

Venture Labor, Media Work, and the Communicative Construction of Economic Value: Agendas for the Field and Critical Commentary¹



Discourses of Control and Free Agency: Generating Self-Blame Among Unemployed Workers

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I explore how the culture of free agency and self-entrepreneurship discussed in Neff's *Venture Labor* manifests itself among unemployed professionals. My research into the support discourses unemployed white-collar workers encounter in their job searches reveals an important insight into the cultural construction of labor. To take control of one's career means believing that external barriers do not matter and that one can find one's dream job so long as one follows one's passions. Because success in one's job search is perceived as depending on the projection of an authentic and passionate self, the experience of labor market difficulties generates devastating self-blame.

Keywords: unemployment, self-help discourses, hiring, individualism

The culture of venture labor, free agency, and self-entrepreneurship not only manifests itself among individuals who have jobs but also appears among individuals who are struggling with joblessness. We are in the midst of an ongoing and largely invisible crisis of long-term unemployment and underemployment. Six years after the official end of the Great Recession, the percentage of the unemployed who are long-term unemployed remains at levels unseen in more than six decades, with devastating consequences for individuals and society. Whereas sociological studies reveal that the obstacles to reemployment are structural and include a shortage of good jobs as well as biases in the hiring process, the dominant self-help discourses aimed at unemployed workers—as found in popular books, videos, workshops, support organizations, and coaching services—are largely devoid of such sociological grounding and instead emphasize workers as free agents who exercise control over their

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career outcomes. The most widely known modern self-help book for job seekers is Richard Bolles's *What Color Is Your Parachute?* It advises job seekers that finding a job is foremost a matter of finding and exuding your authentic and passionate self. This book first appeared in the early 1970s, precisely as white-collar job security and work conditions in general began to erode in the United States, and has since sold more than nine million copies. In this book and others, job seekers are told that by discovering and expressing their authentic and passionate selves, they can take control of their career fates.

Self-help discourses aim to inspire job seekers to believe not only that finding a job is in their control but that they can make their dreams come true if they follow the right strategies. As Bolles (2004) puts it, "The *major* difference between successful and unsuccessful job-hunters is not some factor out there such as a tight job-market, but *the way they go about their job-hunt*" (p. 24). The right strategies include going after one's "dream job" with passion, because "it is this *passion* which often is the difference between successful career changers and unsuccessful ones" (p. 186, emphasis in the original).

My research into the support discourses unemployed white-collar workers encounter in their job searches reveals an important insight into the cultural construction of labor: To the extent that job seekers express skepticism about self-help claims, such skeptical responses are met with the suggestion that perceived labor market obstacles are within the mind of the job seeker (Sharone 2013). This self-help discourse in fact subtly blames job seekers who express skepticism by focusing on their need to remove so-called inner obstacles. To take control of one's career means willing oneself to believe that external barriers do not matter and that one will be able to find one's dream job so long as one follows one's passions.

The discourse of personal control is alluring to workers who feel anything but in control, and the advice to follow one's passions ignites yearnings for meaningful work. Yet, while the discourses of control and passion may provide a temporary motivational boost, these ultimately boomerang and intensify self-blame. Structural obstacles are not willed away, and many job seekers do not quickly find new jobs, but instead experience a stream of employer rejections. The discourses of self-help, which are often the primary intermediary for job seekers' interpretation of their labor market difficulties, tend to focus on job seekers' shortcomings, such as their lack of motivation, confidence, or character. Because getting hired is perceived to depend on successful projection of an authentic and passionate self, the experience of labor market difficulties generates devastating self-blame. In my interviews with job seekers who have been out of work for three months or longer, I repeatedly heard phrases such as "I feel like a loser" or "something is wrong with me" (Sharone, 2013).

While the currently dominant support discourses emphasize individual control, this approach to support is not immutable or culturally inevitable. The individualism expressed in the self-help discourses is surely an important part of American culture, but the American cultural tool kit (Swidler, 1986) contains both individual and structural narratives that can be mobilized to understand career difficulties. It appears that self-help discourses dominate, at least in part, due to the absence of institutions that disseminate advice addressing the practical needs of insecure workers who are at the mercy of structural forces in the broader economy. My own research reveals that at least some self-help practitioners are not ideologically wedded to the free agency worldview and are driven by a pragmatic desire to facilitate positive outcomes

for their clients. This pragmatism leaves them open to empirical findings revealing the shortcomings of self-help advice and to learning more effective approaches. For example, following the publication of my book that showed how self-help discourses of choice and control aimed at long-term unemployed workers led to intensified self-blame, more than 50 career coaches volunteered to work with me to find more effective practices, including the use of sociologically informed discourses of support that fully recognize structural obstacles (Sharone & Vasquez, 2016).

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