditional family context nor the educational system is conducive to development of transferable soft skills and individual attributes that are valued by employers. Supporting this developmental path, Turkish managers have been shown to have high employee obedience expectations (Trompenaars/Hampden-Turner 2011) and stronger assumptions about employees being reactive and aversive to take responsibility in working life (Aycan 2006), in comparison to Western counterparts (such as Germany) (Aycan et al. 2000). Moreover, hiring in Turkey tends to be based on 'soft criteria' and subjective judgements (based on loyalty, commitment and social fit with the workforce) as opposed to 'hard criteria' based on merit and competence (Aycan 2005).

An argument can be made that presumably managers have also been socialised within the traditional Turkish family and education system, and therefore they have little reason to expect the soft skills discussed in the wider literature. This might be related to the considerable social change (from traditionalism to modernism) Turkey has undergone in the last few decades. Especially the managerial classes are increasingly highly educated (often educated abroad) and adopt more entrepreneurial ideologies, as well as endorsing values of integrity, conscientiousness, discipline and achievement (Askun/Oz/Aşkun, 2009).

Based on young people's limited opportunities for developing soft skills, their likelihood of better-than-average self-ascriptions (Sedikides/Alicke 2012) and employee-related managerial assumptions, we expect a significant perception gap in young people's and employers' ascriptions of soft skills in Turkey.

These are summarised in the following hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: There will be a significant perception gap between young people's and employers' ascriptions of young people's transferable skills.

Hypothesis 2: There will be a significant perception gap between young people's and employers' ascriptions of young people's personal attributes.

Hypothesis 3: There will be a significant perception gap between young people's and employers' ascriptions of young people's work-related values.

Studies with employers also suggest gendered skill expectations may be in place (Tsirkas et al. 2020). Labour force participation and employment rates

for women in Turkey have been historically much lower than that of men's (ILO 2017). Due to strong traditional gender roles which prescribe the role of the breadwinner to the man and that of the homemaker to the women, Turkish women tend to be more involved in unpaid caring work and/or the informal sector. Though there is evidence that young women are more likely to have the soft skills required by employers (OECD 2015), women's absence from work life may make their soft skills less visible to employers, who may therefore take men's skills as representative when rating young people's skills, attributes and values. This would indicate gendered ascriptions young people's soft skills based on availability bias, i.e., the most readily available information in memory.

Recognising the possibility of judgments based on such visible/observable information, we expect that employers' ascriptions of young people's soft skills to diverge more from young women's self-ascriptions, in comparison to that of young men's. These gender-based expectations are hypothesised below:

Hypothesis 4: Employers' ascription of young people's soft skills will diverge more from young women's self-ascription, in comparison to young men's.

Method

The study is informed by a secondary dataset on young people's soft skills in Turkey. Data from young people and employers was collected through two separate surveys as part of an international ERASMUS+ project (the Youth Employment at the Work Life Through Long-Term Employability Skills) and was finalised in 2019. Permission was granted to carry out the research in written form from the Provincial Directorate of National Education (Decision No: 59090411) which approved the ethical suitability of the study. Participants filled out informed consent forms before completing surveys. No personal participant information has been collected.

Young people were recruited to the study via ERASMUS+ project partners (Istanbul Provincial Directorate of Social Studies and Projects and Junior Achievement Turkey) who distributed survey links in public schools. Employer data were collected from the members of Turkish Enterprise and Business Confederation (TURKONFED), a non-governmental organisation (with over 60,000 member companies) that contributes to economic development policies. Employer representatives, from small and medium-sized enterprises in industrial and professional services sectors, completed an online survey about their perceptions of young people's soft skills.

Two separate surveys (one for young people and one for employers) were used in the study. Both employers and young people received the same items and both

surveys were validated by a pilot study prior to circulation. The authors had no control over the development of instruments and the data collection process.

Sample description

The initial dataset included responses from 107 employer representatives and 871 young people. Cases where 25% or more missing values were deleted. The remaining missing values were substituted by mean values. This resulted in a final sample of 72 employers and 746 young people. The majority of young people (67%) were male (Mean age=17 years, SD=1.87). All were at public secondary schools at the time of study. Public schools perform worse than private schools in Turkey both on qualifications and on soft skills (Aksit 2007). Hence, a recent trend for private school education has been observed among those who can afford to do so. For the present study, this implies that the sample is predominantly composed of young people from working-class backgrounds. Forty-three percent of the school leavers had no prior work experience and only 26% had completed at least one internship.

The mean age for employer representatives was 49 years (SD= 10.64) and the majority were male (68%). Their roles were either general managers or owner/managers and held at least bachelors (58%) or postgraduate degree (24%).

Measures

Soft skills were measured as reflected in transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values.

The transferable skills measure consisted of a composite mean score of 15 items (e.g., leadership, teamwork and communication). Young people were asked to indicate their self-confidence in each transferable skill ("Please rate how confident you feel regarding the skills shared below") on a 5-point scale, 1 = not confident at all, 5 = definitely confident ($\alpha_{\text{young people}}$ =.91) and employers were asked to rate how competent young people were in the same set of transferable skills ("Please rate how competent you think young people are regarding the skills shared below") by using the same a 5-point scale ($\alpha_{\text{employers}}$ = .96).

Personal attributes were measured with a composite mean of 12 items (e.g., introverted, decisive, agreeable, hard-working, competitive). Young people were asked to report the extent to which each personal attribute reflects their true personality ("Please rate to what extent the following personal attributes reflect your personality") on a 5-point scale, 1= does not reflect who I am at all, 5= absolutely reflects who I am ($\alpha_{\text{school leavers}}$ =.84). Employers were also asked to rate the same personality attributes ("Please rate to what extent you think the following items reflect young people's personal dispositions") on the same 5-point scale ($\alpha_{\text{employers}}$ = .89).

Items for transferable skills and personal attributes were derived from the National Network of Business and Industry Association's (2014) Common Employability Skills Framework, National Children's Bureau's Employability Skills Measurement Tool (Blades/Fauth/Gibb 2012) and the former UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES 2009) approach to employability skills.

Work-related values were measured with six items developed by the ERASMUS+ project research team based on common value measurement tools in psychological research including Schwartz's Portrait Values Questionnaire (Schwartz/Melech/Lehmann/Burgess/Harris/Owens 2001) and Zanzi, Arthur and Shamir's Career Concerns Questionnaire (1991). Young people were asked about their preference for opposing career values ('*When you think of your current/future work, which of the following is a priority for you? If you had to pick one, which side would you be closer to?*') on a 5-point scale, 1= *closer to the value on the left side* (e.g., development opportunities), 5= *closer to the value on the right* side (e.g., good pay). Composite intrinsic and extrinsic work-values were computed by adding all occurrences of preference for more intrinsic (e.g., learning and development opportunities) and extrinsic rewards (e.g., good pay) at work. Employers were also asked to rate what they thought young people's preferences would be regarding the same set of work-related values ('*When you think of the people who are at the beginning of work life, which of the following is a priority for them? If they had to pick one, which side would they be closer to?*' on the same 5-point scale, 1= *closer to the value on the left side* (e.g., development opportunities), 5= *closer to the value on the right* side (e.g., good pay).

Analytical strategy

Independent samples t-tests were used to compare mean differences between employers and young people's ascriptions of transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values (H1 – H3). Considering the unequal sample sizes between the two samples, homogeneity of variance between samples was first determined by observing Levene's values of equality of variances. Accordingly, only for personal attributes sample variances were found to be equal ($F(85, 816) = .22$, $p = .64$). Group variances between the employer and young people samples for transferable skills and work-related values were significantly different. This violates the homoscedasticity assumption associated with t-tests. For these variables, Welsh test results (i.e., equal variances not assumed) were reported. The discrepancies between employer vs young people's ascriptions based on gender (H4) were tested using one-way ANOVA, where employers, young men and young women were treated as distinct comparison categories. Dunnett post-hoc t-tests were run to compare employers' ascriptions to that of young men and women's.

Results

Table 1 shows t-test results confirming H1, H2 and H3. Employers' ratings on young people's transferable skills ($t(78)=10.91$, $p<.01$), personal attributes ($t(816)=-15{,}31$, $p<.01$), and intrinsic work-related values ($t(77)=10.41$, $p<.01$) were significantly lower and extrinsic work-related values was significantly higher ($t(64)=-7.19$, $p<.01$) than young people's self-ascriptions. Examination of the effect sizes, using Cohen's *d* shows that this perception gap was strong for transferable skills ($d=1.38$) and personal attributes ($d=1.27$), and medium for intrinsic ($d=.73$) and extrinsic work-related values ($d=.71$).

Employers' ascription of soft skills differed from both young men and women's self-ascriptions on each measure with strong effect sizes, ranging between $\eta 2=.13$ (intrinsic work-related values) to $\eta 2=.25$ (transferable skills). Confirming H4, the difference was stronger for young women's ascriptions (see Table 1).

Table 1. Mean differences between young people and employers' ascriptions.

	Young people – employer				Young men – employer	Young women – employer	
	Young people M (SD)	Employer M (SD)	*t* (*df*)	Cohen's *d*	M (SD) [a-c]	M (SD) [b-c]	*η2*
Transferable skills	4.11 (.70)	2.81 (.99)	10.91*** (78)	1.38	1.18*** (.09)	1.55*** (.09)	.25
Personal attributes	3.99 (.71)	2.65 (.72)	15.3*** (816)	1.27	1.27*** (.09)	1.48*** (.09)	.24
Intrinsic work-related values	2.51 (1.40)	0.92 (1.11)	10.41*** (77)	.73	1.39*** (.19)	2.03*** (.20)	.13
Extrinsic work-related values	1.71 (1.21)	3.43 (1.83)	-7.19*** (64)	.71	-1.57*** (.17)	-2.05*** (.18)	.15

Note a refers to mean of young men, b refers to mean of young women, c refers to mean of employers. Independent sample t-tests were run for young people-employer comparisons. ANOVA was used for comparing young men and women to employers. *** p<.001.

A closer inspection of discrepancies on individual items (Table 2) shows that employers and young people diverged on all transferable skills, personal attributes (except 'being temperamental') and work-related values (except for young people's preference for autonomy). The effect sizes were high for transferable skills and personal attributes, but relatively low for work-related values (ranging between $d=.39$ and $d=.49$).

Table 2. Detailed mean differences between young people and employer ascriptions

	M (Young people – employer)	SD (Young people – employer)	Cohen's d
Transferable skills			
Leadership	1.41	0.14	1.10
Written communication	1.10	0.14	1.15
Verbal communication	1.16	0.13	1.03
Listening	1.69	0.16	0.97
Making presentations	1.13	0.14	1.13
Technology use	0.40	0.14	1.10
Foreign language	0.55	0.16	1.29
Planning	1.35	0.15	1.03
Taking responsibility	1.75	0.16	1.01
Self-confidence	0.78	0.16	1.01
Decision making	1.43	0.15	0.96
Time management	1.31	0.13	1.08
Risk taking	1.06	0.15	1.07
Team working	1.14	0.11	0.92
Problem solving	1.63	0.15	0.98
Personal attributes			
Introverted	-0.70	0.15	1.36
Temperamental (ns)	-0.10	0.16	1.32
Entrepreneurial	0.43	0.14	1.11
Confident in abilities	1.27	0.12	0.97
Hardworking	1.64	0.14	1.13
Seeks advice from others	1.62	0.13	1.02
Emotionally stable	1.51	0.13	1.05
Emotionally resilient	1.26	0.13	1.21
Agreeable	1.50	0.14	1.15
Multi-tasking	1.21	0.14	1.13
Good at prioritising	1.66	0.14	1.08
Competitive	1.23	0.14	1.11
Work-related values			
Preference for progression opportunities	0.35	0.05	0.49
Preference for learning and development	0.29	0.06	0.49
Preference for autonomy (ns)	0.02	0.05	0.39
Preference for good managerial relations	0.09	0.05	0.42
Preference for career opportunities	0.23	0.04	0.46
Preference for challenging work	0.47	0.05	0.47

Note: All mean differences are significant at p<.001, except for 'temperamental' and 'preference for autonomy'

Discussion

This paper aimed to examine the perception gap between employers' and young people's ascriptions of soft skills. The findings show stark differences in ascriptions. Young people, especially young women, rate their transferable skills, personal attributes and intrinsic work-values significantly higher and extrinsic work values significantly lower than employers' ascription. These differences were particularly more pronounced on judgments of transferable skills and personal attributes.

This examination of the perception gap between employers' and young people's self-ascriptions on soft skills is descriptive by design and limits the explanations we can offer for the stark mismatch observed in this study. It is also an epistemological impossibility to draw an accurate view of young people's soft skills. Hence, our aim is not to discuss who is right or wrong in their ascription of soft skills. The lack of unanimity in ratings may however confirm that soft skills are indeed socially constructed, and that young people and employers may be drawing on distinct experiences and assumptions in their evaluations. The findings mimic perception gaps reported within the workplace, between employers and employees or new hires (e.g., Schultz 2008; Tsirkas et al. 2020), university leavers and employers (Succi/Canovi 2020); as well as between professionals and students (Singh Dubey et al. 2022). The study therefore contributes to evidence base on social construction of soft skills by highlighting perception gaps between two key stakeholders in youth employment.

Due to their developmental life stage and associated lack of exposure to skills development opportunities and the wider socio-cultural context in Turkey, there is little reason to expect young people to rate their transferable skills and personal attributes highly. We can speculate that young people may have rated their soft skills higher than employers due to lack of understanding what these skills refer to, lack of self-awareness associated with their skills and/or the better-than-average effect (Sedikides/Alicke 2012). Employers' significantly lower ascriptions may point out to the discrepancy they encountered from previous experience between young people's expected and observed soft skills in the workplace (Tesch et al. 2003).

Young people's consistently higher self-ratings of intrinsic values and lower extrinsic values confirms the prevalence of growth goals when we are younger (e.g., Carstensen et al. 2003). The stark contrast between employers' and school leavers' self-ascriptions of work-related values may highlight stereotypes based on age. However, it should also be noted that the effect sizes for perception gaps on transferable skills and personal attributes were higher than on work-related values. The greatest contrast in self and employer ascriptions observed in young people's transferable skills (especially responsibility taking, listening and problem-solving skills), personal attributes (especially ability to prioritise tasks,

being hardworking and seeking advice from others) and work-related values (employer ascribing higher importance to extrinsic values) corresponds with employee-related managerial assumptions reported in Turkey, especially with regard to responsibility taking and not being hardworking (Aycan et al. 2000).

The findings show that employer ascriptions reflect young men's self-ascriptions more accurately than they do young women's, supporting the gendered social construction of skills (Voyer/Voyer 2014). Although both men and women may over-estimate their performance, women score higher on measures of transferable skills and personal attributes (Zenger/Folkman 2019). Our findings mimic these differences on soft skills reported by men and women (Tsirkas et al. 2020), where women's self-ratings were higher for transferable skills, personal attributes and intrinsic values, and lower for extrinsic values than men's. Although there is some evidence that employers rate women's soft skills higher than men's in the workplace (Tsirkas et al. 2020), it may be that when asked about young people's soft skills, employers benchmark their perception against young men, representing the ideal and/or the most common worker, especially in the Turkish context. Hence, the gendered skills construction may also be explained in terms of an availability bias of men's soft skills in Turkey.

Overall, the above discussion gives us reason to argue that young people's soft skills are socially constructed, possibly based on experience in the workplace and subject to biases in judgment. Previous work discusses social construction of soft skills by economic actors based on the power to decide what is worthy as skills and the value attached to them (Hurrell/Scholarios/Thompson 2013). We extend this discussion by focusing on self and employer ascriptions of soft skills. Students and employers show differing views of what constitutes relevant soft skills; similarly, students and employers also view the degree of importance of some soft skills from different perspectives (Williams 2015). Our findings suggest that soft skills may be socially constructed based on the biases, expectations and preferences of the economic actors (Warhurst et al. 2017).

Practical implications

The contrast observed in this study on young people's transferable skills and personal attributes, especially considering the Turkish family and educational context, suggest that a key practical implication is investment in young people's soft skills development. This would require embedding soft skills development through curriculum review and reform during primary and secondary education. For young people leaving public schools with little/no work experience, such as those in our sample, employer engagement during their compulsory education is also highly recommended to gain awareness of the skills sought after in the world of work and for employers to familiarise themselves with the attributes and values of young people (ILO 2015).

The second set of practical implications from this research involves recognising and overcoming unconscious managerial bias. Our theorising suggests one possible explanation for the discrepancy on self and employer ascription of young people's soft skills may be based on stereotypical assumptions. Considering the growing importance of soft skills, this runs the danger of marginalising young people from the labour market due to ascription of low skills. Based on our discussion, it is recommended that hiring managers gain awareness of their own candidate and employee-related biases and ensure that structured processes are in place in order to minimise biases influencing decision making.

Limitations and future research

Using a secondary dataset, the study provides a unique contrast of self and employer ascriptions of young people's soft skills. The dataset allowed us a broad conceptualisation of soft skills (composed of transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values) to focus on young people (aged 15 to 18) from public schools in Turkey, suggesting a primarily working-class sample, alongside representatives from SMEs. Despite these strengths, lack of control over survey design meant that the study was largely descriptive and relies on self-report data, although from two key stakeholders, and therefore our discussion of findings provides speculative explanations. Future research may triangulate findings by qualitative interviews, in order to understand why young people and employers have rated the way they did, and with quasi-experimental methods where young people's soft skills and demographics are manipulated on application forms and changes in employers' decision making are observed.

The niche student and employer sample limits generalisability of findings. Hence, our sample does not cover experiences of young people who are educated beyond high school or employers working at multi-national or large holding companies in Turkey.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated a stark perception gap in employers' and young people's ascriptions of soft skills. A key conclusion drawn from these findings is that soft skills, i.e., transferable skills, personal attributes and work-related values, that are increasingly used in hiring decisions are socially constructed. The explanations considered include employers' previous experience with young people, young people's opportunities for developing skills both in the family and education context, and role of biases and stereotypes in judgment.

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