JOB SEARCHING AMONG COLLEGE-EDUCATED AMERICANS: MANAGING EMOTION WORK, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND MIDDLE CLASS IDENTITY

by

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the concept of emotion has increasingly been seen as a vital political factor shaping human subjectivity, that is, the process by which one becomes a subject. Emotion is an important component in the neoliberal economy within which well-being is seen to be best advanced by liberating entrepreneurial freedoms and by assuming the interests of workers and companies are commensurate. I approach the job-search process and (un/under)employment as focal spheres in which to examine the everyday production and upkeep of emotional management to produce an employable self. Specifically, I draw on thirteen months of fieldwork at five career development workshops in Arizona to argue that the career advice industry is urging job seeking college educated Americans to use emotional management techniques to become employable in a neoliberal economy.

Increasingly precarious employment for college-educated Americans prepares the ground for job seekers to pursue help from career experts. These experts guide job seekers to do emotion work to change their thinking and behavior so that they can be employable professionals ready for the work force. This attempt to repackage and recreate a new employable self is couched in discovering one’s “authentic self” discourse, bringing out existing skills, and figuring out what one enjoys doing. Career experts re-frame unemployment and underemployment as a training opportunity for job seekers to become productive people. During these workshops, experts explicitly attempt to blur the boundaries between work and non-work, as well as between social good and profit, which is consistent with the neoliberal economy where the individual is seen as a product or company to be marketed. Therefore, in a neoliberal context, achieving individual well-being involves active incorporation of the personal sphere into the business domain.

In addition, a look at the class identities of college educated participants reveals that emotion, particularly a sense of economic security, is also shaping how job-seeking Americans describe their middle-class identity. I illustrate that in the face of decreasing economic opportunities and a tight labor market, very few participants have a negative view of what “middle class” means to them, nor do they describe their class status with an occupation oriented criteria. The majority of participants’ descriptions of “middle class” included consumption items, while almost half of them indicated the importance of economic safety, security and the lack of anxiety for basic economic needs. Following and extending on the concept of ontological security, which refers to the constancy of social and material environments, I demonstrate that despite their precarious employment status, participants still believe in the American Dream and they articulate middle-class identity through their ability to continue consuming, even in a more modified form, which allows them to retain a sense of security. This indicates the centralization of safety and security discourses in defining an American middle-class identity.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Dissertation

On a sunny yet chilly Wednesday morning, I get into my car and drive ten minutes to an upscale neighborhood in Tucson, Arizona to attend a career workshop specifically designed for “professionals,” roughly understood to be college educated middle-class Americans who are seeking full-time jobs with decent benefits. Many of them are underemployed or unemployed. I pass the empty lobby in the office building, and go to Room 401 which looks like a classroom. I say hello to job seekers and Allison\(^1\), a professional recruiter and volunteer presenter. At a desk located near the front side of the room, there are a bunch of papers laid out, consisting of: a sign-up sheet, welcome package, job-search score cards, sample job-interview questions, business cards, and other resources located in the area. I find a seat, start my laptop to take notes, prepare my voice recorder, and take out the consent forms for my research. New participants are sitting silently, and the regulars are chatting with each other. Allison gives the welcome packages to newcomers and explains how things work in the meeting before it starts. As more participants trickle in, the chatter in the room increases. While talking to a participant about a forestry job, Allison puts the USB drive into the computer tower under the lectern, waiting for it to load. After a couple of mouse clicks, she turns back and pulls down the projector screen. The light from the projector is shining into her eyes. After making her Power Point slides full screen, Allison welcomes everyone and starts her presentation with the agenda chronologically: weekly success and failure stories, personal branding statements, a ten-minute break, and a group activity.

The first activity, success and failure stories, is an attempt to hold job seekers accountable to themselves and each other, as well as an opportunity to learn from each other’s experiences.

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\(^1\) All of the participant and organization names are pseudonyms.
“Success” in career workshops usually has a very conservative meaning, such as completing a two-hour-long job application, working on a LinkedIn profile or, if they are lucky, getting an interview for a job. There is an old saying, “the job search is a numbers game.” Allison explains, “If you apply for 100 jobs, you will most likely get 7 responses, 3 interviews, and maybe a job. So, keep going.” As these numbers show, failure makes up the largest part of the job-search process. Participants complain about the difficult computerized application systems, being unable to contact a human being about a job opening, an interview that went bad, or different career experts having varying opinions on what a good resume looks like. Facilitators and participants attempt to make deep analysis of success and failure stories. As such, these stories usually receive a lot of attention during the workshops as other participants try to learn about specific companies and behavior patterns that either worked or were unsuccessful, and adjust their attitude and behavior accordingly to increase their success rates.

The next activity, the personal branding statement, also known as an elevator speech, is a short autobiographic summary, ranging from 30 seconds to 2 minutes, to describe a person and his/her profession in the hopes that “someday, somewhere, someone” will offer a referral, useful employment information, or a job, as Allison often tells participants. This activity is required of all workshop participants as it aims to get people used to public speaking and self-promotion. Allison does the first elevator speech to set an example. Afterward, participants stand up and introduce themselves one by one. Regulars usually have a more polished statement, such as Hector’s:

Good morning. My name is Hector Kole. I am an operations manager currently on contract with a company in national sales and marketing. I am searching for full-time local positions... I possess extensive transferable skills with manufacturing, supply chain engineering, program management and production processes. My strengths lie in
continuous improvements, being the persistent, confident and flexible program manager. One of my many accomplishments is my production increase by 10% and resulting $1 million savings. Subsequently I was awarded additional responsibilities to continue the cost saving procedures. My passion is to assist companies to create more profit in the shortest time possible ... If you have business cards, I can send you my resume. Thank you.

Personal branding statements are very formulaic. They usually start with job titles and industries one has worked in, which should also index the industry fields in which one is looking for a job. Then they go next to what one has achieved and must include some numbers to show concretely how one adds value to the “bottom line” of companies (i.e., profit). Expressing an excitement and love for one’s work is a must (e.g., passion) in order to show devotion and generate confidence. Finally, they end with a suggestion to exchange cards. New participants, like Deborah (age 50), give longer speeches that break the traditional formula of personal branding statements by providing some negative information:

Hi. My name is Deborah Manning. I just completed Pima Country’s accounting certification program. I had no luck finding a job, because I don’t have the experience. Of course, that’s what usually happens when you change careers. I have decided I am just gonna be an office specialist. That way I know how to greet people, I know how to answer the phone, I can do accounts receivable, payable, payroll, very good in Excel, Word, typing 10 key, a lot of office experience throughout my years. I worked in warehouses, I worked in Raytheon. I have gone temp-to-hire, … but even the temp-to-hire is getting where they don’t have as many jobs as they used to have. So it is just been a slow-go. I am thinking maybe my resume, I don’t tweak it enough… so I am gonna focus a little bit more on that and if anybody has any ringers or anything, I am open.

Usually each personal branding statement is followed by the other participants providing feedback and tips to each other. After almost everybody is done making their statements, we take a ten-minute break. Then, Allison starts the group activity that is about overcoming fear with visualization. She asks us to stand up, close our eyes, and urges us to imagine that we are flying like a bird over our favorite city on earth, without stress and worry of everyday life. After more
instructions and placing us on top of the Sears Tower, Allison urges us to step to the edge. Except the constant buzzing from the projector, the room is silent. Allison explains that job-seekers’ biggest road-block is themselves and their own fears. She asks us to open our eyes, take a seat, and explains possible solutions to overcoming these barriers, such as writing a gratitude journal.

After a brief Power Point presentation, Allison finishes up the meeting with next week’s agenda. A couple of participants line up near Allison to seek her advice on a job opening and how to approach an important employer for networking purposes. Other participants talk to each other. Trudy, a job seeker, asks Hack, another job seeker, if he can give her feedback on her resume. Jeff talks to Mark about golfing in Tucson. People are slowly leaving the room. Allison asks if the last person can switch off the lights and shut the door behind them.

Allison, Trudy, and I walk out together. It is sunny outside. We talk in the parking lot about why some people are regularly coming to the workshop but not doing their “homework,” like preparing a good personal branding statement or conducting informational interviews with employers. Trudy complains about the negativity that some people have and bring to the workshop and also the lack of initiative others face, invoking the resonating American adage, “Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.” I offer to give another LinkedIn workshop in the coming weeks to help participants in their job networking. Allison welcomes my idea. After a little more chatting, we wish each other a good day and head toward our cars.

1.2 Genesis of the Research

This research is a result of personal encounters with unemployment and underemployment both in the United States (U.S.) and Turkey, the latter where I was born and
raised. While I personally experienced unemployment right after graduating from a prestigious college in Turkey, I had imagined that my unemployment was a result of the economic status of Turkey as well as being from an environment with few college-educated adults to guide me.

Soon after I came to the U.S. with a Fulbright fellowship to study for my Master’s Degree, the mortgage crisis and global financial meltdown started to unroll in 2008. As housing prices were continuously dropping, foreclosures increasing, and the subprime mortgage industry collapsing, the full extent of the situation was still unclear. I still was not sure exactly what was happening. In September 2008, the news about the investment bank Lehman Brothers having the largest bankruptcy in U.S. history caused shock waves in the media. News reports were talking about the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression (1929-1939), yet I could not visibly observe the crisis except in the media. In the streets, I still saw many new cars with their temporary license plates from the dealership, and people were still eating out in restaurants, which were my (somewhat naive) personal indicators of the economic climate. However, pretty soon news of budget cuts in higher education in Arizona started manifesting, putting me and other graduate students in fear of our future. I started hearing about more and more friends and their family members losing jobs, and their decreasing home values. At the end of 2009, while the official unemployment rate in the U.S. reached 10%, the comprehensive unemployment rate, which includes part-time and discouraged workers, was 17.1%. I began to feel as though I had come to the U.S. at the wrong time.

While I had seen plenty of crises back in Turkey, growing up in the midst of oscillating 60-120% inflation, multiple currency devaluations, and political crisis, I found the American crisis somewhat more surprising than the Turkish one. For one thing, American prosperity started to look very hollow. People who claimed to own a home did not really own it. It was
bank-owned through varied mortgage schemes. This also applied to individuals who asserted they owned a car yet who were making monthly car payments. Additionally, the American health care system, which is known for having the best technology and techniques in the world, left people suffering and dying from being uninsured, under-insured, and/or going bankrupt due to steep health care costs often coupled with the loss of their jobs. These shocking realities led me to switch my project from investigating how a group of refugees adjusted to neoliberal life in the U.S. to investigating how college-educated Americans survive and struggle through unemployment and its wider consequences.

When I changed my topic to study unemployment and underemployment in 2013, my initial goal in this research was to understand the social welfare mechanisms in the U.S. utilized by college-educated Americans who were once assumed to be an economically-advantaged group. I understood social welfare as more than food stamps or unemployment benefits. Coming from Turkey, where a social welfare state is the ultimate but unreachable goal for the government and society, I was surprised to see anti-welfare rhetoric in the U.S. (Morgen & Maskovsky, 2003). The starkest contrast of all was the billions of dollars spent on corporate bailouts and many other tax breaks for the wealthy. While the super-rich have now been blamed in the mainstream media since 2008 for causing the economic crisis, and the poor have been constantly stigmatized for being “lazy” and “irresponsible” (Goode & Maskovsky, 2001), I wanted to understand how college-educated Americans, who were neither benefiting from prosperity nor blamed for their lack of training or initiative, were using various social welfare programs. After all, they are supposedly doing everything right by getting an education, buying insurance, taking care of their bodies through diet and exercise, and investing in their retirement funds. With such high rates of unemployment, the best place to start seemed to be career
development workshops designed to train job seekers and workers to fall in line with the expectations of the current labor market.

Soon after I began my fieldwork in these employment workshops, my attention turned to the direct and explicit attempts by institutions to train, implicate, and cultivate American citizens as particular types of working and professional subjects (Foucault, 1995; Rose, 1999). After attending these workshops for two months, I began to realize that the main focus of the career development field largely hovers around shaping a job seeker’s personality. This includes how job seekers come off and present themselves to others, and how they can anticipate a response and modify their behavior and expectations accordingly. It also encompasses how they cultivate and leverage relationships in order to have gainfully employed lives. People who figure out how to get jobs in what seemed to be a new labor market, end up learning how to change themselves first.

1.3 Theoretical Background

This dissertation is ultimately about being a human subject, and the process by which one becomes a subject through employment mechanisms and precarious life conditions in the Western polity. To be more precise, the central inquiry revolves around a self-fashioning, professional, job-seeking subject, who uses emotional strategies to become employable in the Post-Great Recession United States, where life has become increasingly insecure for the college educated. Strategies and techniques to modify job seekers’ emotional demeanor are directly related to current conceptions of the nature and duties of subjects (Rose & Miller, 2008).

A growing body of scholarly literature examines theories, policies, and implementations around the concepts of emotion, feeling, sentiment, and affect in work and everyday life.
Ahmed, 2004; Berlant, 2011; Fortier, 2010; Hochschild, 1983; Ramos-Zayas, 2012; Zelizer, 2009; Zembylas, 2007). While these concepts have differing meanings for some scholars, which will be provided more in detail further in this dissertation, I follow Hochschild (1979, 1983) emotional management concept, which brings together the modification of inner feelings with social engineering, to focus on how people deliberately act on the emotions of themselves or others by suppressing or inducing certain kinds of feelings. While there is extensive literature on emotional management in the service economy (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Larson & Yao, 2005; Wharton, 2009), less is known about 1) how emotional management in the job-search processes and in class identity is conveyed day-to-day, and 2) how college-educated people engage with emotional management in neoliberal economies (cf. Dean, 1995; Lane, 2011; Muehlebach, 2011; Sharone, 2013). In other words, more needs to be known about how the construction and maintenance of the employable self intersects with the everyday realities of those who are guiding (career experts) and learning (job seekers) this self-fashioning. For example, what does it mean to change daily practices in order to become more relationship-based so that one can obtain employment and secure a career path in an insecure labor market? How do career experts frame employment workshops as a personality-modification domain in the name of uncovering one’s inner passions and qualities? How is the middle-class identity articulated when the basis of economic security and the American Dream is undermined?

Drawing from and contributing to the field of cultural anthropology and sociology, this dissertation employs the notions of emotional management, governmentality, neoliberalism, and self-care, explored in the works of Michel Foucault, Nicolas Rose, Arlie Hoschchild and others, to show that job search and employment processes are crucial sites of subjectivity creation and
the production of self. Increasingly precarious employment in the U.S. for the college-educated prepares the groundwork for job seekers to pursue help from career experts. These experts coax and entice job seekers to utilize emotion to change their thinking and behavior so that they can become employable professionals ready for the neoliberal economy. This attempt to repackage and recreate a new employable self is couched in a discourse of discovering an “authentic self” through unearthing existing skills and discovering emotionally fulfilling and satisfying labor. The implicit assumption among career experts is that “you have failed because you were not true to yourself” with a pinch of acknowledging the Great Recession (2008-2010) and widespread hiring freezes. These experts re-frame unemployment and underemployment as a training opportunity for workers to figure things out, become productive people, and manage their careers according to the principles of the new work regimes, so that they can secure employment both in the short and long term.

I benefit from and extend the following four bodies of anthropological and sociological literature, which I shall further elucidate below:

1) Subjectivity formation through employment processes;
2) Governmentality as a production of self-governing people;
3) Neoliberalism;
4) Governing through emotion.

1.3.1 Subjectivity Formation through Employment Processes

Subjectivity is the overarching theme of this dissertation as it not only creates people but also impacts larger socio-economic structures. Descartes, in the 17th century, based his philosophy on the existence of subjectivity, a universal, self-conscious, and thinking human
being. For Marx, individuals are situated in a class struggle, and their struggle is supposed to lead to a universal human condition, a paradoxical fusion of human freedom and social determinism (Miller, 1982). Weber showed how the Protestant work ethic cultivated a particular entrepreneurial subjectivity, an autonomous thinking subject grounded in a particular historical context. According to Weber, this gave rise to modern capitalism (Weber, 2001).

By the mid-20th century, there was an economic and social shift happening in the U.S. in which a growing number of white-collar Americans were not simply selling goods and services anymore, but they were also selling their personality, mixing impersonal with intimate (Mills, 1969). However, C.W. Mills assumed the concept of “personality” as a given in a socio-economic structure. A couple of decades later, Althusser and Foucault presented that subjectivities are not a given, but rather they are entrenched in both institutional and social structures (Althusser, 2006; Foucault, 1995). Power and knowledge constitute certain types of subjectivities, and government instills new habits and conduct over populations via routines and disciplinary practices (Foucault, 1991). In liberal economies, this is done by means of technologies that govern populations and individuals by securing “natural processes” (Dean, 1999; Rose, 1998). Barbara Cruikshank (1999) calls this “voluntary subjection” through which people are convinced to “empower” themselves to be self-governing and self-regulating so that they can be productive for the national economy and be less of a burden on the social welfare system. By the mid-20th century in social sciences, human subjectivity became largely understood as shaped by outside forces.

The workplace is a principal site of subjectivity formation (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). The impact of work on subjectivity is not a side effect. The changing relations of production are intrinsically linked to the changing conceptions of personhood (Du Gay, 1993; Rose & Miller,
Thus, interventions upon work are at the same time interpolations upon subjectivity, identity, and personhood. For example, when Human Resource Management scholars try to measure job satisfaction, a popular topic in that field, they are ultimately trying to figure out ways to increase productivity by changing and fine-tuning the organization of work through interventions on worker subjectivity (Legge, 2005). Their attempts to measure and compensate work differently change how workers come to understand their selves through work.

Not only the workplace, but also career workshops are sites of subjectivity formation. While the job search is not traditionally considered a type of work in and of itself, many new job seekers are overwhelmed with the amount of work they are asked to do in order to secure a job. One of the brochures career workshop presenters give to participants is a job hunting weekly scorecard which has 23 activities to accomplish every week, some of which are: meeting new people face-to-face, updating their LinkedIn profile, identifying target companies where they would like to work, writing plans to help a particular target company, contacting former employers, meeting with a job-search buddy, attending a career workshop, writing and reviewing phone scripts, practicing personal branding statements, and so on. These activities are very personal, aiming to change not only how job seekers are going about searching for jobs but also deliberately changing who they are as people in the process.

In order to understand how the job search is impacting job seekers, I conducted most of my fieldwork in career workshops where unemployed, underemployed, and even fully employed people come to get free help. The organizations who host these workshops vary by type; some are government-funded, others are non-profit or faith-based organizations. Some of these organizations depend on volunteers to mediate the career workshops or on other organizations to provide free space to hold the workshops. All of these career workshops are free for job seekers
to attend. They are an integral part of the liberal economy that seeks to constantly train and update the workforce. Even though they do direct people to other resources that provide technical training, career workshops are not focused on teaching technical skills; they concentrate their efforts almost entirely on the development and enhancement of social skills. I consider the career workshops and career experts as part of an ensemble of governmentality that engineer souls to increase the productivity of the nation.

1.3.2 Governmentality as a Production of Self-Governing People

Governmentality is referred to briefly as the “conduct of conduct” (Foucault, 1991, 2009) which means governmental power is directing human behavior through aspirations, interests, and beliefs (Dean, 2009). Governmentality is a moral question that “constitutes good, virtuous, appropriate, responsible conduct of individuals and collectives” (Dean, 2009:12; Popkewitz, 1997). Ferguson and Gupta (2002:989) state that governmentality “works by creating mechanisms that work ‘all by themselves’ to bring about governmental results through … the individual (now construed as the entrepreneur of his or her own ‘firm’) and the ‘responsibilization’ of subjects who are increasingly ‘empowered’ to discipline themselves.” This is critically important as the theory of human capital—meaning the skills and knowledge workers have and can use for work—has enabled economic interpretations beyond the domain of the economy and markets (Foucault & Senellart, 2008). Doing research in the field of governmentality does not only tell us about the practices of governments, but also how one’s self is governed (Barry, Osborne, & Rose, 1996; Rose & Miller, 2010).

The state is one of the organizations that governmentality works through to form norms of subjectivity, but it is not the only one. Beyond a state-centered approach, governmentality is
an “ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analysis, and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power” (Foucault, 1991:102). Career workshops, professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, self-help career advice literature, job-search checklists, and various people who volunteer to help job seekers, are all part of this ensemble of governing populations and engineering souls.

According to Dean (1999:32), “[r]egimes of government do not determine forms of subjectivity. They elicit, promote, facilitate, foster and attribute various capacities, qualities and statuses to particular agents” (also see Cruikshank, 1999). Governmentality is not about domination and/or freedom; it is a technology of power derived from the rationality of liberalism. Freedom indicates “not interfering, allowing free movement, letting things follow its own course….basically and fundamentally means acting so that reality develops, goes its way, and follows its own course according to the laws, principles, and mechanisms of reality itself” (Foucault, 2009:48). Freedom is used as a tool of government aimed at molding one’s self into a moral subject (Foucault & Senellart, 2008). Governmentality is concerned with subject and morality formation, and subjects are desired to act autonomously and rationally while following moral dictates (Dean, 1999). In the case of employment workshops, this means promoting the production of self-governing employable subjects who can manage their own careers by constantly updating their hard and soft skills, leveraging relationships, learning how to present themselves, balancing teamwork with personal wellbeing, and so on.

Cruikshank (1999:21) explains that “Foucault used the word ‘subject’ in a double sense… to articulate a form of power that simultaneously ‘subjugates and makes subject’.” In this sense, government works through rather than against the subjectivities of citizens (Cruikshank, 1999). Citizens in this framework are already subject to power even in the “free
space” of civil society (Cruikshank, 1999). The idea is to target people’s subjectivities, learn about them via the human sciences and convince people to take part in empowerment programs, such as the free career workshops discussed in this research.

1.3.3 Neoliberalism

In the late 19th century and early 20th century, the public and economic freedom policies in place failed due to rampant unemployment and other social problems in the West (Rose, 2006). Social welfare was the proposed solution to these problems; here the state took responsibility for guaranteeing individual freedom and capitalist enterprise, a type of governmental mix of classic liberalism and socialism (Rose, 2006). After the 1960s, the welfare state came under attack. Issues such as the 1973 oil crisis and increasing competition from newly industrialized nations effectively put the West under a long recession with low economic growth. This trend initiated the modification and replacement of the Fordist-Keynesian economic and social system, which entailed industrial mass production, and active government intervention in the economy through fiscal policies and generous public spending to prevent or soften a future capitalist crisis (Hickel & Khan, 2012). However, a group of economists, the most famous one being the Chicago School of Economics, pointed out that this system was ineffective and proposed a solution that was later to be called “neoliberalism” by its critics.

Neoliberalism is described by David Harvey (2005:2) as “a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills with an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade.” This basically means that the market is taken as the measure of good for areas ranging from work and leisure to social welfare services.
and child-rearing. It is not uncommon to read about neoliberalism being equated to privatization. Arguments can be made for the retreat of the state in terms of its direct involvement; however, the state continues to stay in the background (as well as the foreground) with regulations and funding while other means of government have proliferated in the forefront. Examples of the proliferation of government across different domains vary: television shows providing health and morality messages; citizens taking charge of air quality and radiation measurements; over-the-phone psychological therapies provided to citizens and non-citizens by private agencies; and the flourishing of self-help workshops providing advice and practical skills to people to assist them with their personal problems. Also, rather than a drastic break from the Fordist-Keynesian economy in terms of its techniques, neoliberalism is an assemblage of various policies, some of which includes Fordist-Keynesian practices itself (Hartman, 2005; Muehlebach, 2011; Ong, 2007). For example, industrialized mass production continues, but it is faster and more open to changing market demands (i.e., just-in-time manufacturing). Government continues to fund infrastructure, but it is usually private companies building things; social welfare services are funded by the government but increasingly implemented by private companies like Maximus Inc., whose slogan is “Helping Government Serve the People.” On the other hand, some of the changes are drastic. Government and corporations used to guarantee job security and benefits, but these have begun to be seen as too rigid for the new economy which is hyper-competitive.

Ong (2007) defines neoliberalism as a mobile assemblage. Neoliberalism, according to Ong (2007:4), is “a technology of governing 'free subjects' that co-exists with other political rationalities. The problem of neoliberalism – i.e. how to administer people for self-mastery – is to respond strategically to population and space for optimal gains in profit.” Unlike political leftist views that imagine and present neoliberalism as “global markets crashing on countries,”
Ong (2007:4-5) conceptualizes neoliberalism as a re-management and “recalibration of the capacity of groups in relation to the dynamism of global markets.” In this view of government, many forms of technologies are deployed, preventing a systemic formulation of normativization. Neoliberalism is a flexible technology. This flexibility can be seen where special zones of production and research are able to co-exist next to the exploitation and management of the working class who are deportable and disposable subjects with limited rights (Ong, 2006, 2007). Thus, neoliberalism is an elastic governmental rationality; it can be utilized and deployed by a wide range actors on the political spectrum including both the progressive left and the conservative right.

In the last decade, anthropologists have been paying particular attention to the concept of neoliberalism and its creeping expansion into everyday lives, not only because of how it influences work processes but also how it affects how we come to understand ourselves as humans and citizens. There is an omnipresence and omnipotence associated with this concept such that anything under the sun can be blamed on neoliberalism. While some scholars argue that neoliberalism has become “a totalizing way of life” (Hickel & Khan, 2012), others are more critical and argue that neoliberalism is not the same everywhere, thus proposing that anthropologists should look at it as an adaptive assemblage (Ong, 2007). Anthropologists call for the examination of local interpretations of neoliberalism (Kipnis, 2008). Gershon (2011:544) suggests using “anthropological imagination” to reveal that “neoliberal labor is not merely one of replacement, but of continual translation, in which people constantly struggle to make neoliberal principles livable given their other understandings of how one is social.” This is evidenced in my research where participants are trying to reconcile various streams of knowledge to make their lives make sense. Many job seekers still believe that “those who work hard deserve a job,” yet
they also know that this is not enough. They are asked to change how they come across in order to get employed. While this comes off as superficial to some job seekers, career experts underscore that hard work must be supplanted with compatibility with the company’s core values, missions, and visions.

What is particularly interesting about neoliberalism is its claim of commensurability of humans with business. Ilana Gershon (2011), in her analysis of neoliberal agency, points out that there has been a shift from people understanding themselves as property in the past toward people conceptualizing themselves as a business and a bundle of skills (also see Urciuoli, 2008). In this shift from possessive individualism to corporate individualism, Martin (2000:582) explains, “People with the resources…are increasingly speaking of themselves as mini-corporations, collections of assets that must be continually invested in, nurtured, managed, and developed.” As I demonstrate in paper one, job seekers are asked to conceptualize themselves as an “independent contractor/company of one” (Gershon, 2011; Lane, 2011), and turn everyday life into a self-improvement and career-advancement opportunity. Career experts advise job seekers to network for a job anywhere, anytime, and with anybody whether during a library visit, grocery shopping, or neighborly visit. This change of mentality involves more than just a simple switch.

1.3.4 Governing through Emotion

The change from the old economy to a neoliberal one had a massive impact on not only the nature of work but also on life in general. Harvey (2005:3) states that neoliberalism “has pervasive effects on ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world.” The implementation
of the neoliberal economy requires changes in the subjectivities of citizens, meaning how individuals experience and understand themselves as human beings. For example, do people see themselves as citizens who should provide help to strangers-in-need, or do they expect the government to set up services to fill that need? Or rather, do they blame people for their own misery? Particularly due to the impact of neoliberalism on human subjectivity, American anthropologists have paid attention to how neoliberalism is shaped and experienced by people throughout the globe, particularly non-Western and/or disenfranchised people (Elyachar, 2012; Kingfisher & Goldsmith, 2001; Millar, 2008; Ong, 2003). In many scholarly works, individual “responsibility” and “entrepreneurship” became two widely mentioned concepts in the shaping of subjectivities within a neoliberal economic rationality (Read, 2009; Rose & Miller, 2008).

In institutional attempts to create certain types of subjects, such as ones that are both responsible and entrepreneurial, emotion, feeling, affect, and sentiment are used as mechanisms to create good citizens who are loyal to the nation (Fortier, 2008; Jones, Bellamy, & Warleigh, 2005) and compassionate to others (Berlant, 2004; Johnson, 2010; Muehlebach, 2011). “Governing through emotion” is how particular subjectivities are created for citizens in the neoliberal economy.

In an attempt to understand how governmentality is forming human subjectivities, a growing academic terrain is utilizing the concepts mentioned above, emotion, feeling, affect, and sentiment, as lenses for analyzing everyday life. Scholars often spend considerable time explaining the difference between these concepts. In a review of the literature, McElhinny (2010) points out that some academics try to distinguish the private from the public, the biological from the social, the universal from the cultural when they are really trying to semantically parse these concepts. For example, according to Richard and Rudnyckyj (2009), emotion is born within an
individual while affect emerges out of human interaction. For Hemmings (2005), affect refers to states of being, while emotion refers to the manifestation or interpretation of affects (also see Giardini, 1999). In an attempt to transcend such distinctions, Ahmed (2004) proposes to ask what emotions do rather than what emotions are.

While these concepts are not interchangeable, due to its specific utility in the work related sphere, in this dissertation I will be focusing on one of the registers of it, emotion and emotional management, primarily emanating from Arlene Hochschild’s work. According to Hochschild (1979, 1983), there are two approaches to the study of emotions: the organismic model of Darwin, James and Freud, and the interactional model of Dewey, Gerth, Mills and Goffman. Hochschild shows that for the organismic model, emotions are unconscious and are secondary to biological drives like sex and aggression. For the interactional model, emotions are intentional and appearance oriented—surface acting. In an attempt to bring these models together and go beyond them, Hochschild proposes the concept of emotional management which combines the techniques of deep acting (modifying inner feelings) with social engineering, where people deliberately act on the emotions of theirs or others by suppressing or inducing certain kinds of feelings.

Hochschild in The Managed Heart: Commercialism of Human Feeling (1983) showed that employment involves a constitution of subjectivity, not simply the use of it. This understanding of employment is in line with neoliberal governmentality which entices people to be more involved at work. In the neoliberal economy within which job security is a thing of the past, and flexibility is central, citizens are expected to shed their old attachments (i.e., secure employment, affordable healthcare), and adapt to the new employment expectations laid out before them in the career workshops.
Many scholars have primarily applied the emotional management concept to service oriented jobs where workers regulate their feelings for customers and co-workers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey, Diefendorff, & Rupp, 2013; Larson & Yao, 2005; Wharton, 2009). This dissertation contributes to this literature by applying emotional management lenses to the job search process where job seekers regulate their self through the guidance of the career advice industry for the potentiality of employment, meaning they are trying to sell their self as a product to be purchased/employed by hiring authorities. The information that job seekers are receiving in these career workshops largely focuses on the development of social skills, such as having a positive attitude, the presentation of a professional but easy-going personality, creating good relationships, interpersonal sensitivity, conveying self-confidence, doing audience analysis, mutual compatibility, and so on. The career advice literature serves as a tool for the creation of a new citizen-worker. I return to these points in paper one and two.

Anticipating that most job applications will fail to result in a job offer, career experts attempt to turn failures into successes. In the case of an explicitly failed job interview, career experts suggest that job seekers try to receive feedback and a referral from the interviewers as demonstrated in an example found in paper two. This approach for constantly seeking feedback and referrals from failed job applications is seen as a solid strategy for crafting an employable self. The ability to accept defeat in a constructive way and an eagerness to learn from one’s mistakes (or at least appearing to do so) frames job seekers as problem-solvers, relationship-builders, and good-communicators. According to career experts, these positive attributes can advance one’s job search by situating the job seeker as good natured, thus potentially able to adapt and contribute to the existing work environment and culture of a particular organization.
CHAPTER 2: PRESENT STUDY

2.1 Situating the Labor Market and Arizona

Since this research is focused on college educated job seekers in the U.S., it is important to report some of the labor market statistics impacting this group. There are numerous positive indicators at the national level for the college educated. The unemployment rate among workers with a bachelor’s degree and associate degree are 3.5% and 4.5% respectively, compared to 6% among those with a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The pay differential between college educated and high school graduates has been consistently widening in the last decades, reaching the ratio of 1.95 in 2009 (Autor, 2010). The median annual earnings breakdown is as such: $57,000 for those with a bachelor’s degree, $41,000 for those with an associate’s degree, and $34,000 for those with a high school diploma (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015).

On the other hand, some economic indicators are more lukewarm. The American labor market, similar to other industrialized nations, has been expanding opportunities for both high-skill, high-pay occupations and low-skill, low-pay occupations, creating a polarization of the labor market. While this trend has been occurring since the 1970s, it has been intensified over the last decade (Cheremukhin, 2014). During this same period, the middle-skill, middle-pay occupations have been shrinking, particularly impacting white-collar clerical, administrative, and sales occupations (Autor, 2010). The middle-skill occupation annual salaries range somewhere between $20,000 to $50,000 and include occupation groups such as science, business, finance, health, teaching, protective and community services, and administrative support and sales. While in the 1980s, the occupational breakdown was 12% for high-skill, 75% for middle-skill, and 13% for low-skill occupations, in 2009 the breakdown was 15% for high-skill, 68% middle-skill, and
17% for low-skill occupations (Abel & Deitz, 2011). This means that despite the expansion of high-skill and low-skill jobs over the years, the large majority of workers are still in the middle occupational levels where salaries have been somewhat stagnant. Moreover, despite projections and calls for more college graduates, the statistics show that only 27% of all the jobs in the U.S. minimally require an associate degree or higher. Furthermore, people who have these college degrees make up 47% of all workers, pointing toward an overproduction of college graduates (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl 2014). One explanation for this situation is “upcredentialing” meaning employers are seeking college graduates for jobs that did not require a college degree in the past. While some of this is justified based on the rising skill requirements for certain jobs, others suggest that employers are using a college degree as a recruitment filter (e.g., Burning Glass, 2014).

I conducted this research in Tucson, Arizona, the second biggest city in the state. Up until the 1940s, Arizona’s economy was mainly based on the three Cs: copper, cotton, and cattle. Arizona was considered the Third World of the United States (Sheridan, 2012). However by the 1960s, Arizona had transformed itself, as Thomas Sheridan (2012:277) puts it, “…from an extraction colony into a military and recreation one.” Much of the expansion was thanks to its favorable weather, military-industrial complex, cheap labor and land, as well as the advantageous lending policies of its financial institutions. Having hosted the largest pilot training center in the world as well as being an electronic warfare center during World War II, these strategic military positions attracted private electronic and aerospace companies, such as Goodyear Aircraft, Motorola, General Electric, Kaiser Aircraft, and IBM. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the largest employer in Arizona was Motorola with its military electronics, semi-conductor, and solid systems divisions (Sheridan 2012). Not only were other high-tech
manufacturing firms opening up shop in the state, but national corporations like Greyhound, Best Western, Ramada Inn, American Express, and State Farm Insurance were also relocating their corporate headquarters to Arizona due to low wages and low taxes, and with them, bringing well-paying jobs to the state. Arizona’s economy continued to boom in the 1960s, 1970s, and early and late 1980s. However, the climate has changed both in Arizona and the nation since then. The housing boom that started in the mid-1990s had significantly contributed to the state’s growth until its demise by 2008 which coincided with a major global financial crisis (Gammage & Hunting, 2014). By 2015, one of the biggest private employers in Arizona, like in many American states, is Walmart with its army of cheap labor.

While the City of Tucson has a population of a little over 500,000, the Tucson Metropolitan Area which includes its various suburbs, has over one million inhabitants. Up until the 1970s, mining was a major part of Tucson’s economy, where 1 in 20 Tucson residents worked in the copper mines (City-Data, 2009). Yet this significantly declined by the mid-1980s. The opening of the Davis-Monthan Air Force Base in Tucson during the 1980s brought with it some major security, software, electronics, and aviation companies including: Raytheon Missile Systems, IBM, Honeywell, Texas Instruments, Intuit, America Online, and Bombardier Aerospace (Treo, 2013). However, these major corporations employ no more than 20,000 people all together. The Tucson Metropolitan Area has one of the highest shares of individuals working in service jobs in the nation, thus making it prone to poverty (Smith & Kenworthy, 2014). The major employing industry in Tucson is the tourism sector where 1 in 10 people work (City-Data, 2009). Due to its mild winter climate, Tucson attracts a significant elderly population and hosts some major medical centers like the Banner University Medical Center (6,000 employees), Carondelet Health Network (4,690 employees), Tucson Medical Center (2,966 employees)
The majority of jobs created by the health and service industry translate to low-wage occupations.

Tucson is also known for its low wages, entry level jobs, and relatively cheap living expenses. Median household income in Tucson is around $37,000 compared to $49,000 in Arizona and $53,000 nationwide (Census, 2013). The Tucson Metropolitan Area has the 8th-highest poverty rate in the nation among metropolitan areas with populations over 500,000 (Smith & Kenworthy, 2014). Yet, looking at the national poverty data, between 2010 and 2012, only 5.8% of individuals age 25 and older with a bachelor’s degree and above are living in poverty in the Tucson Metropolitan Area, somewhat close to the national average of 4.4% (Smith & Kenworthy, 2014).

2.2 Research Methods

This ethnographic research is based on 13 months of participant observation and in-depth interviews in Tucson, Arizona within all five organizations that provide free career workshops in the area and was conducted between November 2012 and December 2013. Because the career advice literature permeates American culture, it is nearly impossible not to be exposed to the ideologies of career development and the larger discourses of self-making via social media, the Internet, books, or people providing bits and pieces of career advice to others that they have heard or read somewhere else. Despite the widespread availability of these messages, one site where these larger discourses are most explicitly articulated is the free employment workshops, which intentionally provides a space for job-seeking college educated Americans to hear, engage with, and respond to these career development and self-making ideas and practices.
I completed a total of 53 in-depth interviews: 40 interviews with job seeking college-educated Americans and 13 interviews with career experts who give advice to job seekers. In addition to the participants I interviewed, I had the opportunity to talk to and/or observe over 200 people coming to these career workshops. The five organizations who provided the free career workshops include: non-profit, university, governmental agency, faith-based career center, and library. See Table 1 for the characteristics of the organizations. I attended a total of 79 individual career workshops. Besides having my voice recorder and laptop in these workshops to take notes, I actively participated in them by making elevator speeches, joining activities, giving and receiving feedback, and presenting on how to navigate and use LinkedIn’s website in the job search process. I also provided one-on-one LinkedIn teaching sessions with participants who expressed interest.

Table 1. Characteristics of organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Geared Toward</th>
<th>Meetings Attended</th>
<th>Frequency of Meetings</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Duration of a Workshop</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>White-collar</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, open discussions, activities, guest speakers</td>
<td>180 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Master’s degree</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Weekly or Biweekly</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers, some training package</td>
<td>60-90 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, training package, some discussion, activities</td>
<td>240 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
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<td><strong>79</strong></td>
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</table>
The target population of this research was college-educated job seekers between 30-64 years old with a minimum of two years of college education. Participants were looking for employment opportunities in a variety of sectors that include health care, information technology, media, sales, education, pharmaceuticals, aeronautics, social services, and real estate. See Table 2 for the participant demographics of group 1 job seekers. The bulk of the job seeker interviewees (25 out of 40) were recruited from the career workshops in which I participated. To diversify the sample and include job seekers who do not attend employment workshops, I recruited 15 additional job seekers using snowball sampling: 1) from the core interviewees (n=6); 2) via the professional networking site LinkedIn (n=7); and 3) through my attendance at networking mixer events (n=2).

One of the limitations of this research is the higher number of interviews with women as they were more open to requests to join the research. Another limitation was the lower rate of participation by younger married people. One possible explanation is that younger married people are more likely to have childcare responsibilities and larger social networks that might limit their participation in the career workshops and other career related activities.

The average annual income of the participants was about $53,000, which I have calculated by including current income only for employed and underemployed participants; and the highest income only (the last 10 years) for the unemployed. There were only 5 participants with past incomes of $100,000 and above. Even though unemployed participants did not have an income, past salary provides a sense of where individuals are situated from an income perspective.
Table 2. Group 1 (Job seekers) demographics

<table>
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<th>Group 1 (Job seekers)</th>
<th>N=40</th>
<th>Employment Status During Interview Period</th>
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<td>Age</td>
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<td>Race and Ethnicity</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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Career experts whom I interviewed are recruiters, human resource personnel, outplacement experts, career development workshop conveyors, businessmen, and social workers. See Table 3 for the demographics of group 2 career expert participants. I consider these experts an extension of the self-help career advice literature that provides career assistance to individuals on a daily basis through various mediums including self-help books, professional networking sites like LinkedIn, or in-person, whether they are formally educated on career development or not.
Table 3. Group 2 (Career experts) demographics

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<th>Group 2 (Career experts)</th>
<th>N=13</th>
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<td>Sex</td>
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<td>- Female</td>
<td>11</td>
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<tr>
<td>- Male</td>
<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>- Mean=52</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

The individual interviews and participant observation at career workshops were welcomed by many of the participants, however, my attempts to do participant observation in the job seekers’ everyday lives did not come off naturally. Unlike many anthropologists who study populations that are concentrated in a particular neighborhood—often due to poverty and/or ethnic support networks—college educated Americans live all over the Tucson area. I could not live in a geographically delimited neighborhood to observe people. Job-seeking college educated Americans are everywhere and nowhere. Also, they did not really need me for any practical reasons like financial or bureaucratic help, or to help them gain access to resources. As a Ph.D. candidate, I was financially worse off than most of my participants. Occasionally people asked me to teach them how to use LinkedIn, which I was happy to do in the workshops and one-on-one. While at the beginning of the project, I conducted a lot of the interviews at coffee shops, after a while, I requested meeting people in their homes and/or hanging out with them (participating) in their everyday activities. This included shopping, going to job fairs, family dinners, volunteering with participants, helping them with a move, going to a playground, attending a religious ceremony, dog walking, and attending an AA meeting. While I could not live with my participants, as a graduate student on a teaching assistant’s stipend, I was however living somewhat like them. With a limited budget, I spent time shopping at thrift stores and big box stores, using coupons, buying food based on weekly ads and community food events. I was
also frequently stressed about whether I would get temporary employment from semester-to-
semester, or how much I would have to co-pay for a doctor’s visit. In this way, I was able to 
relate to my participants’ needs, worries, and concerns on a most basic level.

2.2.1 Organizations in This Study

While most of the career workshops are designed for all levels of populations or types of 
job seekers, only one of them, the Professional Job Counseling (PJC), specifically serves
“professionals.” The PJC is more finely-tuned toward the needs and concerns of the college 
educated crowd. Regardless, the advice provided in all of these workshops is very similar:
marketing one’s self via soft skills development. As I previously mentioned, the career advice 
given in these workshops were very similar to the advice found on the Internet, media, or books 
regardless of whether the advice was coming from career experts or business people.

A local educational institution provides free space to the PJC to hold its weekly meetings, 
and its workshop facilitators are volunteers. The PJC’s workshops are longer in duration than 
those of other four organizations, held once a week, and anyone can join the PJC’s career 
workshops. Each workshop meeting usually lasts about 180 minutes with various activities such 
as discussions, personal branding statements, and presentations. The board members of the PJC 
consist of business people in Arizona with connections to major organizations in the state. 
Because of the PJC’s focus on “professional” occupations, its diverse content, and the provision 
of space for people to discuss issues, around half of my workshop data comes from this 
organization. See Table 1 for the characteristics of the PJC and the other four organizations 
holding the career workshops.
The career workshops put on by a government organization are designed for everybody, not just for the college educated job seekers. Similar to the PJC, anyone can attend these free workshops, and they too are often held on a weekly basis. These workshops take an hour, start with personal introductions, and often have guest speakers, who tend to be the Human Resource personnel of a company. The same organization also held a comprehensive four day workshop on the job-search process. These comprehensive workshops have the same content, are repeated weekly, are free of charge, require pre-registration, and take around sixteen hours to complete.

The university where I attended some career workshops had several events organized by their career center, but others were prepared by different associations at the university geared toward students as well as alumni. Sometimes speakers would come from other states to hold talks. For workshops held at the university setting, I did not attend any designed for undergraduates as they are a relatively distinct population in the labor market.

Public libraries in Arizona often have career support hours, however, these services often consist of loaning a laptop, working on applications, and resume writing while a librarian answers basic questions. The attendees of these career support services are often not college graduates but are rather people with a high school education or less. Thus, after some participation and chatting with librarians, I stopped going to these support hours. However, I found one public library in an upper-class neighborhood where a former corporate executive was volunteering in his free time. These meetings were rather irregular, sometimes with no participants, which limited my participation with this organization’s career workshops.

The last organization was the career center of a faith-based organization (FBO) which offered comprehensive five day job-search workshops, very similar to the ones offered by the government organization mentioned earlier. This organization was rather obscure, mainly
serving their congregation despite being open to public. I only learned about them toward the end of my fieldwork through one of my participants. The FBO offered training packages in which retired volunteers led the weekly workshops. Many of the participants in this organization also only had high school degrees.

2.3 Paper Summaries

This dissertation follows the three article format. As a result, each paper was prepared as a stand-alone piece for publication in three different journals. Paper one and two are specifically focused on the soft skill development discourse, the importance of networking for the job search, and having a likable personality respectively. Both of these papers point out that the changing economy is linked to neoliberal policies. One of the aspects of the neoliberal economy is to produce employable workers and job seekers who are required to modify their self in order to find decent jobs. The majority of the data for these papers come from the career workshops. Paper three also looks at subjectivity formation through emotional management in the neoliberal economy, but from a different position: middle-class identity. As occupation is one of the most important elements to social class, in this paper I investigate what “middle class” means subjectively (and emotionally) to college educated Americans, the majority of whom are under- or underemployed. This paper shows that despite their negative employment experience in a difficult labor market, participants largely continue to retain a positive image of middle-class status. This status is articulated through an ability to continue existing consumption habits, which is tied to their ability to retain ontological security.
2.3.1 Paper One

Paper one specifically examines the networking discourse for college-educated job-seekers. Career experts in the employment workshops emphasize the importance of networking to find jobs. While the existing research establishes that networking matters for career purposes (Bian, 1994; Burt, 1995; Coverdill, 1994; Fernandez, Castilla, & Moore, 2000; Granovetter, 1995), how this is advised and practiced in the job-search process is less known (Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2013). In this paper, I examine the perceptions of networking, how institutions are set up to promote networking, and how job seekers engage with this discourse. Job networking requires the rallying up of emotion and the adoption of desirable professional identities, where job seekers adjust how they talk, respond, and come across, not only when they are searching for a job but also when they are employed. In the U.S. context, networking is encouraged and positively reinforced to job seekers by career experts, unlike in many other countries where networking is seen in a negative light (i.e., nepotism, cronyism) (Grindle, 1977 in Mexico; Guthrie, 1998 in China; Ledeneva, 1998 in Russia; Nichols, Sugur, & Sugur, 2003 in Turkey; Pistaferri, 1999 in Italy). Yet, despite the fact that many U.S. job seekers agree with the importance of networking, they often resist actively doing it not only because they are shy, but also because there is a lingering discomfort of salesmanship associated with job networking. Career experts do cultural work to convince job seekers that networking can be done anytime, anywhere, and with anybody from visiting libraries and grocery shopping to walking a dog and attending church. According to career experts, the best strategy, however, for job seekers is to conceptualize volunteering as a networking activity. I argue that this idea of expanding a rent-seeking activity—using resources to obtain economic gain—to everyday life, and particularly to community service, is a manifestation of neoliberalism which aims to blur the boundaries
between work and non-work as well as between social good and personal-profit. Using data from the career advice literature, and research conducted in career/employment workshops with job-seeking college educated Americans and career experts in Arizona, this article analyzes the discourse of networking and its implications for the construction of professional subjectivities within a particular view of neoliberalism.

2.3.2 Paper Two

Paper two examines the discourse of “personality” in the job-search process. While the term “personality” has its origins in psychological theory, I use the term “personality” in a discursive sense, a stand-in concept utilized by career experts and job seekers to talk about a collection of individual aspects like character, persona, value, authenticity, chemistry, cultural fit, and so on. Before analyzing the fieldwork data, I provide an overview of the scholarly literature from management, organization behavior, and industrial psychology, showing the increased incorporation of human subjectivity into the workplace since the later 19th century. Participant observation reveals that career experts in employment workshops emphasize the importance of changing the self via emotional management to help people find jobs. I argue that career experts frame the job-search process as a personality-modification domain where self-presentation and attitude-change are promoted and normalized for job seekers in the name of uncovering one’s inner passions and qualities so that job seekers can produce not only an authentic employable self but also “fit” with hiring authorities and prospective organizations. Focusing on the individual’s personality during job search education rather than their technical skills is in line with the changing labor process over the last several decades, which demands workers and job seekers incorporate themselves emotionally in the workplace. Thus, the goal of
worker training and professionalization is not only to show job seekers have certain marketable skills, but that they are a certain kind of person.

2.3.3 Paper Three

In the third paper, I look at how college educated job seekers\(^2\) describe what it means to be “middle class” in the context of their under- and unemployment status in a particularly tight labor market with decreasing economic opportunities. Since the 1950s, the concept of the middle class, combined with the American Dream, has provided an optimistic metanarrative for many Americans to understand their lives in terms of expanding economic and social opportunities. The American Dream assumes a baseline “ontological security” which Giddens (1990:92) describes as the confidence in people's sense of identity, a feeling that others are reliable, and their material environments are secure. There is an abundance of research linking homeownership—a basic tenant of the American Dream—to ontological security. This article extends this literature by showing that people, particularly college educated job seeking Americans, can derive ontological security not just from homeownership, but through their ability to continue to consume, even in a more modified form, despite their underemployment or unemployment status. Participants emphasize the importance of economic safety and security, and articulate middle-class identity through consumption items (e.g., home, car, vacation). In the face of precarious employment situations, participants’ longing for economic security manifests in their descriptions of “middle class” and show their ability to continue some of their usual consumption habits, which allows them to maintain a sense of security and stability. Economic security can enable consumption and allow people to continue to believe in the American Dream

\(^2\) There is complete data from 35 participants for this paper.
within which hard work (i.e., full time employment) can bring success and prosperity (i.e., consumption). This article broadens the concept of ontological security by illustrating that people derive their sense of security and their ideas of what it means to be middle class from their ability to consume beyond the bare necessities and continue some of their usual consumption patterns.

Despite the rising media and political discourse of a declining or disappearing middle class and the negative personal experiences of many job seekers, most participants (27 out of 35) maintain a positive image of the “middle class,” indicating a strong hold of the American Dream metanarrative, which assumes hard work automatically brings prosperity and success. Yet around half of the participants (19 of 35) also associated middle-class identity with economic security and stability, and the lack of worry about basic economic needs. This emphasis on security is possibly an expressed desire for ontological security. To provide insight into the lived experience of my participants, I analyze my data under two domains: 1) Everyday spending and 2) Homeownership. These two domains encapsulate the majority of factors participants expressed to describe the middle-class identity and also flesh out the increasing centralization of safety and security discourses in defining American middle-class identity. I conclude by suggesting that job seekers’ descriptions of middle-class identity provide insight into shifting class identity and its concomitant impact on individuals’ sense of well-being in the neoliberal economy.

2.4 Conclusion

The three papers included in this dissertation provide insight into how the production of self and the emotional management of job seekers and workers as they are influenced by their under- and unemployment status in a precarious labor market. While this study is situated in
Arizona, themes can be gleaned that contribute to an enhanced understanding of the role of neoliberalism in U.S. employment more broadly.

I have argued that the emphasis in career workshops and by career experts on how to manage and re-produce oneself beyond technical skills demonstrates the ways in which employment mechanisms, the career advice industry, and companies demand that job seekers and workers become more emotionally and personally involved in their jobs. In precarious employment conditions where job security is passé, career experts vis-à-vis the contemporary advice literature, continue to place the risk and responsibility of employment on job seekers and workers. Career experts demand that employees become more intimately involved with their work; this new mandate manifests in enhanced expectations among job seekers and workers, by asking them, for example, to be likeable, to have good social skills, to brand themselves, to be persuasive, to create and maintain good relationships with others, and to leverage these relationships to benefit both themselves and their potential employers. In essence, job seekers and workers are expected to embody the company, firm, or organization where they are employed or hope to be employed.

The goal of modern day worker training and professionalization is not only to show that job seekers have certain marketable skills, but that they can fit within a specific organizational culture. And while they are expected to encompass all things simultaneously, this growing burden on job seekers (and workers) does not correspond with benefits, compensation, and job security, all of which are rapidly diminishing; thus heightening concerns for economic stability and security among college educated job-seeking Americans.
2.4.1 Scholarly Contributions to the Literature

The emotional management concept has been utilized by many scholars to analyze service jobs where workers regulate their feelings for customers and co-workers (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Grandey et al., 2013; Larson & Yao, 2005; Wharton, 2009). This dissertation contributes to this literature by applying emotional management lenses to the job search process. In this context, job seekers are the products, meaning they package their “self” and try to sell it to hiring authorities. This is in line with the neoliberal economy in which people are imagined to be products as well as businesses.

In paper one, I examine how career experts and the advice literature talk endlessly about networking as a necessity for college educated, job-seeking Americans. The existing research already revealed that networking matters for career purposes (Bian, 1994; Burt, 1995; Coverdill, 1994; Fernandez et al., 2000; Granovetter, 1995); yet how the importance of networking for one’s career success is advised, recommended, and practiced during the various employment processes, and how job seekers (and workers) face this is less known (Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2013). My contribution is examining the perceptions that job seekers have regarding job networking, and specifically how career experts and the advice literature promote socializing and volunteering as a means of networking for professional and personal gain. My research also documents how job seekers apply prominent career messages to self-fashion specific identities in order to advance their goals of job placement, security, or promotion. I have shown that job networking requires the use of emotion, where job seekers adjust how they talk, respond, and relate to others in order to appear and become more marketable. Simply having connections does not count as networking. Job seekers must build an employable persona that enables them to
engage with the gut feelings of key players in various economic sectors and to leverage both existing and new relationships.

In the employment workshops where I conducted my participant observations, career experts readily evangelized networking-as-crucial messaging to diverse audiences. In the neoliberal landscape of contemporary job seeking, I show that career experts have moved from information brokers to cultural brokers, inculcating the underemployed and unemployed with the belief that job security can be attained in the most mundane places, and that it is within the power (and the responsibility) of job seekers to identify these networking opportunities in their everyday lives. Although most job seekers acknowledged and internalized the importance of networking, it was often begrudgingly, and laced with discomfort pertaining to self-promotion and negative connotations of salesmanship.

Scholars have discussed how the boundaries between public and private are socially constructed, ideological, and shifting (Gal, 2002; Peterson, 2000). Nevertheless, what I find particularly interesting in the job-search context is the demand to blur the boundaries between social good and personal profit by explicitly promoting everyday activities, including the once altruistic act of volunteering, as opportunities for self-advancement. Essentially, job seekers must be prepared to network at all times.

In paper two, the focus was the discourse of “personality” in the job search process. Similar to the previous paper, I demonstrate that emotional management is central to the production of an employable self. Through an overview of the scholarly literature from management, organizational behavior, and industrial psychology, I show that the emphasis on cultural fit in the workplace has been on a steady incline since the later parts of the 19th century.
The job search has evolved into a value-laden self-improvement project: identities must be modified and crafted, self-presentation adjusted, and attitudes shifted to meet the demands of organizations seeking the right cultural fit. Some experts have even claimed that unemployment is an opportunity to reflect and self-improve so that people can find better employment but also ensure future employability that will be a better fit. Management rhetoric justifies this based on organizational culture theory (Barney, 1986; Schein, 1984), meaning each company has its own unique culture, and ensuring cultural compatibility between existing workers and newcomers. The growing use of personality tests in job recruitment also supports the rising interest in the normative aspect of employment processes. These tests ensure that candidates and employees feel the responsibility (read: liability and burden) for their behavior in the work space.

In paper three, I look at how college educated job seekers describe what it means to be “middle class” in the U.S. within the context of their under- and unemployment status. Despite most Americans claiming to belong to the “middle class” due to its egalitarian promise, and neutral and optimistic position, the Great Recession (2007-2010) solidified that middle-class Americans no longer stand on firm economic and social grounds. In this paper, I demonstrate that despite their precarious employment status, participants still believe in the basic tenants of the American Dream (e.g., hard work, prosperity, homeownership). Further, they articulate middle-class identity through their ability to continue consuming, even in a more modified form, which allows them to retain a sense of security despite their negative employment experiences and current economic climate.

I primarily benefitted from Beth Cohen (2003)’s citizen-consumer theory and Anthony Giddens (1990)’ ontological security theory. Cohen (2003) argues that mass consumption has been promoted in the U.S. as a moral activity since the 1940s, not only to create more sustainable
economic growth, but more importantly, to create a greater democracy and equal opportunity within the Fordist-Keynesian economic system. The American Dream that middle-class Americans could imagine in the post-World War II period was created in a relatively secure and growing economy, where mass consumption and citizenship were married to each other. The second theory, ontological security, refers to the constancy of one’s social and economic environment (Giddens, 1990). In many Western societies, economic security is seen as the primary basis of ontological security (Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2010). While a number of scholars have investigated how homeowners, rather than renters, derive ontological security from their homes, this paper contributes to this literature by examining how job-seeking Americans articulate middle-class identity and ontological security through consumption.

2.4.2 Research Implications

While career experts in Arizona do not directly refer to these networking or cultural fit theories and trends in the normative aspects of employment, these are widespread as a discourse, in actual practice, and/or both. For example, as I demonstrated in both papers one and two, business people and self-help experts talk about the importance of personal characteristics and relationship building, and how to implement or practice these notions. These ideas about career development are widely available in the public sphere through career experts, self-help books, professional networking sites such as LinkedIn, newspapers, and friends and family members who read or hear these ideas. Job-seeking Americans are exposed to these whether they go to career workshops or not. While the majority of college-educated job seekers in Arizona are not targeting Fortune 500 companies, where these ideas are implemented the most robustly, job seekers are constantly receiving these career messages. For example, in a recent opinion piece,
John Brown (2015), the former director of Xerox’s famous Palo Alto Research Center, jokingly suggested using eHarmony, a dating website that uses algorithms to match employees in order to help “orchestrate serendipity” at work places and increase productivity. While Brown acknowledges the contemporary challenges of managing one’s own career by using the metaphor “Whitewater” as opposed to an older metaphor of a “Sailboat,” the article itself is optimistic, putting high-tech organizations like CERN (The European Organization for Nuclear Research) and the Palo Alto Research Center as examples for workers (and job seekers). Unfortunately, institutions like CERN and the Palo Alto Research Center are exceptions with their highly educated and specialized workforce; the majority of people are working in relatively smaller organizations.

Overall, the research findings point to the importance of the emotional management of the job seeker, where how people talk and behave impacts employability. Today, many colleges in the U.S. have already implemented elective courses and workshops that teach professional communication and behavior. As these workshops become increasingly commonplace, their impacts might be dubious due to the inequality created through social reproduction, meaning structures that pass on inequality from one generation to the next. Scholars have pointed out that dispositions are inculcated in the individual at an earlier stage (Bourdieu, 1984). From this perspective, those individuals coming from professional families start the race a great deal ahead of the rest of the population. According to this logic, the former group is likely to benefit from these workshops much more than their peers who do not have professional parents. Lauren Rivera (2012:1016), in her study of elite firms’ hiring practices, concluded that these firms prioritized cultural similarity (e.g., hobbies, experiences, self-presentation) because hiring authorities perceived it “as a meaningful quality that fostered cohesion, signaled merit, and
simply felt good.” Despite the good intentioned attempts to train job seekers, hiring authorities continue to have subjective leanings in their evaluation of candidates; and social reproduction has a strong presence in employment processes.

Having a brief experience in career counseling at the college level, I suggest that career experts need to have an honest discussion with job seekers about the unequal playing field and social structures in place. This discussion might help job seekers to understand the challenges better and give them an opportunity to address them. At the very least, this can decrease the psychological burden on individuals who might think, “What is wrong with me?” a question one of my participants admitted asking herself. Offer Sharone’s (2013) investigation of American and Israeli job seekers found that despite some awareness of social structures that make the job search challenging, American job seekers blame themselves for failed employment processes. On the other hand, Israelis blame the system. During my fieldwork, career experts would occasionally talk about the Great Recession and how it made the job search process challenging, but the majority of the focus was still on what the individual can do. I even observed career experts’ attempts to move job seekers away from thinking about things that they cannot change, which resonates with the famous serenity prayer that is popular, even in secular settings, in the U.S. I believe that whether or not job seekers can change how they talk and behave, acknowledging the structural challenges can at least take some burden off of job seekers and add a sense of psychological ease, which is much needed in an already difficult job search process.

2.4.3 Future Directions

Throughout this dissertation, I have pointed to the links between the neoliberal economy, and the conditions and expectations set for job seekers. Cultural anthropologists have paid
particular attention to the negative effects of the neoliberal economy on everyday life. There are certain points about neoliberalism worth re-mentioning to explain its impact on job seekers’ lives, and then move onto broader issues from there. First, neoliberalism actively promotes the economization of personal, social, and political life (Foucault, 2009) in the hope that it will promote human well-being. Second, enterprising culture and changing self in this direction are seen as central to individual good and happiness (Ong, 2006; Richard & Rudnyckyj, 2009; Rose, 1999). This requires self-governing individuals, who maximize benefits for themselves and their surroundings. In relation to earlier points, individuals are asked to conceptualize themselves as commensurate with companies. Encouraging people to imagine themselves as “independent contractors” or a “companies of one” are demonstrations that people are equated with companies in the neoliberal economy (Gershon, 2011; Lane, 2011). In this sense, maximizing personal profit is eventually seen as good for the self, and in the long run, imagined to be good for society.

In this vein, volunteering for personal gain is a lingering issue that must be addressed. How does the blurring of volunteering with job networking impact people’s sense of civic duty? Or should we just consider this as “killing two birds with one stone”? For a long time, high school and university students have been encouraged to instrumentalize volunteering for entering good colleges and building up their resume to show they have different forms of work experience albeit volunteer experience. Yet, the participants in this research were over 30 years old. The instrumentalization of volunteering for career purposes and how it impacts the sense of civic duty is a potential avenue for future research.

Finally, despite the discursive patterns linking personality-modification and self-improvement projects to eventual career stability and even fulfillment, the lived experiences of some college educated Americans point to a more troubling trend: anxiety and insecurity related
to, and enacted through, patterns of consumption. In this research, despite the recent mortgage crisis affecting many Arizonans, housing emerged as a domain in which people found ontological security, with home ownership correlated to perceived consumptive power more generally speaking. The ways in which people negotiate careers (public) and home (private) to maintain a tenuous grasp on middle-class identity is an area deserving of future research. While business people and career experts explicitly tell people to blur the boundaries between the private and the public spheres in order to have a fulfilling career, the absorption of these career messages only goes so deep. Job seekers who were talking about how passionate and hard-working they are during the career workshops rarely mentioned occupational criteria in their description of middle-class identity. This calls for further research into people’s boundary making strategies and rationales between work life and private life in a neoliberal economy.


APPENDIX A: PAPER ONE

Normalizing Networking: Blurring Social Good with Personal Profit in Neoliberal Times

Abstract

This article examines networking discourse in employment workshops for job-seeking, college educated Americans. Career experts emphasize the importance of networking to find jobs. Participant observation and interview data reveal that while job seekers agree that networking is important, they dislike the idea of doing it. Career experts do cultural work to convince job seekers that networking can be done anytime, anywhere, and with anybody. In particular, career experts encourage volunteering as a networking activity in which job seekers can both give back to the community and search for a job at the same time. This expansion of a rent-seeking activity to everyday life and community service is a manifestation of neoliberalism which aims to blur the boundaries between work and non-work as well as social good and personal profit.

Keywords: Emotional labor, career advice, job search, neoliberalism, networking, volunteering
NORMALIZING NETWORKING: BLURRING SOCIAL GOOD WITH PERSONAL PROFIT IN NEOLIBERAL TIMES

Just as high-tech workers faced a wake-up call in 2001 when the dot-com bubble burst, the Great Recession of 2007-2010 alerted college-educated Americans that job security was a thing of the past. Newly unemployed workers face a job market in which many available positions are part-time (Chumley, 2013). This is but the latest chapter in a longer-term shift in the nature of employment from stable and secure to contingent and precarious (Kalleberg, 2009). As a result, job-seeking college-educated Americans are turning to self-help career tools and experts to find full-time employment with benefits. Despite the fact that hard skills still matter, career experts emphasize that social skills—in particular networking skills—matter more in today’s job market.

There is a robust sociological literature testing the effects of networks on employment (Fernandez, Castilla, & Moore, 2000; Granovetter, 1995). Existing research establishes that networking matters to provide information about a position (Burt, 1995; Fernandez et al., 2000); for influencing a candidate’s hiring (Bian, 1994; Huang, 2008; Wial, 1991); and to help a candidate succeed once hired (Bailey & Waldinger, 1991; Coverdill, 1994; Manwaring, 1984). A recent qualitative turn examines mechanisms of emotional relating of job seekers with hiring authorities under the terms “cultural matching” (Rivera, 2012) or “chemistry” (Finlay & Coverdill, 2002; Sharone, 2013).

There is less research on how discourses on job networking are disseminated and experienced by job seekers (Lane, 2011; Sharone, 2013). This article examines these less familiar aspects of job-search processes: how institutions are set up to promote networking, and how job seekers are engaging with this discourse. Using data from the career advice literature
and research conducted in employment workshops for job-seeking middle-class Americans, this article analyzes the discourse of networking culture and its implications for the construction of professional subjectivities. Networking requires that job seekers engage in emotional labor—conscious inducing and suppressing of feelings—to adopt desirable professional identities in which they adjust how they talk, dress, and the impressions they make. Although many job seekers recognize the importance of networking, they often resist actively doing it, not only because they are shy, but also because there is a lingering discomfort of salesmanship and sense of inauthenticity associated with job networking. Volunteering offers a solution to this challenge so that people can come to terms with networking by blurring the boundaries between work and non-work, and between social good and personal profit.

Networking is situated within a liberal technology of governing that entices and guides middle-class college educated people to act on and improve themselves. Michel Foucault (1991, 1995) showed how institutions utilize routines and disciplinary practices to instill new norms and conduct into populations without brutal force. Similarly, Cruikshank (1999) calls this “voluntary subjection,” a mechanism in liberal economies to transform people into proper citizen-workers. The workplace has been the principal site for such identity formation projects (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Over the course of the 20th century, transformation of production relations have depended on changing conceptions of personhood (Rose & Miller, 2008). A shift from Fordist economy to a post-Fordist one, more particularly referred as neoliberalism, is not simply a change in economy, but also in professional identity and work ethics.

I interpret networking discourse in the form of career advice as a manifestation of neoliberal economic practices in three interconnected ways. First, neoliberalism actively promotes the economization of personal, social, and political life (Foucault, 2009). Second,
neoliberalism casts the creation of self-governing individuals, through enterprising culture and personality modification, as central to individual good and happiness (Ong, 2006; Richard & Rudnyckyj, 2009; N. Rose, 1999). Third, the traditional distinction of professional and domestic spheres, which Max Weber saw as the basis for the modern capitalist economy, is no longer seen as suitable in an open liberal society (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Instead, individuals are asked to conceptualize themselves as “independent contractor/company of one” (Gershon, 2011; Lane, 2011), and engage in emotional labor to turn everyday life into a self-improvement and career advancement opportunity (cf. Hochschild, 1983, 2003). Networking is a tool in this context for self-governing individuals to become a company, and utilizing every opportunity to maximize career opportunities. This is particularly salient in U.S. culture.

This article is structured as follows. First, I present a brief history of authoritative discourse (Bakhtin, 2010; Bourdieu, 1991) on networking in the career development field which is reproduced by self-help career books, as well as scholarly publications in organizational behavior, management and psychology. These authoritative resources shifted discourse on networking from a stigmatized and non-priority practice to a legitimized and important activity. Next, I turn to a case study of networking discourse in practice. The data is drawn from individual interviews and participant observation in five different organizations’ career development workshops in Tucson Arizona, a mid-sized in the Southwest of the United States. I find that, while job seekers agree with career experts on the importance of networking, they still resist networking discourse. Career experts do cultural work to resolve this resistance by instrumentalizing volunteering as an option where job seekers can both give back to the community and network at the same time.
Background: A Brief History of Job Networking Discourse

Advice Literature on Job Search and Careers

While networking is essentially an old practice, and widely utilized in the United States (Laird, 2009), it has only recently become an autonomous practice identified, valued, studied, and institutionalized in and of itself (Boltanski & Chiapello, 2005). Historically, networking has often been cast in a negative light as nepotistic; and this is still the case in many other countries (Grindle, 1977 in Mexico; Guthrie, 1998 in China; Ledeneva, 1998 in Russia; Nichols, Sugur, & Sugur, 2003 in Turkey; Pistaferri, 1999 in Italy). Over the course of the past century in the United States, career advice literature and an associated industry of career experts advising on job search increasingly frame networking as a legitimate and indeed essential practice.

Late nineteenth century and early twentieth century career advice literature in English mention friends and acquaintances, but such networks are discussed only briefly and not presented as the most important way to find a job. Instead of using the word networking, these books often use words like “pull,” “drag,” “contact,” “influence,” “relationship,” and “personal circle.” In a list of how to find vacancies, Gowin and Wheatley (1916:322) list “friends” as the third option, after help wanted ads and employment agencies. In Getting a Good Job, Barrett (1917) lists “friend” as the last item on a list of ways to obtain inside knowledge about vacancies. In the Technical Man Sells His Services (1933), the author critiques networking in the very first page, stating “…assume that you are going to stand on your feet, get work by using your own resources, and disdain the use of ‘drag’ pressure influence of any nature whatsoever.” However in the 1940s, Edlund and Edlund (1948) who ran a non-profit employment help center, list personal networks as the top three of five methods for locating vacancies: 1) current employer, 2) former employer, 3) friends and business acquaintances, 4) clearing houses, and 5) cold calls.
Esther E. Brooke in *Career Clinic: The Answer to Your Job Problem* goes one step further and praises “pull” if used properly:

"Pull" is not only a perfectly legitimate way of getting a job, but it is generally accepted in business as a sound and sensible practice. Both you and your employer gain by it. You get a job under favorable auspices; your employer gets someone whose background and training have been vouched for by someone who speaks his language—no small asset when you realize how noncommittal most references are! (1940:100)

Brooke suggests using existing friends and acquaintances to gain employment. Since the 1960’s, the advice literature began suggesting creating new connections for professional reasons. This is evidenced in Bernard Haldane’s book *How to Make a Habit of Success* (1960) and Richard Bolles’ book *What Color is Your Parachute?* (1974), which has more than 40 editions published since then, and which is referred to as the job seekers’ bible. These two examples were focused on creating connections during the job search process. In 1980, Mary-Scott Welch wrote *Networking: The Great New Way for Women to Get Ahead* (1980), the very first book dedicated solely to professional networking, showing how, when, and with whom to network. This book was feminist in the sense that it tried to replicate the Old Boys Network in a more democratic fashion where anybody could learn how to network in a very structured way, especially women trying to break the glass ceiling. This approach emphasized the creation of a supportive community, which I see as a continuation of the 1960s’ new social movements. Welch’s book was a sign post showing that networking was turning into a legitimate, respected, and democratic practice, at least in the U.S. Yet the book was not very popular, perhaps because it was written by a woman and targeted at women. Another possible reason is that by the 1980s, discourse of self-development shifted from a collective project to a rather solitary endeavor (Binkley, 2007). Although networking is ultimately a social project, for Haldane, Bolles and other career experts
who dominate the field, networking is the responsibility of the individual, requiring constant work on the self and others to cultivate and leverage ties for means of one’s employment and career development.

Organizational and Psychological Literature

Just as the career advice literature was transitioning to value networking and leveraging everyday relationships, organizational and psychological scholarship was going in the same direction, promoting relationship-based yet individually managed careers. Since the 1970s there has been increased attention to networking and the mobilization of affect and emotion, primarily in the academic fields of industrial psychology, organizational management and human resource management. For example, the extensive use of psychological test Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) by businesses after 1975 (Hogan, 2007) and the discovery of “emotional intelligence” in the 1990s contributed to increased attention to human relations and how people engage, communicate, and relate to each other (i.e., network) (Hochschild, 1983). Moreover, the notion of “career” shifted from an organizational career with life-time employment to a more fluid, flexible career (Jennings, 1971) in which changing jobs is not only acceptable but expected. This development started at higher management positions and trickled down to white collar workers and even blue collar positions over the years. Scholars describe this change in the nature of employment and career from a bounded, organizational career towards a “boundaryless” one. While the former defines the old organizational work culture where organizations were responsible for an individual’s career, the latter describes a trajectory in which the individual is responsible for his/her own career (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999; Sullivan & Baruch, 2009).

In this new era of boundaryless careers, networking—who you know—is considered an essential

Both the self-help literature, and organizational and psychological scholarship on careers state that networking is an activity that every working person must do, whether employed or unemployed, in order to further career opportunities in an economy within which production itself is networked out. This position underlies new attempts to institutionalize networking, for example via networking events for professionals organized by Chambers of Commerce and networking platforms constructed by companies like Editorial Intelligence, which promotes “smart networking” to build and manage careers. TED Talks have experts giving speeches to auditoriums full of people about how to effectively network, and there are even cruises that allow professionals to spend time together.

In addition to telling people how to network, literature and institutions promoting networking create a market for themselves by repeating the claim that most jobs are obtained through networks. Career experts claim that 70-80% of all jobs are filled via networking (for example Collamer, 2013 in Forbes; Kaufman, 2011 in NPR; Rothberg, 2013 in College Recruiter). However, there are few credible sources for this data for most sectors. The company surveys cited in such claims reflect perceptions of hiring authorities often in major corporations, not necessarily either actual hiring practices or experiences of job seekers. Nevertheless, an industry has emerged around advising people on how to network. One element of this industry is career workshops for job seekers. Based on fieldwork I conducted, which will be the focus of this remainder of this article, such workshops draw heavily on these authoritative discourses to teach people why and how they should network.
Methods and Sample

This research is based on 13 months of ethnography, including participant observation and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2012 and December 2013 in Tucson, a medium sized city with nearly one million inhabitants in the Southwestern United States. The city’s unemployment rate at the time of the fieldwork was representative of the country: 6.8% compared to the national level of 7.4%. The city offers a diverse opportunities for white collar professionals particularly in fields such as health care, information technology, military technology, higher education, aeronautics, and tourism.

Participant Observation at Career Workshops

The career advice literature is widespread in American society via newspapers, Internet, books, or people providing advice they read or heard somewhere. Yet, career workshops are the places where networking discourse is most explicitly articulated, where one can observe how a relatively understudied population—college-educated job-seekers—engage and respond to this discourse in practice. For this reason, the data presented here mainly derives from the participant observation data documented in career workshops. Participant observation was conducted at all five organizations that offered career workshops in this medium sized city. The organizations include a non-profit, university, governmental agency, faith-based career center, and a public county library. Between the five organizations, I attended career workshops (N=79). Table 1 illustrates the details of the five organizations offering career workshops. The target population of this research was job seekers between 30-65 years old with a minimum of two years of college education. For this reason, the main research site was the non-profit which focused on “professionals” in a vague sense, generally referring to people with a college degree. This
organization, which I refer to as the Professional Job Club, organized weekly workshops that lasted three hours, providing more time compared to other workshops for participants to discuss issues pertinent to their job search and give weekly accounts of their experiences and progress with networking processes.

The career workshops that I attended at the university usually lasted an hour, and were geared toward people with a master’s degree level of education or higher; however, these workshops were irregular. Because of the age inclusion criteria for the participants in this research, I did not attend workshops that targeted undergraduate students. The governmental agency’s workshops were inclusive of a large variety of people from entry-level job seekers to professionals in many disciplines, used some training packages, and lasted about an hour. After a new participant expressed her discomfort with me conducting research there, I discontinued my participation in this organization. The faith-based career center was rather obscure, mainly serving their congregation despite being open to public. I only learnt about them towards the end of my fieldwork. They had training packages in which retired volunteers led the weekly workshops. Many of the participants in this organization also had high school degrees. Lastly, a public library in a middle to upper-middle class neighborhood provided space for a career coach to conduct free employment workshops; however, these were also irregular and infrequently attended, which limited my participation.
Table 1. Characteristics of organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Geared Toward</th>
<th>Meetings Attended</th>
<th>Frequency of Meetings</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Duration of a Workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>White-collar professionals</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, open discussions, activities, guest speakers</td>
<td>180 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Master's degree and above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Weekly or Biweekly</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers, some training package</td>
<td>60-90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, training package, some discussion, activities</td>
<td>240 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, the information and activities in all of the workshops had similarities, yet the non-profit provided the most time for participants to discuss job seeking issues more in-depth. This allowed me to collect detailed and extensive data on: job seekers talking about their job seeking and employment experiences, other participants providing feedback for the other attendees, and career experts/service providers trying to delve deeper into the job search debriefing sessions.

I actively participated in the career workshops I observed, when appropriate, by making elevator speeches, joining activities, asking questions, and giving and receiving feedback. In addition, I audio-recoded sessions, took very detailed notes during the course of the workshops with time-stamps, coded these notes in a qualitative research software, and transcribed a sample of those. In addition to interviews, I had also opportunity to speak with and/or observe over 200
people coming to these workshops. I excluded young adults and elderly as they introduce unique dynamics that fall outside of the purview of this study.

**In-depth interviews**

To gain a more in-depth perspective on participants’ perceptions and experiences with job networking, I supplemented the participant observation with 53 in-depth interviews with both college-educated job seekers (n=40) and career experts (n=13). Interviewees were recruited using a mix between convenience and snowball sampling methods, as there is no formal sampling frame available for this group. Also, college-educated job-seekers are a relatively hidden group as they are less open about sharing their under- and unemployment status with people outside of their immediate circle, meaning close family and friends. Many of the participants would extend their employment status information primarily to hiring authorities and recruiters as they can assist them in their job search. Thus, the career workshops are the best venues to locate this group. The bulk of the interviewees (25 out of 40) were recruited from the workshops in which I participated. To diversify the sample to those who do not attend employment workshops, I recruited 15 additional job seekers using snowball sampling from the core interviewees (n=6), recruited via the, professional networking site LinkedIn (n=7), and attendance at networking mixer events (n=2). All job seekers interviewed were invited to participate in the research, paying close attention to diversity of sampling in terms of age; employment, marital and homeownership status; and the economic sector they experienced in. Demographics of job seeking interviewees are given in Table 2.
Table 2 Group 1. (Job seekers) demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Job seekers)</th>
<th>N=40</th>
<th>Employment Status During Interview Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60% -Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40% -Underemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Expects unemployment in near future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Mean=46</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Early retired</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>82.5% -Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Bachelor's</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.5% -Multiple jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Master's</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30% -Expects unemployment in near future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Some college</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10% -Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-PhD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Associate's</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5% -Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeownership</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td>-No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Single</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Divorced</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Married</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All the interviews were conducted face-to-face, semi-structured, audio recorded, and lasted 1 to 3 hours. The topics covered were personal background, people’s view of past employment trends, last full-time job, current job-search process, lifestyle changes, average day, class identity, demographics and personal economic indicators such as childcare and elderly care expenses, past and present income, car and home ownership, and debt.

In order to understand career experts’ view of job-search process and job seekers, I interviewed 13 career experts in town who are providing advice to job seekers in their search. These interviews were face-to-face, semi-structured, and lasted 1-2 hours. Demographics of career expert interviewees are given in Table 3. The career experts interviewed were either
associated with the workshops as facilitators, volunteers or guest speakers, or referred to me by the job seekers. The predominance of females in this group potentially signals this domain as a helping profession.

Table 3 Group 2 (Career experts) demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2 (Career experts)</th>
<th>N=13</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Male</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Mean=52</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Following data collection, I conducted computer-assisted qualitative data analysis to code participant observation and interview data. Initial codes were based on expectations regarding varieties of networking discourse which included, non-career related social networks (family, friends, and acquaintances), and career-specific networking discourse (and other phenomena of interest for the larger study). These codes were iteratively adapted in the course of data analysis. The final set of codes used for this paper are career-specific networking discourse. I particularly attended to congruencies and differences with the authoritative discourse on job networking described in the previous section, based on analysis of the popular self-help career advice books and articles on media, along with scholarly publications on career advising and networking.

Findings

Career Workshops in a Medium Sized City
On a sunny Wednesday morning, people start trickling into a classroom for the weekly workshops of the Professional Job Club (PJC), a non-profit organization. The PJC is one of many establishments in the United States (U.S.) aimed at helping primarily college educated under- and unemployed Americans find jobs and gain career development skills. The volunteer presenter, Allison, a professional recruiter and career coach, organizes the front table with papers: a sign-up sheet, job hunting weekly score cards, assessment of job-search performance sheets, behavioral interview questions, job hunt strategy flowcharts and brochures for other resources in town. While some participants are regulars, others are new, trying to figure out if they are in the right place. After a brief conversation, Allison welcomes the participants and introduces the meeting’s agenda: weekly success and failure stories, and personal branding statements. The rest of the meeting consisted of participants giving feedback to each other, a group activity and lastly a guest speaker. Then Allison starts her presentation with an emphasis on networking as one of the most important ways to find gainful employment:

Getting started must haves: It is imperative for those of you who are new to our search that one of the key things that is going to support your success will be networking….There is something called the Hidden Job Market and… for most people I believe when you first launched your job search, you may not be aware that anywhere from 50-70% of positions are filled via back door methods… could be as high as 80 to 85% depending on the geography or industry that you are part of but, 50% is certain, another 30 to 35% are filled with inside candidates, and as much as 75 to potentially 85% using back channel methods. What that means is, you know somebody, who puts in a good word for you and some of your searches may be well that kind of a search where your candidacy is going to be best viewed as a result of someone fiercely supporting you, someone who knows you work well and that you are experienced.4

3 Pseudonyms are used in this article to protect the anonymity of individuals and organizations. Also, some of the personal identifying information has been changed with no effect to the meaning of utterances.
4 Because natural conversation can be choppy and ungrammatical as well as voice record quality can be low, I have edited certain parts of the quotations to the best of my ability without changing meanings.
Allison’s above presentation is common in other career workshops whether geared towards people who are looking for entry level jobs or towards college educated professionals. Workshops like the ones at the PJC aim to teach people not only how to effectively search for a job but also how to cultivate relationships while employed so that a person can make strategic career decisions for the next job and stay employed throughout one’s lifetime, albeit most likely not with the same employer. Thus, networking is not only taught as something to be consciously done while seeking a job, but it also must be done regularly and consciously in a neoliberal economy as a result of the constant anticipation to optimize life (Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009; Rose & Miller, 2008).

Allison’s emphasis on networking at the PJC is very strategic. The Internet is full of job ads and a lot of applications are completed entirely online. Many job seekers spend hours upon hours applying for jobs, modifying their resumes and crafting cover letters, yet they hardly hear anything back from employers. The job-application process has become so complex and convoluted, with employers making it harder for job seekers to contact hiring authorities to ask questions. Job seekers call this the “black hole.” One participant who regularly sends out applications and tries to follow up on the process describes his challenge: “Follow up is our biggest problem. We do not know how much to follow up. We do not know who to follow up [with]. It boils down to the networking. People set up road blocks and how do you get over it? I have an interview with HR [Human Resources] but how do you talk to real people?” Job seekers are frustrated that they do not know if the hiring authorities have even seen their application. By providing job seekers with some cold hard data (however accurate) on how most people get their jobs, the presenter responds to a common frustration among job seekers and also informs new participants that they need to do more than just apply for jobs.
In the workshops I attended, networking can potentially be any activity that brings one into contact with other people, not just going to professional meetings or pre-arranged networking mixers. But not every relation will intrinsically be considered networking. One’s ability to leverage relations in some way or another (e.g., getting a job, getting an interview, or getting some information about an opening) can make a relation a network. It is not that networks are basis of getting jobs, but a certain way of networking can lead to finding a job and career advancement. Cultivating and leveraging relations are the hard parts of networking.

Gordon, a 43-year-old male, is one of the most active members of the career workshops in town. He is very organized and keeps all of the business cards he accumulates stacked in his portfolio. Unlike many other participants who attend these workshops, Gordon is usually dressed in a suit. He took an early retirement from the military as he did not want to relocate again. His wife is a medical assistant and they have three children living with them, one who has a disability. Their house’s market value is less than what they owe to the bank, but Gordon and his wife opted out of a short sale as he does not want to lose his security clearance, which would be asset for his job search. Gordon got more offers in 6 months than any of the other participants in this study. Within a six month period, Gordon applied to 80 jobs by re-crafting each one of his resumes and cover letters, which he showed me on his laptop during one of the workshops. Even with all of his effort, he only managed to get seven interviews, which many job seekers consider a big success. Notably, two months after I interviewed him, Gordon accepted a job he found online, one that came with a six figure salary. He also got two other offers without any personal connections. Yet during the course of his search, he pointed to networks as essential. I asked Gordon what information about the job search he did not know before coming to the career workshops:
Networking. A lot of people… a lot of military people that come out really do believe that almost all jobs are posted online... I don’t think they realize the amount of work it takes to network... So I think the PJC really helped me out in that aspect. And they do tell you that in military transition assistance… that networking is key to getting a job but they do not really show you how. They really don’t.

The main problem Gordon pointed out is that at the beginning of their job hunt, many job seekers truly believe that most jobs are posted online, meaning a job opening is available to the public, thus open to fair market competition. This leads people to believe that whoever qualifies and applies should get the job. But career experts tell otherwise. In a Wall Street Journal article, a founder of a recruitment company recites similar numbers as do career experts in town: 80% of jobs are not publicly advertised (Nishi, 2013). This data is commonly mentioned by career experts to justify the importance of networking; however the Bureau of Labor Statistics’ Job Openings and Labor Turnover Survey (JOLTS) dis-confirms it (Hansen, 2009). For example, in 2014 JOLTS data shows 54,952,000 openings and 58,684,000 hires (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). The percentage difference is only 6.5%, far from the claimed 80%. Yet, networking has become such a buzz activity that numbers that are potentially valid mainly for high status jobs are circulated to all job seekers.

For Gordon, “the amount of work it takes to network” means putting oneself out there, engaging with people one does not know, having a positive attitude, being enthusiastic and having the willingness to help people with the hope that it may be reciprocated one way or another. Job seekers are asked to commodify and market themselves by being overt and plastic, and fitting themselves into what the market envisions as good. Changing oneself in line with market forces, yet at the same time staying “true” to oneself can be seen as a paradox. In the self-help career advice book Unlock the Hidden Job Market, which is often referenced in career workshops, Duncan Mathison and best-selling author Martha Finney (2010:94) urge people to
“network without sounding phony, lame, or desperate”. While Mathison and Finney admit that people equate networking to being phony, lame, and desperate, they claim this is because people do not know how to network properly.

Job seekers are told to create and assume desirable professional identities at all times, because one does not know who is connected to whom. In the next example, a participant, Ethan, gets a job as a result of talking to a stranger during a book fair. The job is in a totally different field than that in which he is educated and worked in for the last 20 years. Ethan, a 52 year old white male with a master’s degree in the sciences who is fluent in Spanish, has been a regular attendee of two career workshops in where I conducted fieldwork. After 6 months of unemployment and another 6 months of working part-time as a sales clerk with no benefits at a major retail store in customer service, Ethan came to the career workshop with some good news. He had found a full time job with benefits in a young and prestigious company as a customer service representative at their branch in town and told the group how he found the job:

I will start off by saying that the way I got this job is networking. I would not even know about it. What happened was I went to a book festival and I was talking to this woman about restaurants in town… She gave me her contact information, and I took it home… And my mom saw the name, and said "I know her, I went to school with her." So then my mom called up her friend, and they started talking, and I had mentioned that I was looking for a job, but I had said I was looking for a job in water management and it did not ring any bells for this woman … Then she said "My husband works at this great place! Let's get them together!" So her husband sent me an email, "I understand that you are interested in this company and it is a great place to work and send me your resume and I will sent it to HR", so he did!"… A couple of weeks later I got an email from HR saying "We would like to interview you".

Ethan eventually got this position with the company, which had nothing to do with his education or his professional work experience. He has been working there for the last two years.

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5 Some White Americans in career workshops were convinced that anybody who speak Spanish could easily find a job in the state where there is a high Hispanic American population.
His story is an example of one of the most important aspects about the job search that career experts emphasize: networking. Coming to career workshops for over 6 months, Ethan believes any informal contact can turn into a job opportunity. Speaking in line with the career experts, Ethan urges people to be aware of one’s attitudes and self-projection even during a brief chat about restaurants at a book fair. Stories like Ethan’s become so iconic that career experts repeat these over and over to convince job seekers to network.

“I Just Don’t Like to Sell Myself”

Despite job seekers acknowledging the importance of networking, they are often resistant to the idea. One of the reasons people dislike networking is that it is associated with image of a “salesman” in the U.S., who is seen as dishonest, superficial and not genuine. For example, in a basic Google image search, more than half of the first page results on “salesman” are negative ranging from sly and flighty to overly extroverted and devilish. This is part of a larger trend where not only job seekers but also modern workers in general are asked to take on the qualities of a salesman (Cremin, 2003). Career experts continuously tell job seekers “You are now in sales. Nobody will sell you, you have to sell yourself.” According to career experts, job seeking requires one to be good at sales and marketing, no matter what their job is. In an insecure labor market career experts tell people, “toot your own horn as no one else will do for you”.

One of the participants, Nate, an extroverted while male in his 50s, complained during a workshop, “I think that most of us are doers, not sellers, right? They are trying to get us to be the seller.” This participant is using a royal “they”, positioning “we”—himself and other job seekers—versus “they”—not only employers and hiring authorities, but also implicitly career experts. The job-search and employment processes are seen to be pushing stereotypical image of professionals as sellers, a not so respected persona in the American psyche. Becoming a seller
requires a change in attitude, becoming a more outgoing, shameless, eager, and self-starting person, who is constantly calculating how best to approach people and leverage contacts. The seller has the qualities of an entrepreneur, a character that is often promoted in neoliberal settings (Freeman, 2014; Yurchak, 2003).

Another participant Ursula (54) is also in line with Nate. Ursula is an empty-nester and married to a research scientist working for the federal government. She has a graduate education, but she worked for a mental institution over a decade with around a $35,000 salary. She was content in her job until she was injured by a patient. Unlike many other job seekers, Ursula is economically stable and does not really need a job. When she and her husband wanted to buy a house and needed a down payment, her well-off and educated parents gave them money for the whole house. Now, they own two homes without a mortgage and Ursula has great health insurance via her husband’s federal job, not to mention one of her kids is making above $300,000 as a corporate attorney. The career experts and other participants only know Ursula’s past employment, and nothing else as she does not talk about it. Her usual attire of a worn t-shirt and jeans also gives a working class image, which is far from the truth. Her job search is not urgent, unlike others, and she can afford to be not shy about showing her irritation of the whole premise of “selling the self”:

Presenter: Most of us does not think ourselves as selling ourselves. BUT on the job search, you are.

Ursula: I just don’t like to sell myself.

Presenter: I got that. ..But you have to be in the job search.

The presenter brushes off Ursula’s critique. Her “dislike” does not really matter vis-a-vis employers. It is not employers who have to adjust themselves in this context, but the job seekers.
And the career development literature and workshops provide only a limited space for venting on one’s frustration about the labor market. Ursula and Nate’s dislike can be situated in a larger context in which white collar jobs among college educated Americans have traditionally been salaried positions. Attempts to make white collar professionals more entrepreneurial and responsible for their own careers meet resistance when framed as sales, which is usually associated with selling a product, not marketing the self. In the extreme case “selling the self” is degradingly and literally associated with slavery and prostitution in everyday life.

Another example of distaste for marketing the self can be found in reactions to workshops for practicing a personal branding statement, which is also known as the “elevator speech.” The purpose of these personal branding statements is to make job seekers think about what they can contribute to a business, and practice this branding statement for networking purposes. One participant protested during an interview that he had never heard branding for humans before attending these career workshops, but only for cattle. Such statements similarly show that job seekers are not comfortable with some of the advice they are getting. However in the career development, and job-search context, the idea of “company of one” is promoted (Lane, 2011), thus marketing and sales are what job seekers are often told to do.

**How to Network: “Get out of the House, Get Away from the Computer”**

To resolve job seekers’ dislike of the idea of networking, career experts not only tell people to network, but also teach them how to do it. The very first strategy is suggesting job seekers to turn their everyday lives into job-search opportunities. This requires re-imagining and re-tooling of everyday activities and spaces such as shopping, library, book fairs, workshops, neighborhood and travel into a venue for networking and job search. Thus, non-work becomes work in this process.
For job seekers who know networking is important, the first choice of venue for networking is usually job fairs and networking mixers organized by professional associations and chambers of commerce. However, soon job seekers with college degrees realize that the majority of the job fairs in town are for entry level jobs with minimum pay, not necessarily for college educated job seekers. Mixers by professional associations and chambers of commerce sound good at first, but job seekers get intimidated by the crowd and the pressure to find a job. Also, chambers of commerce events tend to be populated by business owners who are trying to promote their businesses (read: networking) rather than having jobs to offer. In the excerpt below, one job seeker is frustrated about job fairs and asking for more information about ways to network. The presenter tells him and others how to network by meeting people in their everyday routine such as in a grocery store or a library.

Participant: Well-paying salary positions are … unbelievably hard to come by and the job fairs… are all entry level… I go in there, press them about other jobs beyond the entry level. Some of them open the door a little bit, let me know what else is available and I had quite a few of them but I have gotten almost zero feedback on any of them… I mean you know job fairs, send the resumes from home, that is a more intense use of my time doing that and I just now started getting together with friends or going to a mixer in the evening, something with the chamber or whatever it may be. What other ideas are there, what other things are working as far as, you know, networking is concerned?

Presenter: Essentially I think you need to step back and be strategic about networking. …What is the goal you wanna get out of creating those relationships? How do you find those people? How do you get in front of them? Then go to places where people who have jobs are. In other words, most unemployed people do not go to grocery store after work hours; that is when everybody is in a grocery store. Why would you not go to a grocery store at the same time all those people with jobs are in the grocery store? You never know you are gonna run into someone who is gonna make a difference in your search. So you want to constantly be putting yourself where you mingle with those employed folks. Go to the law library in Jack's case. Being present there, talking, checking up with librarians, checking up with other people that are in the table. ... People who are additional resources, who may have just talked to another job seekers or whom may have talked to another player who is an employer. You never know. You just gotta constantly be pushing yourself to get out of the house, to get away from the computer.
Career experts often emphasize the importance of starting networking first from one’s inner circles and then expanding into acquaintances, neighbors and ex-co-workers, and then suggest job seekers to meet new people in everyday life in grocery stores, public libraries, banks and hospitals. Instead of compartmentalizing the job-search to networking mixers and online job applications, career experts tell job seekers to turn their everyday life into a whole job-search event, seeing every single individual as a potential source of employment. Instead of going to the grocery store at the time when it is much less crowded and easier to shop, the presenter suggests that people shop at the busiest time of the day so that a consumption-oriented activity can be turned into a production.

The demand to turn one’s everyday life into a rent-seeking economic activity fits with a large set of neoliberal practices such as self-optimization and self-actualization while economizing personal, social and political life (Foucault, 2009; Rose & Miller, 2008). Individuals are supposed to be responsible for their own careers and asked to be constantly alert and on for their own good. This requires a change of habits, everyday routine and mind set where individuals have to push themselves emotionally and be extroverted, cheerful, helpful and communicative. Individuals have to be expectant and hopeful in every interaction, and prepare themselves to be in a good mood, open to people and willing to be helpful to strangers. However, it takes a lot of work to be “hoping” and “expectant.” Everyday life is actively constructed as a podium for individuals to present and sell themselves for market competition. In this context, social life is construed as a work. When unemployed and underemployed, social life is even more work.

There is, however, a danger of “networking too much,” meaning networking without a clear plan. James is a well-connected HR manager who helps job seekers whether or not they are
looking for a job in his company. During an interview at his office, he warned me about this and mentioned that some people are doing too much networking without finding a job:

My thing is I am not a big networker after hours. My thing is I do not really like the mixers, and happy hours and all that kind of stuff. I think that is more of a social thing and if I am looking for a job, I do not need to make more friends that I can drink with and talk about golf with. I need to align myself with people that are in positions that are gonna help me achieve my goals and you know, I need to focus on my objective which is finding a job… I see a lot of people spending a lot of time going to a lot of functions and… they need to be more selective about that …if I want to find an HR job, I better be networking with people in the industry, but I see people…floundering. I think they feel like they need to do something…do everything. You know it is like, "Oh there is networking here, there is networking here." These functions take a lot of time and a lot of energy and it can be for nothing. One gentleman I talked to, he had some very high power roles. …he was talking about all this networking he was doing and he was unemployed. I asked, "So what value did you find going to these meetings?" and he is like, "nothing." And I am like, "Then why did you?" "Well, because it is the thing to do. You are supposed to do that.” And I said, "Well I do not necessarily agree. I think you could have a lunch, coffee with a few key people and that should be really all you need… align yourself with the right people…that to me is a better value to this time that you spent.” Spend more time on LinkedIn, spend more time on connecting with people that are especially in that role he was looking for.

This HR manager’s complaint about “people networking too much” points out that not every socialization, even strictly professional ones, can be actually construed as a productive networking opportunity. One can meet many new people during the job search, but it is leveraging these relations that really counts. All the hype about networking perpetuated by career experts and self-help literature pushes some people to network too much, and justify it by saying “that is the thing to do.” James’ solution is however is not to challenge the networking hype, but to fine tune it by doing it better, being more focused and targeted.

Yet the above example is a rarity in the sense that most people do not network a lot; thus career experts do not often complain about “too much networking.” While many job seekers understand and accept the value of networking, many are shy to engage people that they do not know for the purpose of finding a job. A very common complaint job seekers make in career
workshops was that employers rarely visit these workshops. Job seekers who are shy to network on their own ask career experts to bring more employers to workshops so they can ask questions, hear their opinions, and maybe find an opportunity to introduce themselves. Many job seekers also prefer not to spend time with each other outside of the workshops. One participant mentioned that unemployment is already depressing and she’d rather spend her time with employed people, just like one of the career experts suggested, “Meet employed people in grocery stores.” Yet, many people do end up spending significant time with other underemployed and unemployed people, with whom they share an affinity of circumstances and available time, even though this does not lead to solidarity.

In order to break this cycle, career experts advise people to conduct “informational interviews” with key people just like James the HR manager mentioned in the previous quote. An informational interview is a 15-30 minute meeting job seekers conduct with key employers to learn about an industry, culture of an organization, career trajectories, and also to get a referral. The term was coined by Richard Bolles. In order to get an informational interview, job seekers are told to research and find an employed professional, a key person in an industry, and send them a message that they want to take 15-20 minutes of their time to learn about their career trajectory. To convince employed professionals to accept these requests, job seekers need to emphasize that they are looking for a job but they are not asking one from them, thus taking the burden off of the key player.

In the long term, informational interviews are supposed to help job seekers to learn more about an industry (i.e., “competitive intelligence”). Within this context, career experts considers this as a benefit of unemployment and underemployment. The majority of the job seekers are assumed to have free time to gain information and train themselves, for staying in one job for
long time might have potentially pigeonholed a worker, and thus prevented the updating of one’s skill set. Another benefit of informational interviews is the potential access to future job openings in companies where key players are working in

The emphasis on soft skills, networking skills particularly, ultimately gives the impression that job search is not necessarily a very rational process despite the millions of dollars spent for algorithms and software programs to hire people. Some scholars point out that job search is a chemistry game (Finlay & Coverdill, 2002; Sharone, 2013) and is geared towards the gut feeling of hiring authorities (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). Even though job seekers understand and agree with the market realities, the “marketing self” via networking is not seen positively by them, and career experts have to do more rationalization to convince people how to network.

**Volunteering as a Good Way to Network**

To counter some of the negative images on networking, career experts do cultural work to convince job seekers that networking is not just egotistical, and networking does not necessarily put the networker in a needy and “loser” position. Networking is presented as getting connected to people, exchanging ideas, helping each other out as opposed to what is often seen as cold, business-like networking, which people in suits are assumed to do. Instrumentalizing and turning volunteering into a networking opportunity not only turns non-work into work, but also amalgamates social good with personal profit. This strategy is in line with neoliberal vision of life that is maximized and measured based on market conditions in order to create value (Harvey, 2005).

Volunteering in various organizations is one of the activities that the career workshops promote in order for college educated job seekers to network for career and employment
purposes. One career expert who in the past worked in a Fortune 500 company gives an example that it is traditional for the regional head of IBM in the state to be a board member of the United Way, a coalition of charitable organizations. This expert is emphasizing that key business people are involved in non-profit work. This points out the importance of volunteering not just for the sake of the betterment of the community and gaining new skills, but also for finding a job and advancing in one’s career. Here is another example from a career workshop funded by the government:

Continuing with the idea of networking, let's talk about volunteering... Why volunteer? Networking. [Participants are chuckling] Yeah it could! Volunteering is a great way to learn new skills, OK? You wanna get into a different field? You do not have the skills? Just need skill development? Volunteer. Right? It is a great way to find out if you like a new field. Do you wanna contribute to your community, obviously, right? You wanna give back to the community. And finally, da da da da! Network. Network for possible future employment… A couple years back there was a woman in class who was all about sustainability. She was so passionate about sustainability she was volunteering in two organizations. One of them wrote a grant and she was hired. Shall I say more?…If you are going to an agency to volunteer, because you wanna get something out of it, let them know. Tell them what your expectations are, so that you can get the kind of experience you want. You can get really solid training and significant guidance and feedback. Why not volunteer? Yeah, just a few hours of a week, right? …Get out of your house!

In the above excerpt, I saw participants’ chuckling as a surprise reaction to the forced link between networking and volunteering. The first one is seen as a business activity for profit, while the latter is seen as a civic activity for the social good. The presenter is trying to shore up support by asking questions to which the answers are obvious, and nobody will likely challenge her. To support her argument, she gives an example of a woman who got a job out of volunteering, making it sound like an easy and logical trajectory. The presenter here is trying to explicitly expand the realm of work into the social relations such as volunteering where the gainful employment itself is often not seen as primary.
This increasing demand to network is taking place within a domineering service economy, which often requires emotional labor that is associated with feminine dispositions and demeanors such as being deferential, and friendly (Nixon, 2009). Volunteering itself can have feminine connotations through helping and care. On the one hand, volunteering can also be framed as a masculine endeavor as career experts are asking job seekers to be assertive about networking by regularly meeting new people and, as in the case of above example, by being upfront about expectations in volunteering. According to Kingfisher (2002) the whole neoliberal idea of responsible, autonomous, and entrepreneurial individual is the idealized western masculine self.

The volunteering-networking combo is also a nexus of relative privilege. Volunteering is largely known to be a middle class activity in the United States (Musick, Wilson, & Bynum, 2000; Smith, 1994) and shapes people’s self-identity (Nakano, 2000). It is not that volunteering has nothing to do with gainful employment and the job search particularly among middle class Americans. Young adults do volunteer for self- and career-oriented goals, such as to get into good colleges, or to build resumes and skill sets. But as they get older, they tend to move into more community-oriented volunteering (Janoski & Wilson, 1995). In this sense, career experts not only are asking middle class adults to revert back to young adulthood in their view of volunteering, but also are pushing the limits of work further into the everyday social relations by urging unemployed and underemployed adults to be explicit about the amalgamation of networking and volunteering. A number of scholars have noted how related socially constructed distinctions are increasingly blurred in a neoliberal economy, such as production-consumption (Bauman, 2007; Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010), employment-free labor (Terranova, 2004), public-private (McGee, 2005). I similarly see career experts’ discourse of “volunteering for networking”
as an attempt to actively blur an ideologically fixed distinction between personal profit and social good, and to align social engagement with the market.

While volunteering is presented as a good way to network for employment purposes, one’s ability to volunteer depends on one’s resources especially during underemployment and unemployment. Many college educated job seekers are somewhat cushioned either via savings or family support. Most participants in these workshops are in relatively good shape in most financial areas. For example, one participant has $30,000 of credit card debt, but he also has a $90,000 retirement investment which is above the U.S. average of $60,000. Another participant, who was on the verge of a short sale, has $8,000 in the bank and a two year old Toyota Highlander. Yet another participant is receiving help from his retired parents to pay for rent and food. In brief, volunteering is a viable option for many college educated Americans to network.

Volunteering has an overtone of “empowerment” as it situates job seekers as “givers,” not “takers,” and potentially looks easier to do. In the excerpt below, a presenter is explaining the importance of networking and participants are almost evangelically agreeing and giving more supportive examples:

Presenter: Never underestimate the value of meeting people in all walks of life, every single person who is employed can possibly open that door for you. Many business people volunteer. We talked about this over and over again and here….I really love Jonathan's example of being alongside [a director, volunteering] harvesting bufflegrass [an invasive plant] and having that person be a direct lead to someone who is a regional director in an association directly over in his area of expertise. So it works. If you do it. If you take the time to do what you wanna do, it works. And Mario had some successes in that regard, putting himself in a situation, Louise too.

Louise: May I share what happened?

Presenter: Yeah please.

Louise: I am singing at local Blues series on Tuesday nights and…last week… I covered for Jim [a friend]. And after it was all done, Jim said “OK Louise, so you are interested in
non-profit industry and I will send your name to a president of a non-profit. Can we have a lunch and go visit the president?"

Presenter: Super start, super. Huge networking opportunity. … So volunteer for organizations that you have personal interest in, as in Louise’s and Jack’s case. When you do things that lighten you up, you are more engaging, you are more fun… you are more comfortable cause you are in your skin and it just makes creating relationships that much easier so keep that in mind. …it is the distraction of helping others who are less fortunate, it is huge. Getting outside of your own head [like] thinking about your own things, instead you are thinking about someone else. [A participant is raising her hand] Megan?

Megan: Oh that is how I got into nursing in the first place. I was in graduate school and I started volunteering in the university hospital and they offered me a full time job.

In the job search context, volunteering is both giving free labor while simultaneously achieving personal gain, such as an increase in one’s charisma and thus social standing. This strategy is not new, but increasingly becoming common practice. Companies such as YouTube and LinkedIn give out free services to expand their revenue base (Ritzer & Jurgenson, 2010). User-consumers share their free labor creating content, which increases the brand value and brings advertising income to these companies (Terranova, 2000). Individuals can volunteer their labor, get more personal satisfaction, and if they are selling services, this can promote their own business as well. Sociologist Adam Arvidsson described this process using Max Weber’s term “ethical rationality”:

Indeed, one gives to the community in order to increase one’s own standing and charisma, or the size of one’s networks. To use Weberian terms, it is …an ‘ethical rationality’: act in a way that maximises your charisma and community standing by maximising your productive contribution to the community. At the more extreme end, this tendency towards ‘self-interested sharing’ takes the form of ‘networking’ or ‘personal branding’ in which the very point of creating community ties and offering experiences is the cultivation of charisma and social capital. (2009:21)

By volunteering, one gives out free labor to increase one’s social standing in the hope that one can capitalize on that later. Career experts tell people to help others out on a regular
basis. For example, Ron, a former Corporate Financial Officer and now job seeker, is a regular at the Professional Job Club (PJC). He occasionally acts as a career expert during the workshop, giving advice to other participants. During one of the workshops, the presenter asks Ron to share his experience of attending a networking event in a major city nearby. Ron warns people that he talks about non-business things during conversation not to scare people off. After a brief chat, he asks for people’s business cards and makes a note on it about the conversation. When he is back home, he writes emails to people he just met. He reminds them about the conversation they had and sends them a thank you note, along with an article that the receiver might find interesting for their business use. This “helping others” (read: free labor) by sending people articles is a commonplace suggestion in career workshops for networking or during the hiring processes. The question job seekers are supposed to ask is “How can I help?”\textsuperscript{6} reminiscent of a call-center when this disguises another question, “How can you help me?” In their attempt to make networking more accessible, easy, and acceptable, career experts encourage job seekers to modify themselves to become enterprising, and also explicitly blur the boundaries between social good with personal profit.

**Conclusion**

With particular attention to the volunteering discourse, I have outlined some of the processes in the job search activity that aim to create networking subjects in line with the neoliberal economy. In the career advice industry, everyday life is actively constructed as a podium for individuals to present and “sell” themselves for market competition. This is an extension of capitalist labor that does not stop during the job search. In this context, social life is

\textsuperscript{6} Deborah Cameron (2008:150) considers the question “How may I help you?” over “Can I help you?” as part of the institutionalized “top-down talk.” While “Can I help you?” is open to a negative answer, ”How may I help you?” can deflect a negative response and be considered more polite
construed as work. When unemployed and underemployed, social life is even more work. The job seekers are asked to work on themselves to adjust to changes in the market to remain employable. Career experts attempt to convince job seekers to volunteer for job networking purposes. Any resistance is soothed by the “giving” nature of the idea of volunteering.

As I previously mentioned, job related networking in and of itself is not new, yet its promotion and implementation is increasingly becoming explicit and legitimate. Pamela Laird in her book *Pull: Networking and Success since Benjamin Franklin* (2009) shows how success in the U.S. has always depended on connections, despite the myth of “self-made men” that Americans want to believe. Whether it is done under the terms “mentor”, “gatekeeper”, or “role model”, networking has a prominent position in the U.S. context, gently pushed under the hard work ethos. Only in the last couple of decades, networking itself became a definitive practice. During my research, networking is consistently and continually recommended by career experts despite resistance from job seekers. The resistance itself is potentially an attempt to preserve an imagined self who works hard, does not market her/his self, and separates personal profit from social good. Yet, career experts as the trainers of the neoliberal economy are here to orient job seekers to new cultural norms that require blurring of such boundaries. Normalizing and spreading networking throughout everyday life requires a shift in how one thinks about self and others, as well as what it means to volunteer in a neoliberal economy.

Scholars point out that volunteering is promoted as a strategy to partially replace the void government left behind (McMurria, 2008; Muehlebach, 2011). Citizens are urged to volunteer to help other citizens for services previously provided by the government. During career workshops not only are state institutions rarely invoked to solve employment problems, but also potential discontent is directed towards individuals themselves to solve their own problems, and those of
others, by volunteering. Thus, these attempts to fill the government’s void could further exacerbate the already weak social welfare system in the U.S. Assuming “networking is the answer” to unemployment and underemployment may mean that the emphasized priorities for gainful employment in a precarious labor market rests largely on a job seeker’s likeability, cultural fit with the organization, and their ability to build and maintain weak social relationships with anyone who may help them advance their career. These new priorities further individualize the responsibility of employment outcomes and work to remove the employment burden away from government and corporations.
REFERENCES


Abstract

This article examines the discourses around “personality” for job-seeking college educated Americans. Participant observation and interview data reveal that career experts in employment workshops emphasize the importance of changing the self via emotional management to help people find jobs. I argue that career experts frame the job-search process as a personality-modification domain where self-presentation and attitude-change are promoted and normalized for job seekers in the name of uncovering one’s inner passions and qualities. Within this discourse, job seekers are encouraged to produce not only an “authentic” employable self but also a “cultural fit” with hiring authorities and prospective organizations. This new focus on attitude over skills is in line with the changing labor process over the last several decades. Thus, the goal of worker training and professionalization is not only to show that job seekers have certain marketable skills, but that they are a certain kind of person who can fit within a specific organizational culture.

Keywords: Discourse of personality, job searching, emotional management, human subjectivity, career advice
“Fake it until you make it… Fake it ‘til you become it” (Dr. Amy Cuddy in a TED Talk video shown in a career workshop in Arizona)

It is 9am on a brisk February morning in Arizona, and job seekers are slowly making their way into a classroom within a large office building to listen and discuss techniques and strategies to find gainful employment. The weekly employment workshop is provided free through a local non-profit organization, and this week’s topic is “Changing Mindset and Personal Image” given by a volunteer presenter who is a career coach and former human resources (HR) manager. Tables have been arranged in a U shape to facilitate discussion and active listening. Most of the participants are dressed in casual clothes and some are chatting with one another while others are filling out the sign-up sheet that is going around the room. The presentation and discussion we are all waiting to begin is yet another piece of self-help career advice focused on personality modification through emotional management. Today, we are ready to hear about how and why we need to change ourselves to successfully find a job.

Changing one’s self through emotional management is one of the most popular topics in the self-help career advice literature and employment workshops in Arizona. Career advice literature permeates the fabric of American society where it is almost impossible to not be exposed to the ideologies of career development and the broader discourses of emotional management via newspapers, the Internet, social media, books, or people providing different pieces of career advice to others that they have heard or read somewhere. And while the public is constantly exposed to emotional management messages in different domains, one site where
these larger discourses are most explicitly articulated is the free employment workshop, which intentionally provides a space for job-seeking college educated Americans to hear, engage with, and respond to these ideas and practices. To obtain a better understanding of this discourse, I carried out thirteen months of ethnographic research that included participant observation at all five of the organizations that provided free employment workshops in Tucson, Arizona. After providing an in-depth historical look at the literature on subjectivity within the workplace, my goal in this paper is to examine the techniques and discourses deployed through career experts and the self-help literature to shape job seekers as employable selves.

On the projector, the presenter is showing us a short TED Talk video by Harvard Business School professor and social psychologist Amy Cuddy. In the video, Dr. Cuddy promotes doing a “power pose,” an exaggerated posture that involves standing straight, legs shoulder width apart, hands on hip, and chin up. In the background, there is the picture of Wonder Woman, holding this pose. Dr. Cuddy claims that holding this pose for a couple of minutes will biologically change one’s mood and make one more confident, at least for a little while. If practiced regularly, this pose, she asserts, can eventually change people’s self and the reaction they receive from the outside world. When the video ends, our presenter starts:

It is in our nature to look for bad things, we are wired in. It is from hunter gatherers. Negative encounters leave bad impressions. Not to ignore things but we manage ourselves better when we are in actual situations and don’t dwell in negativity… Part of what we do here is to develop good habits in our job search… As you’ve seen in the TED Talk, new patterns of thought can actually change the physiology of our brain. Of course don’t ignore bad news, it will bite you later but focus on the good side… I want you to focus on an image that is successful. …. I want you to focus on images, what kind of company, what kind of boss you want? When we are in the job search, we forget what we want.

After this speech, the presenter invites us to participate in an activity. She dims the lights and asks us to stand up, put a distance between each other and shut our eyes. She starts reading
from a paper with a calm and story-time voice, and tells us to imagine ourselves on top of a tall tower, in the middle of a terrace. She asks us to go to the edge without rails and face down without opening our eyes. We are on the edge, looking down. The presenter wants us to feel the fear and terror. Then she wants us to step back and imagine we have wings. After a brief silence, she asks us to step to the edge again; this time with the anticipation that we are not going to be afraid since we have wings now. She asks us to jump and fly, going wherever we want. When the exercise is over, she explains that she wants us to feel the power of imagining and how it can change our own selves, and eventually how this type of thinking could change the job search itself.

The remainder of this workshop contains messaging on how to continually involve ourselves in positive activities, such as volunteering; regularly pushing ourselves to feel gratitude; writing personal recommendations for former colleagues on LinkedIn; and “stop trash talking in our minds.” After some more discussion, the presenter mentions the topic for the upcoming week “Self-Image vs. Desired Image.” She gives an uplifting quote to the group and wishes everyone a good day. The job seekers stand up and gather their belongings, thanking the presenter. A few individuals stay behind to ask her for job search advice, while the rest of the people slowly shuffle out of the room.

In this paper, I question the strong interest of career experts and the self-help career advice literature on talking about and emphasizing the importance of “personality” in the job search. While the term “personality” has its origins in psychological theory, I use the term “personality” in a discursive sense, a stand-in concept utilized by career experts and job seekers to talk about a collection of other terms like character, persona, value, authenticity, chemistry, cultural fit and so on. Explored through the works of Charles Taylor, Anthony Giddens, and
Micki McGee who view self as a project in the making, I argue that career experts frame the job-search process as a personality-modification domain where attitude-change and self-presentation are promoted and normalized for job seekers in the name of uncovering one’s inner passions and qualities so that job seekers can produce not only an “authentic” employable self but also a “cultural fit” with hiring authorities and prospective organizations. This self-making project is in line with the changing labor processes over the last couple of decades, which demand that workers create more of an emotional connection to the workplace. Thus, the purpose of worker training and professionalization is to not only show that you have certain marketable skills, but also to illustrate that you are a certain kind of person -- a team-player, likable and a problem-solver.

**Methodology**

This research is based on thirteen months of ethnography including participant observation and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2012 and December 2013 in Tucson Arizona with nearly 1 million inhabitants. I conducted participant observation at all five organizations that provided employment workshops in this city during the thirteen month timeframe. Table 1 illustrates the details of the five organizations offering career workshops.

The target population of this research was job seekers between 30-65 years old with a minimum of two years of college education. For this reason, the main research site was a non-profit which focused on “professionals” in a vague sense, usually meaning people with a college degree. I actively participated in these workshops, when appropriate, by making personal branding statements, joining activities, asking questions and giving and receiving feedback. I
also conducted interviews with two groups. Group 1 included college-educated job seekers 
\((N=40)\) who have employment experience in a variety of sectors including health care, 
information technology, education, pharmaceuticals, aeronautics, human resources and social 
services. Group 2 included 13 career experts who provide employment advice to job seekers in 
the form of recruiters, human resources personnel, career development workshop conveyors, 
business people, social workers, and outplacement experts. While a discussion of gender is not 
within the purview of this paper, it bares to mentioning that much of the emotional work that is 
encouraged is readily associated with women (Hochschild, 1979), including many of the career 
experts in these workshops.

Table 1. Characteristics of organizations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Organization</th>
<th>Geared Toward</th>
<th>Meetings Attended</th>
<th>Frequency of Meetings</th>
<th>Format</th>
<th>Duration of a Workshop</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non-profit</td>
<td>White-collar professionals</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, open discussions, activities, guest speakers</td>
<td>180 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University</td>
<td>Master’s degree and above</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Governmental</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Weekly or Biweekly</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion, guest speakers, some training package</td>
<td>60-90 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faith-based</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>Weekly</td>
<td>Presentations, training package, some discussion, activities</td>
<td>240 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>Everybody</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Irregular</td>
<td>Presentations, some discussion</td>
<td>60 minutes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>79</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2. Group 1 (Job seekers) demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 1 (Job seekers)</th>
<th>N=40</th>
<th>Employment Status During Interview Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>60% -Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Male</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>40% -Underemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Mean=46</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Expect unemployment in near future</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Early retired</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>82.5% -Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7.5% -Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5% -Underemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.5% -Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Bachelor's</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>52.5% -Multiple jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Master's</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30% -Expect unemployment in near future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Some college</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10% -Unknown</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-PhD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5% -Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Single</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Divorced</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>35%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Married</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After providing a brief economic context and an in-depth historical look at the literature on subjectivity within the workplace, my goal is to examine the techniques and discourses deployed through career experts and the self-help literature to shape job seekers as employable selves.

Table 3. Group 2 (Career experts) demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group 2 (Career experts)</th>
<th>N=13</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>85%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Male</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Mean=52</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Economic Shift

To truly understand the reality that job seekers in Tucson Arizona, it is critical to examine some of the socio-economic factors that influence their pursuit of gainful employment. From the 19th century through the mid-20th century, Arizona’s economy mainly focused on resource extraction. However by the 1960s, the state had transformed itself. From the 1960s through the 1980s, the largest employer in Arizona was Motorola with its military electronics, semiconductor and solid systems divisions. Not only were other high-tech manufacturing firms setting up shop in the state, but other national corporations were relocating their corporate headquarters to Arizona due to low wages and low taxes and in return, bringing with them well-paying jobs. Arizona’s economy continued to boom in the 1960s, 1970s and during the early and late 1980s. Tucson where this research was conducted closely followed Arizona’s economic trends.

However, things have changed since then, both for Arizona and the nation. During this research, the unemployment rate in Tucson was 6.8% compare to the national level of 7.4%. By 2015, the one of the biggest employers in this city, as in many American cities, is Walmart, with its army of cheap labor. On top of this, the new job openings across the nation during the Great Recession (2008-2010) were mostly part-time positions with limited or no benefits. While the number of full time jobs has been increasing, in 2015, part-time employment stands at 18%, which is higher than pre-recession levels (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2015). Moreover, nationwide statistics show that while only 27% of all jobs require an associate’s degree or higher, 47% of workers have these degrees, indicating a growing competition for a limited number of well-paying jobs (Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl 2014). Further, while the demand for higher education continues both by the “consumers” and employers regardless of the minimum
educational requirements for available jobs, the median household income declined 7.2% between 1999 and 2014 when adjusted for the inflation (Hart-Landsberg, 2015). Lastly, the hiring process that used to take 12.6 days in 2010 now takes 22.9 days as more and more employers are doing skills tests, personality tests and background checks (Glassdoor, 2015). It has even become common practice by potential employers to ask job candidates to solve problems for the company even before they are hired. During this research, it was not uncommon to witness people searching for jobs for more than six months. These are some of the economic factors job seekers in this city have to face in their pursuit of gainful employment with benefits.

Embracing Workers’ Subjectivity

The focus on human subjectivity in employment processes, particularly the instrumentalization of personality, has a long history. In the first quarter of the 20th century, scientific management (Taylorism) was the main managerial guiding principle of American industrial production, viewing the “man as a machine” and looking primarily at the objective conditions of work (Burawoy, 1979). Human subjectivity and specific personality traits were not necessarily the focus of researchers until Hugo Münsterberg (1913:23), the father of industrial psychology, started searching for “the best possible men,” meaning “the men whose mental qualities make them best fitted for the work.” From the 1920s on, social investigators and psychologists started noticing the impact of workers’ attitudes on production, independent of the material conditions of work (see Williams, 1920).

In the famous Hawthorne studies, psychologists conducted research on workers between 1923 and 1932 at the Hawthorne plant of the Western Electrical Company. Initially the research started with the intention to understand the effects of illumination on workers’ productivity, but
very soon the study turned into a multiyear psycho-social study. The researchers viewed workers as social beings whose emotional bonds with fellow workers, feelings of control over their work and sense of self-worth had an impact on production (Rose, 1999:70-71). The Hawthorne studies formally started the “human relations movement” which advocated the importance of the feelings and sentiments of workers and the social solidarity between employers and employees. The movement became a counterbalance to the rationalism of scientific management. While the movement waned by the 1960s, it was successful in bringing the worker to the center of attention in management theory and practice.

Influenced by Abraham Maslow’s self-actualization theory, industrial psychologists Chris Argyris and Douglas McGregor wrote two influential books respectively: *Personality and Organization: The Conflict between the System and the Individual* (1957) and *The Human Side of Enterprise* (1960). Argyris and McGregor pointed out that management assumes and treats employees as children, as a result employees engage in negative work behaviors. Both authors were critical of the assumptions about human nature at the time, which viewed workers as lazy and unwilling to take responsibility. These authors were influential in shifting the attention of organizational scholarship from differences in personality to contextual causes of human behavior.

Around the same time, in the psychological literature, the use of personality tests were called into question due to inconsistencies in measurement. As a result, they were not seen as particularly helpful or effective to incorporate into hiring practices. In fact, Guion and Gottier (1965:160) concluded that, “it is difficult in the face of this summary to advocate, with a clear conscience, the use of personality measures in most situations as a basis for making employment decisions about people” (also see Mischel, 1968). While personality studies came to a temporary
halt in the 1960s, the Personnel Management field started to transform itself into “Human Resource Management” (shortly HR). HR’s paradigm was simple enough: if workers are happy, healthy and loyal to the organization, profits will rise (Brewis & Jack, 2009). To do so, HR embraced workers’ psyche along with lifestyle, culture, beliefs and health as issues that belong to the workplace and are in need of intervention (Keenoy, 1999; Rose, 1999; Wren & Bedeian, 2009).

**Rise of Personality and Emotional Management**

Meanwhile, during the 1980s, two influential developments in organizational and psychological scholarship occurred, which immensely impacted the rise of personality discourse and its use once again in employment. First, psychologists improved their methods for consistently measuring personality and thus a generally accepted model emerged called the Big 5 Model of Personality. This model focused on five factors: emotional stability, extraversion, openness to experience, agreeableness and conscientiousness. This new model appealed particularly to practicing industrial and organizational psychologists due to its claim that it could predict a workers’ future job performance (Hogan, 2007; Schneider, 2007).

Second, the management literature began emphasizing that each company has its own unique organizational culture, thus pushing companies to pay attention not only to individual workers but also to their interaction with each other and the organization as a whole (Barney, 1986; Schein, 1984). With rising academic as well as business interests in organizational culture, the general criterion of employment shifted from person-job fit to person-organization fit (Herriot & Anderson, 1997). With the cultural turn in the organizational literature, employees were expected to fit into the specific culture of the organization, often meaning a potential
employee’s personality must be already compatible to the existing work environment. During this time, culture in organizational scholarship was instrumentalized to serve as a measure against which potential job candidates were evaluated during the hiring process or existing employees were coaxed to adjust themselves accordingly to fit the organization.

The introduction of “organizational culture” in management scholarship was not without pushback. Hugh Willmott (1993), in an often cited management paper, scrutinized organizational culture discourse for demanding ignorance and slavery from employees through totalitarian and subjugating management systems. Organizational culture works by managing what employees think and feel, not just how they behave. Culturist prescription, according to Willmott (1993:517), “…aspires to extend management control by colonizing the affective domain. It does this by promoting employee commitment to a monolithic structure of feeling and thought, a development that is seen to be incipiently totalitarian.” For Costea et al. (2008) the “cultural turn” in managerial ideology was in fact an appropriation of human subjectivity in which personal traits were instrumentalized for business purposes. Emotional management played a key role here for they are seen as important political vectors in shaping human subjectivity.

The 1990s brought increased attention to emotional management in the work space for various reasons. Studies in psychology and management began showing a relationship between positive disposition and job satisfaction (George & Bettenhausen, 1990; Staw, Bell, & Clausen, 1986). HR practitioners took up work rage problems, tying it to early childhood development issues (DiFruscia, 2012). With the invention and popularization of Emotional Intelligence (Goleman, 1995), emotion increasingly and explicitly became positive management tool to be used in life and for career purposes (Ahmed, 2004). For example, in a popular article titled
“What’s so new about the new economy?” in the Harvard Business Review, the author highlights the importance of emotional management and character:

If the job of the manager in the new economy is to eliminate fear, foster trust, and facilitate the working conversations that create new knowledge, then the authenticity, integrity, and identity of the individual turn out to be the most critical managerial assets (Webber, 1993:25).

In work environments, Arlen Hoschchild (1983:7) coined the term “emotional labor,” which “requires one to induce or suppress feeling in order to sustain the outward countenance that produces the proper state of mind in others.” The service-based economy, which dominates more than 70% of the U.S. economy, requires emotional management that is readily associated with feminine dispositions (Cameron, 2000b; Nixon, 2009). Working is not simply about communicating clearly and concisely, but it requires a positive emotional demeanor that pleases customers to increase their satisfaction and generate a positive environment for work teams to be more productive (Cameron, 2000a).

This demand to involve emotions actively in the employment domain can be seen as an expansion of capitalist discipline, which regulates daily practices, norms and attitudes through cooperation, co-option and repression (Harvey, 1989:123; Ong, 1987:4-5; Thompson, 1967). For Gee et al. (1996:7), this demand for emotional involvement at work is a result of the transition from an older production system of selling labor with “little mental, emotional and social investment” to a new work order where people are “asked to invest their hearts, minds, and bodies fully in their work.”

While companies are crafting their own individual “cultures,” workers and job seekers are simultaneously asked to construct employable selves (see Wallulis, 1998). These traits bring a subjective aspect to employment processes where it is not enough for workers to just do their
work well according to the measures of outputs and outcomes, they should also be a certain kind of person: a synergistic and creative worker who is also an involved, positive team-player. As a result, job seekers have to show that they embody these criteria during the hiring process. A flourishing self-help career advice literature that is tightly connected to the business world reflects these expectations and guides job seekers.

A good example of this literature is found on LinkedIn, a professional social networking website. There is hardly an employment event in Arizona without the mention of LinkedIn by career experts. The site is not only for people to showcase their profiles and interact with each other, but it has also become a mediator of career related knowledge, which career experts and job seekers repeat. In 2013, LinkedIn published a series of articles titled “How I Hire” by “Influencers,” who are over 300 major “thought leaders,” some of whom are business people, artists and politicians. Some of the titles included “I Look For Your Failures, and Your Character,” “Content Matters, Character Matters More,” “Just Be Yourself,” “Show Me You’re Unstoppable,” and “Values First.” Many of these articles share a common thread, an emphasis on the personality of potential candidates and not their technical skillset. These articles are part of a larger set of career self-help literature widely available in books and on the Internet, and permeated society through Human Resources industry, CEOs, social scientists, business owners, and associated experts (cf. Cremin, 2003).

In LinkedIn’s “How I Hire” article series, Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Group suggests, “personality is the key” in hiring decisions:

The first thing to look for when searching for a great employee is somebody with a personality that fits with your company culture. Most skills can be learned, but it is difficult to train people on their personality. If you can find people who are fun, friendly, caring and love helping others, you are on to a winner (2013).
While most college educated job seekers are not going to be interacting with the CEO of a major corporation during the hiring process, this type of information is disseminated by experts in career workshops. Presenters spread the viewpoints of CEOs in the form of quotes, presentations, articles or brief mention; and they are discussed by job seeking participants and seen as a guide during their job search process. In the above excerpt, Branson deemphasizes qualifications saying, “Some managers get hung up on qualifications. I only look at them after everything else.” Although Branson sounds idealist, it is very likely that Branson’s HR personnel or hiring consultants already check for qualifications before he meets with candidates, who are most likely going for higher level positions. Since there are usually more people with technical skills than job openings particularly for well paying positions, the question becomes whose personality is a better “match” with the company in question (Brown & Hesketh, 2004). This discourse of personality, disguised under phrases such as soft skills, cultural fit or attitude, is widespread in employment processes. Job seekers are expected to have a certain character—according to Branson, fun, friendly, caring and love helping others—in order to be part of his company. These emotional characteristics are common in job descriptions (Cremin, 2003):
“ability to influence cross-functional teams without formal authority,” “must be a career driven individual,” “ability to collaborate with co-workers,” “be a positive, trainable, motivated individual,” “excellent communication skills,” “patient,” and, “innovative thinker who is positive, proactive, and readily embraces change”.

The famous self-help author Deepak Chopra uses the word “soul” to talk about his holistic view of job candidates:

Since my life's work has always focused on self-awareness and wellbeing, I have made those two attributes the criterion for people I want to work with…. I advise employers not
only to get references and bios from prospective employees, but also to engage with them before hiring in creating a ‘Soul Profile’ (2013).

For Walt Bettinger, the CEO of Charles Schwab, “…hiring is more art than science. Sometimes the determining factor can be how you treat the wait staff at lunch, and literally the tip you leave.” In a hiring industry where billions of dollars are spent to create algorithms, software and methods to make hiring more rational (and often more complicated), Bettinger discursively favors the art of hiring rather than the science. He arrives early to restaurants where he will meet with potential candidates and coaches waiters to act in certain ways to create situations where he can observe the character of a candidate, such as how they will act when a waiter brings the wrong order or how much of a tip they will leave. CEOs like Bettinger and Branson explicitly express that hiring has a very subjective aspect to it.

To demonstrate some of the numbers in line with the above opinion pieces, the author of the popular self-help book *Hiring for Attitude: A Revolutionary Approach to Recruiting and Selecting People* (2012), talks about his survey of companies, showing how most hires are failures not because of the lack of skills but due to attitude issues. According to the survey, hiring managers report that only 11% of new hires are successful, while 46% fail within the first 18 months (Murphy, 2012). Further, the main reasons for this failure are the inability to accept feedback (26%), the inability to understand and manage emotions (Emotional Intelligence, 23%), the lack of motivation to excel (17%) and having the wrong temperament (15%). All of these reasons are from the point of view of the companies who were surveyed and are related to their perception of personality and the (poor) emotional management of their employees. Yet, none of the reasons mentioned point to any structural reasons or issues with the companies themselves, such as a toxic work environment or neurotic managers (e.g., Babiak, Neumann, & Hare, 2010;
Minor & Housman, 2015). Companies and career experts justify the focus on workers’ and potential candidates’ personalities by pointing out the cost of mishires, ranging from the Department of Labor’s conservative estimate of $11,713 to half a million dollars (Smart, 2008). Surveys like the one above, the career advice literature and concomitant practices frame employment problems as a result of the mismanaged attitudes of the workers themselves, thus the solution becomes prescribing self-improvement for the workers and job seekers and not changes to the companies and their practices.

**Interpersonal Fit in Career Workshops**

Career experts in Arizona regularly mention career self-help documents like the ones above during the workshops or post them to their LinkedIn groups where job seekers can read them and sometimes comment. The career workshops that I attended are not only normalizing sites for all of the information and messages mentioned above, but they are also places where people learn to present themselves in ways that support existing cultural norms. In these workshops, job seekers orient and shape themselves to fit the messages radiating from the existing career self-help literature. Nicolas Rose (1998:39) states, “It is characteristic of our current regime of the self to reflect on and act on all the diverse domains, practices, and assemblages in terms of a unified 'personality', an 'identity' to be revealed, discovered, or worked on in each.” Job seekers try to adopt the existing acceptable language and “up their game” while simultaneously strive to be a consistent projection of what they imagine to be their “true” self.

The whole career self-help advice arena is about teaching people to acquire a new language, new ways to talk, respond, strategize and relate to people as a “professional.” This process is not simply about memorizing and parroting proper sentences (though participants do
that as well), but it is also about understanding the logic and cosmology behind why people act the way they do, so they can adjust their behaviors accordingly. This personality-shaping process can be seen in an excerpt from a career workshop hosted at an Arizona university.

The aforementioned workshop is organized by a graduate student association and open to the public. The purpose of the event is to help people who are pursuing and/or have a graduate degree, search for a job and “market” their skills outside the academic labor market. The medium size auditorium is half full with people mostly in the age range between 30 to 40 years old. There are free drinks and snacks at a food table paid for by the association. Most of the participants are masters’ and doctoral level students; some attendees are determined to seek jobs outside of academia while others want to keep their options open. The speaker comes from a prestigious university in California. In the excerpt below, she explains the job interview process:

Hiring authorities wanna get a sense of how your experience could fit what they are looking for; your education and how that fits; your level of preparation for this particular position and then your skills… And then they are gonna really kind of take a look at what you are like as a human being; how do you come across; your attitude, your personal characteristics … that is really important… how you work with other people…. And really kind of the goal is they want to see what kind of fit you are for this particular position with their particular organization.

This expert starts with the basic qualifications: education, experience and technical skills. She then narrows it down to how a person comes across and will fit with the characteristics of the organization and the people who are working there. This also shows the basics of the hiring process. After the applicant pool is narrowed down, hiring authorities invite a few candidates for interviews, a process that can take from a half an hour to a whole day depending on the position and the organization. Hiring decisions are often done during these interviews, and career experts assert that interpersonal fit plays an important role (Huffcutt, 2011; Moss & Tilly, 2001). In an
attempt to empower job seekers, career experts often try to convince candidates that the interview is a two way activity. For example, the career expert above later said, “Just like they are interviewing you, you are also interviewing them to see if you’d like to work in that place” repeating the “cultural fit” discourse at the workplace. The reality is usually very different; in an environment where there are a hundred job applicants and only a small handful obtain interviews. The process is not very indicative of people having very many options, and often translates to an employer liking a candidate and not necessarily the other way around.

During these interviews, some career experts and scholars claim that interviewee performance is more influential in hiring decisions than job-related interview content (Huffcutt, 2011). Yet critical organizational literature also shows that recruiters do not agree on what makes a good person-to-job and person-to-organization fit during interviews (Dipboye, Macan, & Shahani-Denning, 2012; Kristof-Brown, 2000). This is another indicator that the actual hiring process can be very subjective and difficult to capture. Much of the work in this area focuses on the attempt to measure “soft skills,” which I would argue is more of an attempt to rationalize and quantify subjective qualities. So much focus is given to these subjective personal qualities that career experts end up repeatedly talking about many minute strategies, some of which are contradictory, to produce an authentic employable self.

Expectations for applicants to have a likable persona is justified upon the premise that each organization has its own individual culture (Schein, 1984), thus different individuals can find jobs that are suitable to them and to the organization. The implicit message is finding matching parts in a supposedly pluralistic, rational but also compatibility-emphasized hiring process. A career expert who volunteers in one of the career workshops in Arizona describes this
match between organizations and applicants as falling in line with each other’s “core values.” He also emphasizes the importance of emotional intelligence during the hiring process:

Core values. What we are seeing is a trend from the recruiting industry perspective, that our employers are wanting to be more thoughtful about aligning the people that they have hired with their philosophy, their mission, their vision, their values. And what you are seeing in the literature is that employee engagement is predicated upon linking up the individual motivation of the employee with the company. So what we are finding is there is more and more of a trend with employers asking questions about your values and they are doing that [by] using the behavioral interview process….It is not new but the way they are doing it is new. So what is happening is that they are peppering value-laden questions in the interview process… what they are wanting to do is not only to hire people who have values that are aligned with theirs, but also hire people who are emotionally intelligent. So emotional intelligence is simply being aware of who you are, what your motivations are, how you impact others, how others react to you and [your] wellbeing, aware of how you play as a participant in the work environment. Some people are more emotionally intelligent than others. Some people have absolutely noooo social skills.

This information voiced during a workshop is indicative of shaping the capacities, orientations, attributes and moral conduct of individuals. According to Michael Dean (1995:567), what makes the policies and practices to produce self-governing individuals particularly interesting is not simply their role in shaping human subjectivity, but their involvement of people “in their own government by demanding their complicity in these practices of self-shaping, self-cultivating and self-presentation.” Unlike the old expectation that one was supposed to subscribe to a collectivist ethic in an overtly patriarchal work environment (e.g., the organization man), in this new economy, job seekers are assumed to be free subjects with choices and are expected to come to the table as a whole package. This means that they not only have the right technical skills to do the job, but they must also show that they have already aligned their personality with the particular culture of the organization in question. Thus, completing a job task is seen as a result of one’s whole impact on the work environment as a system.
In *Modernity and Self-Identity*, Anthony Giddens (1991) talks about how in late modernity, the self becomes a reflexive project. Instead of a one life trajectory, individuals must constantly remake themselves via narratives linking personal history to the external world. Employment pressures now demand individuals to adjust these personal narratives to the narratives of the companies, such as during a job interview where job seekers are expected to answer “Why do you want to work in our organization?” The constant remaking of one’s self positions people as productive subjects in the sense that they are producing, discovering and experiencing themselves by self-actualization (Rose, 1999).

The rise of neoliberal policies contributed to the emphasis on personality in employment processes. With the emergence of neoliberal practice and theory, the contract between the government and citizens, and corporations and citizens, is broken (Ortner, 2011). Life-long employment and social provisions provided by Western governments and corporations have been rolled back. An Arizona based career counselor outlines these new conditions explicitly in her brochure, “There is a new employment contract that stresses flexible employment opportunities and preparedness rather than job security. This new focus encourages you to take personal responsibility for managing your work life. Develop the self-awareness that will arise from self-assessment and creating a plan for the future you desire.” Like a helping professional, this career expert is offering her services to help troubled people—job seekers and/or workers—to adjust to this new environment.

With increasing global competition and technological advancement, employment is becoming more flexible and less secure. Companies are downsizing but also giving more responsibility to their decreasing number of workers without a significant pay increase or promise of job security. In order to gain the consent of workers, the management of personality
among workers via emotional management is becoming more important. Workers are expected to be “eager to stay, but ready to leave” in this flexible and fast-churning economy (Gee et al., 1996). With no employment security, companies attempt to motivate workers by goals, missions and visions, and expect potential candidates to come motivated with these. Anymore, it is not enough for workers to just do their work well; they are expected to be more involved, more creative and take on more responsibility, not only for their immediate job but also for their career. The self-management of a career is the norm within the neoliberal economy, and it requires an enterprising personality (Rose, 1992).

**Scripted Talk**

The job interview often provides the only opportunity for hiring authorities and job candidates to meet face-to-face and have a chance to interact with each other. The interview is also one of the most important selection methods for hiring decisions (Dipboye et al., 2012; Huo, Huang, & Napier, 2002). Due to the interview’s importance on hiring choices, career experts spend a lot of time talking about how to answer questions, how to moderate one’s mood and how to manage self-presentation. During career workshops, one of the main exercises is creating a personal branding statement, which is an example of scripted talk. This activity has become increasingly popular and encourages people to think about themselves as commensurate with a company or product (Gershon, 2011; Lane, 2011). Personal branding statements aim to help participants practice talking about themselves professionally in less than two minutes in order to stand out to potential employers. The hope is that participants can use personal branding statements not only during a networking activity but also during a job interview. The assumption

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is that knowing what to say will help job seekers concentrate on the delivery of how to say it during a job interview.

An example of the importance of language and social skills on the job-search process is illustrated in a response from Robert who was laid off from a non-profit during the Great Recession when their grant was not renewed. Robert has been a regular participant at two different career workshops I attended and had been actively seeking a job for 6 months. Robert sat down for an interview with me a couple of months after he finally was successful in finding full time employment at a production facility. During his interview, I ask Robert what he thinks is different in the job-search process compared to his past experiences:

You have to research the company, you have to understand exactly what they want...customize your resume exactly to match what the companies are actually looking for. It is like you will use the same wording, terminology, tongue, everything, so it will capture their eye, "Oh this guy, he understands our language. He understands what we want." So right now a lot has to do with customizing your resume and understanding the new demands during interviews. Now interviews are more straight. They do not look only for your professional capacities. They also look for your social skills.

Robert has been to many career workshops and he admits that his perspective about work has drastically changed. He is actively re-crafting his self-image and personal traits to fit in with his new company. The job-search process for Robert is not simply about finding gainful employment, but it is explicitly a self-making project. He repeats what he has learned from the career workshops in a very positive manner. He believes in the career self-help advice, and he embodies it with his demeanor and talk.

While job seekers understand the need for forming and practicing scripted talk through personal branding statements and interview answers, not every participant is as enthusiastic as Robert about the advice they are receiving. There have been debates in some of the workshops
on the issue of scriptedness, particularly because alongside guiding job seekers to form and 
practice personal branding statements, career experts also advise them to be “authentic.” The 
example below is from a conversation at a career workshop. Marisa is married with two kids. 
Her husband is on disability from an accident while working in the military, and he is also 
completing his degree at the local community college. Her husband’s disability payment is only 
enough to pay for basic necessities. After three months of attending the workshop, Marisa 
eventually gets hired as a staff manager by a customer-service oriented firm. In her last session, 
the moderator asks Marisa to explain how the interview went so others can learn. Before Marisa 
gets into the interview, she assumes a “job seeker veteran” role to help others, and is critical of 
the scripted answers:

Marisa: … job interviews can be very discouraging especially when you are unemployed 
for so long, you start to doubt your capabilities… my husband said it, my friend said it, 
"Just be yourself." That is the one thing you go in, you have all these scripted sentences, 
and you try to remember and it just comes off very fake… It just sounds scripted. And so 
that is what I did, when I was going into this interview… I just said to myself, "you know 
what, that is how I got the jobs in the past. It is just being myself" and… it worked I guess. 
[chuckles]

Facilitator: Yeah it did

Other participants: It did

Marisa: One thing the employer said was my persona which is why I was a real good fit for 
the organization.

Facilitator: It is a chemistry game.

Marisa brings in the discourse of “fit,” that her personal traits are commodifiable to 
potential employers. She is known to be fun, easy-going, and collaborative; suitable qualities for 
a woman to be a staff manager in a customer-service oriented office environment. At the end of 
the dialogue, instead of getting offended, the facilitator also supports Marisa, saying that the job
search is a “chemistry game” in which hiring authorities and candidates must ”like” each other (also see Finlay & Coverdill, 2002; Sharone, 2013). The use of the “chemistry” metaphor is telling of how work processes, which were once relegated to the public sphere—masculine—are increasingly integrated into the private domain—feminine—signaled by parallels drawn between cultural fit with love affairs (i.e., chemistry). Marisa’s feminine qualities are marketed for work and make her an ideal “fit” for her new work environment, and the whole process is normalized by further blurring the boundaries between the private and public domains.

Practicing how to speak during the job search process at career workshops is a double bind. On one hand, job seekers are asked to form personal branding statements and practice appropriate interview answers so they come off as prepared, employable and professional, but the participants often end up sounding scripted. On the other hand, they are simultaneously asked to become more authentic to show their “true selves.” Herein lies the problem, what is supposed to make job seekers employable (e.g., preparation) can end up making them sound fake and inauthentic. Job seekers learn, unlearn and re-learn. Marisa’s response to how she got this particular job is being herself, her “authentic” persona, which according to Marisa, is confirmed by the employer.

Charles Taylor (1989) explains that in modern times, interiority is a source of authenticity for self. Authenticity implies not only an individual’s rational deliberations but also their potentially irrational feelings and desires. In career workshops, one’s successful ability to express their “true self” to the outside world is assumed to be a reflection of one’s authenticity. While job seekers are encouraged to use scripts to prepare personal branding statements or their answers to interview questions, career experts’ ultimate goal is to have job seekers practice enough that eventually these presentations and/or scripts will come off naturally, and become

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second nature. This entire process throws the very concept of an authentic self into question as scripted answers are partially imposed by the experts from the outside. In the career workshop, there is a constant back and forth between psychic interiority and exteriority, authenticity and faking. This potentially creates what Micki McGee (2005:44) calls a “belabored self”, which is “the self perennially at work on itself and the self labored over by the self.” According to McGee (2005:16), “the belabored self presents itself as overworked both as the subject and as the object of its own efforts at self-improvement.” Job seekers’ attempt to simply get assistance to find gainful employment, ends up having a much broader impact on their overall lives. People analyze themselves and each other; some are trying to actively change themselves, adapting to the demands of the marketplace as they understand it and try to learn how to play the game.

**Grilling Lenny**

On a Friday evening meeting during a failure and success stories session, job seekers are having fun listening to how one of the participants, a social worker, cannot get jobs due to his speeding tickets because the companies he applies to often require a clean driving record. While people are laughing, another participant finds the opportunity to ask if anyone has a success story in their job search. While the laughter and bantering continue, Lenny, a Euro-American participant with a long term underemployment history starts talking to the facilitator. It is hard to hear for a while, but the facilitator starts speaking louder. Everyone slowly focuses on the shift in the conversation. The room gets serious as it becomes obvious that this is a debriefing session from a job interview. Participants often pay close attention to these case studies to learn from them.
Lenny is 47 years old and recently got his college degree from a for-profit university, however, he has limited job experience in his field. Lenny is also known to be a cynic and some participants consider him to have a negative attitude. Lenny just received a rejection email after a face-to-face job interview. In the dialogue, the facilitator asks Lenny, “What are you gonna do?” in order to prompt him to get something good out of a bad situation. Even though Lenny already knows that the employer is going to go with another candidate at this point, he thinks reiterating to the employer that he is a good fit is a useful option at this stage:

Facilitator: Let’s follow up with this. So you get the email…. At this point, they are moving on with other candidates…What are you gonna do?

Lenny: I am gonna call them and try to get a hold… I am going to reintroduce myself and reiterate the fact that I’d probably be a good fit and kind of ask them, “What could I have done better?” Do you have any ideas? I really don’t know what I could say…

Facilitator: Well…my instinct is I don’t know that I’d go back and reiterate that “I thought I was great fit.”

Lenny: OK

Facilitator: Because

Bradley (another participant): They didn’t think you are a good fit [some participants are chuckling].

The fact that Lenny had already received a negative email from the company reduces any chance that they will reconsider him for the same position at the moment. Another participant, Bradley, agrees with the facilitator, and so do others as indicated by their chuckle. Continuing on with the dialogue below, the facilitator tries to encourage Lenny and other job seekers to get feedback from the interview process and also a referral for networking purposes when an employer is not interested in hiring them for that particular position:
Facilitator: Yeah. They didn’t. So I would go back and say, "I would really like to learn from this. As you are well involved in this job search, I’d like feedback so I better understand how to articulate my strengths in my future endeavors. And who else to contact that might be interested in my skills?"

Lenny: OK.

Facilitator: OK? So you are asking for feedback. It is just pure feedback, plus a networking request.

Lenny: Aaaa! They were extremely non-committed when I walked out. I thought the interview itself went pretty well but extremely non-committed. So that shook my confidence.

Facilitator: So it is worth the shot even if they shoot you down.

Anticipating that most job applications will fail, career experts attempt to turn failures into successes. In the case of an explicitly failed job interview, the facilitator tells job seekers that they can at least get feedback and a referral from this situation. The constant need for feedback and reflection are some of the basic tenants of a neoliberal life. In the case of the job search, they are seen as necessary endeavors for crafting an employable self. Ability to accept defeat in a constructive way and eagerness to learn from mistakes (or at least appearing to do so) frames job seekers as problem solvers, relationship builders and good communicators, which represent some of the characteristics that are valued in the service economy. According to career experts, these positive attributes can advance one’s job search by situating a job seeker as good natured. Below, the facilitator asks further questions in order to understand how Lenny presented himself and it becomes clear that he did not ask the right questions at the end of the interview:

Facilitator: How did you close the interview?

Lenny: I asked them how their Thanksgiving was.

Facilitator: Ouch! [Facilitator and another person are chuckling]
Lenny: And they said it was great.

Facilitator: Did you ask for the job?

Lenny: I did ask for the job several times.

Facilitator: Did you beg? [silence and then laughter in the room]

Lenny: Oh no, without begging [more laughter in the room]. I kept on reiterating I was a good fit for the position….

Facilitator: So maybe it was cultural. Maybe it was just cultural.

Here, the facilitator is asking clarification questions in order to understand how Lenny closed the interview. Lenny tried to make small talk. According to the facilitator, this is not a good idea for closing an interview. By asking about the interviewers’ Thanksgiving, according to the facilitator, Lenny fails to engage them and does not leave them with a good impression. The facilitator shows her disapproval by her exclamation and chuckle. Afterward, the facilitator jokingly asks if Lenny “begged for the job” since Lenny insisted on reiterating that he is a good fit for the job. The silence after that question is indicative of the nervousness in the room, where the facilitator asks an unexpected and bold question to dig deeper into the situation. When the joke is over, the facilitator simply says, “maybe it was cultural” indicating lack of “chemistry” or a lack of “organizational cultural fit” between hiring authorities and Lenny. To further explain the situation, another participant, Nancy who has former supervisory experience, starts talking:

Nancy: You can’t keep selling yourself…I don’t know how much you did, but I don’t want someone repeating themselves and repeating themselves to the end. I’m not sure if that is what you did, but I need something different ‘cause I would get bored. When I need something from a worker, I don’t want them to keep on talking what they think is right. If I need A, B, C and you are selling D, E, and F whatever.

Facilitator: Did you ask the question “How do you see my skills lining up with your position?”
Lenny: No, no.

Facilitator: I would add that question to your original set of questions. "How do you see my skills lining up with your position?"… You can go back and ask in retrospective [during feedback request] "You all didn’t see my skills lining up with your needs. What would make a difference to you?"

Nancy is ultimately suggesting that Lenny did not read the interviewers’ reactions, thus he did not adjust his behavior and possibly continued to annoy the interviewers. Basically, both the facilitator and Nancy frame Lenny as lacking self-awareness, not knowing how he impacts others and not being able to read others’ reactions. Lenny is disciplined by the facilitator and the group and set as a failed subject. This is constructed (and concurred by the group) in an effort to get him to adjust his behavior and work on his self in order to succeed on the job market. The dialogue shows that Lenny is unable to read the situation and does not know how to bring a positive outcome from a failed job interview. He is also seen as resistant to re-crafting his self as an employable one. The facilitator is not only teaching Lenny and others what sentences to use to get feedback during and after a failed interview, but also pushes them to set themselves up as professionals and employable in order to obtain further help from a hiring authority that did not hire.

Yet Lenny is not alone. Many participants leave an interview feeling very optimistic, but their feelings slowly turn to despair as hours pass and they analyze the interview further in their heads. They often cannot comprehend what has happened as they do not hear back from hiring authorities in the weeks following the interview. As the job search has become a more complicated process, job seekers end up studying it as if it is a new language and an exotic land where career experts are “cultural guides” attempting to decode what is going on and prescribe tens of minute strategies, some of which are contradictory. The discourse of personality is
instrumentalized and justified in this context in order to explain and analyze this complex process.

While job-seekers occasionally resist some of the ideas conveyed in the career workshops, overall they are complicit as they see similar ideas elsewhere on the Internet or hear them from their friends or employers. While Lenny might have been unhappy about being disciplined by the career expert and the fellow job-seeker workshop participants as illustrated above, he continued to come to the workshops for months after this incident. His main complaint—like that many other participants—was not questioning the emphasis on personality, but rather that there were not enough employers attending the workshops, so that he could use the opportunity to demonstrate his self.

**Conclusion**

Social science has long recognized the embodied, habitual aspect of social life, however unconscious and implicit (Bourdieu, 1984). What is striking about the emphasis on personality modification and emotional management, is their explicit, conscious and reflective integration into employment processes (see DiFruscia, 2012; Mutsaers, 2014). According to Gee et al. (1996), in a world with no employment security, one of the ways for companies to motivate workers is by having organizational goals, missions and visions. Whether it is the use of terms like company culture, team spirit or personality, what we observe is a transformation of work processes to expand and include personality, emotion as a prime skillset in the U.S. economy. The downside of this focus is its implication for inequality in employment processes. The shifting locus of responsibility puts the burden of employment onto workers and job seekers who must strive to constantly adjust themselves to the ever-changing demands of employers. It is
critical to stress that this burden does not fall onto individuals in a uniform manner, which makes the focus on personality modification a much harder discourse to grasp for some rather than others. For example, workers and job-seekers who come from families with a professional background can more easily demonstrate cultural similarity with potential employers through subtle and explicit signs like taste, body language and self-presentation. Those individuals who cannot as easily meet these new demands for modifying their presentation of self are then faced with exclusion in employment processes (Rivera, 2012).

Creating a positive business environment through “proper” communication techniques is increasingly seen as central to generate worker and consumer satisfaction and productivity (Cameron, 2008). This is especially salient in the U.S. where the service sector consists of more than 70% of all its employment. As there are difficulties in the service economy to demonstrate performance and competency, cultivating a sense of success becomes connected to one’s attitude, image and identity (Alvesson, 2001). This signals broader transformations in the economy where it became imperative to break older distinctions between work life and life outside of work, as well as the distinctions between a person and company. In this economy, job seekers as well as workers are asked to question and modify themselves in line with the labor market. Discourses and practices produced by the career literature primarily target getting a job, which is seen as an act of one’s own body and mind.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX C: PAPER THREE

Striving for Ontological Security: Middle-Class Identity among Job-Seeking College Educated Americans

Abstract

This article examines how college-educated job seekers describe what it means to be “middle class” in the United States in the context of underemployment and unemployment. Since the 1950s, the concept of the middle class, combined with the American Dream, has provided an optimistic metanarrative for many Americans to understand their lives in terms of expanding opportunities. However, the Great Recession (2007-2010) is undermining this metanarrative, even among college-educated Americans. A rising media and political discourse of a declining or disappearing middle class combined with the negative personal experiences of job seekers call into question the meaning of middle-class status. Nevertheless, most participants (27 out of 35) maintain a positive image of the “middle class” despite their precarious employment status. And around half of the participants (17 in 35) associate middle-class identity with economic security and stability, and the lack of worry about basic economic needs. Using data from interviews and participant observation with actively job-seeking college educated Americans, this article examines how these job seekers articulate the American Dream when the basis of economic security is undermined. Following and extending on the concept of ontological security, which refers to the constancy of social and material environments, I demonstrate that participants articulate middle-class identity subjectively and emotionally, in terms of their ability to continue consuming, even in a more modified form. This indicates the centralization of safety and security discourses in defining an American middle-class identity.

Keywords: Middle-class identity, ontological security, consumption
In the period after World War II, a growing middle class was the engine of our prosperity. Whether you owned a company, swept its floors, or worked anywhere in between, this country offered you a basic bargain – a sense that your hard work would be rewarded with fair wages and benefits, the chance to buy a home, to save for retirement, and above all, to hand down a better life for your kids. But over time, that engine began to stall...The link between higher productivity and people’s wages and salaries was severed – the income of the top 1 percent nearly quadrupled from 1979 to 2007, while the typical family’s barely budged....And that’s why... I’ll lay out my ideas for how we build on the cornerstones of what it means to be middle class in America, and what it takes to work your way into the middle class in America: Job security, with good wages and durable industries. A good education. A home to call your own. Affordable health care when you get sick. A secure retirement even if you’re not rich...That’s what we need. (Obama, 2013)

In the United States, social class is a controversial topic not only because there are competing definitions and models using varying factors to measure class status (e.g., occupation, income, taste, education), but also its very existence is disputed by scholars (Eichar, 1989). On the other hand, most Americans identify with being “middle class”7, indicating its vernacularly ubiquitous existence (Hout, 2007; Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Morin & Motel, 2012). Even though scholars point out that Americans’ understanding of social class is imprecise, inconsistent, and very contextual (Brantlinger, 2003; Coleman, Rainwater, & McClelland, 1978; Gilbert & Kahl, 1987; Halle, 1984; Lamont, 1992), when researchers ask about social class, Americans are able to talk about class status in abstract terms (Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Stuber, 2006). Abstract understandings of class positionality, however, tell us very little about how Americans think and feel about their life vis-à-vis their economic situation, particularly in the post-Great Recession (2007-2010). This paper explores what “middle class” means subjectively and emotionally to underemployed and unemployed college educated Americans.

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7 According to the PEW Research Center, approximately 89% of Americans consider themselves as some form of middle class (25% lower-middle class, 49% middle class and 15% upper-middle class) (Morin & Motel, 2012)
The middle class, frequently imagined through the metanarrative of the American Dream, is often seen as the ideal socioeconomic lifestyle category for Americans (Heiman, Freeman, & Liechty, 2012) and is a symbol of the “good life.” It is assumed by many Americans that members of the middle class possess knowledge on how to navigate the pathways to economic prosperity and social success through educational opportunities, home ownership, retirement investments, and self-care. Americans are encouraged to embody middle class status through the pathway of the so-called American Dream, roughly defined as “having an equal opportunity to achieve success and prosperity through hard work, determination, and initiative” (Oxford English Dictionary). Popularized during the Great Depression, the term still holds sway in the description of what it means to live a “good life” for Americans as it provides a moral order to the world (Jefferson, 2013).

The American Dream assumes the existence of a baseline of ontological security (cf. Saegert, Fields, & Libman, 2009) which Giddens (1990) defines as “the confidence…in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action.” In many Western societies, economic security is assumed to be the fundamental basis of ontological security (Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2010) upon which to build a “good life.” A number of scholars have argued that homeownership—a basic tenant of the American Dream (Jefferson, 2013)—can provide ontological security. This article extends this literature by showing that people, particularly college educated job seeking Americans, can derive ontological security not just from homeownership, but through their ability to continue consuming, even in a more modified form. Continuing to consume can be related to normal spending patterns on day-to-day expenses to occasional “luxury” items that people purchase as part of their regular consumption, allowing them to maintain a sense of security. Participants’ emphasis on economic safety and security, and
descriptions of middle-class identity mainly articulated through consumption support the argument that an ability to continue consuming, even in times of insecurity, is prioritized by participants as being central to their descriptions and important to retaining their ontological security. Economic security can enable consumption and allow people to continue to believe in the American Dream within which hard work (i.e., full time employment) can bring success and prosperity.

Over the last couple of decades, the financial and sociopolitical system in the U.S. has changed, making the American Dream harder to achieve objectively, thus impacting how Americans subjectively situate themselves within a meaningful middle-class identity. Furthermore, a rising media and political discourse of a declining or disappearing middle class has called into question the meaning of this identity. The Great Recession (2007-2010) has particularly undermined this metanarrative, including among those individuals who have a college education, a very important factor to operationalize class identity (Bartels, 2006, 2009). Using data from interviews and participant observation with actively job-seeking college educated Americans, this article examines how these job seekers articulate the American Dream when the basis of economic security is undermined. Participants’ responses indicate that class status as well as ontological security in the American context can be understood through consumption and one’s ability to continue some consumption habits in the context of economic difficulties and precarious employment status. In the post-Great Recession, job seekers prioritize the material benefits jobs provide rather than their occupational status or work ethic. This indicates the centralization of safety and security discourses in defining American middle-class identity.
After explaining the research methods applied, I provide a theoretical background to analyze my data. Utilizing and extending on Beth Cohen’s (2003) citizen-consumer argument and Anthony Giddens’ ontological security theory, I demonstrate that despite both an unfavorable labor market and negative personal employment experiences, job seekers’ descriptions of middle-class status are primarily consumption oriented (e.g., home, car, vacation). Most participants (27 out of 35) maintain a positive and individualized image of the “middle class.” Yet around half the participants (17 out of 35) also associate middle-class identity with economic security and stability, and the lack of worry about basic economic needs, which are critical factors that enable consumption. This emphasis on security is possibly an expressed desire to preserve their ontological security as participants consciously try to grapple with feelings of uncertainty in the face of an economic crisis. After this section, to provide an insight into the lived experience of participants, I analyze my data under two domains: 1) Everyday spending, and 2) Homeownership. These two domains include the majority of the items that emerged from participants’ descriptions of middle-class identity during interviews and flesh out the increasing centralization of safety and security discourses in defining this identity, oriented around consumption.

**Methodology**

This research is based on 13 months of ethnography including participant observation and face-to-face semi-structured interviews conducted between November 2012 and December 2013 in Tucson, Arizona a city of nearly 1 million inhabitants. Tucson’s unemployment rate at the time of the fieldwork was representative of the country: 6.8% compared to the national level of 7.4%.
The question of middle-class status was a small part of a larger study that focused on the job-search process among college-educated Americans, a relatively understudied population. Because many of the job seekers were under- and unemployed, career workshops were one of the best places to find this group. I attended 79 separate career workshops in all of the five organizations in Tucson, Arizona that provided career workshops to this type of job seeker. However, job-seeking college-educated Americans often do not talk about material hardship or class status in these workshops. Thus, interviews with 35 of the participants provided the basis of analysis for this paper.

Table 1. Participant Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job seekers</th>
<th>N=35</th>
<th>Employment Status During Interview Period</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Female</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>57.1% - Unemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Male</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>42.8% - Underemployed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Mean=45</td>
<td></td>
<td>2 - Self-employed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Early retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and Ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Expects unemployment in near future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>80% - Employed full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Hispanic</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.5% - Marital status</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Black</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7% - Married</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-White Hispanic</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8% - Single</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Asian</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8% - Divorced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td>-Homeownership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Bachelor's</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>51.4% - Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Master's</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>31.4% - No</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Some college</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-PhD</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Associate's</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In addition, I conducted participant observation with the majority of participants (24 out of 35) by either interviewing them at their homes or getting involved with at least one everyday activity such as going grocery shopping; attending a religious ceremony, networking activity,
family dinners, job fairs, an Alcoholic Anonymous (AA) meeting; assisting moving from their house, gardening, dog walking, playing bar trivia, and so on. The criteria for recruitment was being between 30-65 years old with a minimum of two years of college education. The demographics of participants can be seen in Table 1.

It is important to point out some of the methodological limitations of this research. The descriptions of middle-class identity were often limited to two interview questions: “What does “middle class” mean to you?” and “What images come to your mind when you hear middle class?” The responses to these two interview questions can be seen as the mental priorities of job-seeking college-educated Americans, rather than a holistic description, within the context of the job search process in the post-Great Recession. To show more evidence of class dispositions, I supplement the data with participant observation and interview data beyond these two main prompts.

Consumption and Middle-Class Status in the United States

For some time, scholars have been analyzing consumption as a focal point of global middle-class identity (Liechty, 2002; McKendrick, Brewer, & Plumb, 1982; O'Dougherty, 2002; Truitt, 2008). Consumption is a status marker, a sign of a cosmopolitan attitude, linked to both housing and lifestyle (Boschken, 2003), but more importantly consumption for the middle class provides an avenue for self-realization⁸ (Bellah, 1985; Riesman et al., 1950). When Riesman et al. (1950) analyzed the American middle class in the 1950s, they were comparing an older

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⁸ David Riesman et al. (1950) in *The Lonely Crowd* pointed out a historic shift in middle-class personality from the goal-oriented and work-focused individual to the consumer-oriented and self-conscious one. In a review of “class” in U.S. history, Zunz (1996:197) similarly remarked, “…twentieth-century middle class Americans mixed a new kind of individualism with a new kind of conformity. As their individual achievements were partly dampened by the bureaucratic structures of large organizations, they increasingly sought self-realization by rechanneling their individualism through these structures and through consumption.”
scarcity-oriented mentality to the newer abundance-oriented mentality where affluence, mass consumption, and suburbia were emerging in an optimistic era in the post-World War II context. Contemporary scholars of the global middle classes have also similarly analyzed their data in the context of expanding economic opportunities for the middle class despite rising inequality (see Cahn, 2008; Guo, 2008; Truitt, 2008). However, what sets this research apart from past and even contemporary studies is the fact that the objective economic conditions in the U.S. during and after the post-Great Recession are not optimistic but rather negative due to people losing their jobs and along with their homes and benefits.

Consumption is not simply a satisfaction of a biological need (e.g., need for shelter to protect the body), but it is also profoundly social (e.g., the type and location of a house). People consume to have a particular type of life, to be a certain kind of person, and to have certain kinds of relations with others (cf. Slater, 1997). In order to consume the way we want, we orient ourselves with existing discourses and practices and engage with market forces, corporations, sciences, media, and so on. These institutions have the power to define and shape how people imagine themselves, and help determine what types of relations they establish with others and objects.

The concept of consumption is often understood to include “commercially produced images, texts, and objects” that people purchase such as clothing or TV (Arnould & Thompson, 2005:869). While the vernacular use of the term “consumption” does not typically refer to things like money and spending, scholars do include these concepts within the domain of consumer culture theory, along with other topics related to consumption such as lifestyle, the process of acquiring goods and services, and the management of budget and time (e.g., Douglas, 1997; Featherstone, 2007; Quisumbing & Maluccio, 2000; Schor, 2008). For example, ritual events can
be seen simply as symbolic events, but they are at the same time highly involved in consumptive activities. Through the excessive use of specific goods and services, Thanksgiving marks people’s “ability to meet basic needs abundantly through consumption” (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991:13). Through such events, people can also express their class identity through consumption (e.g., different ways of celebrating holidays like Thanksgiving).

A number of scholars have pointed out the centrality of consumption to our understanding of modern America (Cohen, 2003; Jacobs, 2005). Beth Cohen (2003), in her book, *Consumers’ Republic*, explains that modern consumption in the U.S. is not the result of a natural process but is carefully planned and promoted by the government and corporate institutions to create a certain kind of economy within which citizens are encouraged to consume for personal and public good to sustain economic growth within the Fordist-Keynesian economic system. Mass consumption has been promoted as a moral activity for the public good to create democracy and equal opportunity (Cohen, 2003). The modern understanding of a “middle class American” has been set in the prosperous post-World War II period where citizenship and consumption were tied together within the context of suburban sprawl and rising support for local and individual autonomy. In this context, personal satisfaction is amalgamated with patriotism.

The consumption oriented moral economy in the U.S. was possible with the expansion of economic opportunities for many Americans, providing a relatively steady material and social environment—ontological security—with which people could imagine the American Dream. According to Giddens (1990:92) ontological security refers to, “the confidence that most human beings have in the continuity of their self-identity and in the constancy of the surrounding social and material environments of action.” Because economic security is the seen as the primary basis
of ontological security in many Western societies (Colic-Peisker & Johnson, 2010), I argue that ontological security is a core part of the historical conception of middle-class identity. For example, in the Fordist-Keynesian economic regime of the post-World War II, mass consumption was strongly linked to mass production, a stable welfare regime, reliable jobs, and workers who contributed to the social order (cf. Muehlebach, 2011; Neilson & Rossiter, 2008). Material stability conditioned people’s sense of class identity. Despite the fact that women and minorities were largely excluded from this socioeconomic expansion, the conception of middle class occurred under such formations between the 1940s and 1970s.

However, things have changed since the mid- to late-twentieth century. In the past decade there has been widespread discussion of stagnating wages in contrast to the drastic increases of productivity and corporate profits; increasing healthcare and education expenses; ballooning student and credit card debts; and the recent history of housing devaluation and mass foreclosures (Perrucci & Wysong, 2008; Sullivan, Westbrook, & Warren, 2000; Warren & Tyagi, 2003). Unlike the optimistic mood of the post-World War II period in America, the post-Great Recession American disposition has been one of pessimism (see Rutenberg & Thee-Brenan, 2011; Samuelson, 2011).

So how do the factors illustrated above—the objective rise and fall of economic conditions in the U.S.—factor into the subjective perceptions of college-educated job-seeking Americans in viewing “middle-class” identity? In other words, what are the implications for defining a middle-class identity, and living the “American Dream” when one is underemployed or unemployed in a difficult labor market? I am mainly interested in the epistemologies of middle-class identity in the contemporary U.S., or how one comes to recognize and create
“common sense” for class identity. At the same time, I am interested in how participants’
descriptions of middle-class identity relate to the economies of everyday life.

**From Positive Descriptions to Safety and Security Discourse**

Despite dying, shrinking, and failing middle-class narratives in the media (e.g., Schwartz,
2015; Tankersley, 2014), and negative personal employment experiences in the shrinking labor
market of the post-Great Recession, many underemployed and unemployed participants had
rather positive descriptions of middle-class status, often associating consumption items and
consumptive power with a solid middle-class identity. Approximately half of the participants
talked about the importance of economic security when describing middle-class identity. Only a
few participants (8 out of 35) had a negative picture related to the middle-class attainability in
the current U.S. context, such as the following male in his 30s:

> What I understand right now is the middle class is dissolving, it is dying. Some people
even tell you it is dead already, but it is still holding up by a string I would say. There is
not much of a middle class anymore like it used to be.

This participant is possibly reflecting the negative media discourse of economic decline
which is widely available in mainstream media outlets like *National Public Radio, The
Washington Post,* or *The New York Times.* Some of the other negative descriptions within these 8
responses, on the other hand, would start with positive idealized pictures of middle-class status,
yet they would later turn grim. For example, Hector, an underemployed engineer describes the
“middle class” initially in terms of, “a house, car, vacations, family dinners, Thanksgivings, you
know Christmas dinners. I guess a settled feeling that fiscally everything is OK. No anxiety,
yeah.” Hector is financially better off than many of my participants. He makes $30,000 for his
part-time marketing work even though he is looking for a full-time job, more suitable to his college education and project-management experience. His wife is working full-time, making $35,000. Both of their salaries combined are more than the median household income in the U.S. In this sense, it can be argued that his initial description of middle-class identity was objectively true for him. But later in the conversation he provided a negative picture of the “middle class” in consideration of larger trends he was observing in the nation:

I think there is a lot of anxiety. I think stress levels are high, divorce rates are worse. More and more people are choosing not to have children. This situation is here, that I am in right now, this home and this kind of lifestyle is…going more and more towards the low end of the spectrum. So if there is a middle class and a lower class, somewhere between there, middle, I think, is moving towards the lower end. The percentage of wage increases that has happened in the last 20 years… for the majority have been 2 to 4 percent which does not keep up with the cost of living allowance. Where executives on the other hand have been getting just absolutely monstrous numbers. Presidents, vice presidents, CEOs, COOs are making…what they term now “sick” money… The gap is getting wider and wider. I think the middle class as a whole is just kind of disappearing… The middle class has been drained in the last 50 years to fund specific programs that government put in place for the people who are low income and regulate the tax structure in such a way that middle class gets the larger burden of it… [B]ig business get so many write-offs and so many advantages that they can maintain wealth. But that is just a simplistic view…

Yet, few people had such grim views of the middle class. The majority of my participants (27 out of 35) had rather positive descriptions of what “middle class” means to them:

Middle-class means I guess- so having the freedom to…have a car, I guess. There are certain things I would say they would own. Having the freedom to live your life in the weekends. Maybe partly work from home and pay off your debts. Maybe have enough money to help support a child.

Rather than taking my participants’ answers for granted, I see such positive responses as a mix of the idealized image of middle-class identity and also the practical realities for
responders. For example, the participant above is a married, childless male in his early 30s, has a Master’s degree, and owns a home. While on one hand he works part-time from home, which is in line with his description, on the other hand he does not have a child to support. As such, his description of middle-class status can be viewed as partly a reality for him as he works from home, owns a home and car, and plays basketball on the weekends. Excluding 6 participants who do not see themselves as belonging to the middle class, 16 out of 29 participants provided descriptions of “middle class” which included things like owning a house, being married, having a child even when they did not meet one or more of these criteria. This indicates the strong hold of middle-class ideology in the U.S. despite negative macro and micro economic indicators, precarious employment experiences, and ongoing political and media rhetoric of a dying middle class. These descriptions of middle class provided by participants largely reflect their belief (or their desire to believe) in the American Dream narrative’s “success and prosperity” aspect, as measured by consumption items and the ability to continue some of one’s usual consumption habits. In the above example, it is the freedom to have a car, a home, and to spend time doing leisure activities, and having enough money to support a child through sufficient services and goods (mostly paid through loans) that describe middle-class identity for him. His description is tightly related to his consumptive power and his ability to consume in the context of a difficult economic system, which provides him a sense of ontological security.

In addition to these positive descriptions reflecting the American Dream narrative’s consumption side, around half of the participants (17 out of 35) talked about the importance of economic security, stability, and the lack of worry about basic economic needs in their descriptions. I interpret the voicing of this economic security discourse as not only a concern and reaction toward the precarious economic conditions in the U.S., but also as an expressed desire to
preserve an ontological security, articulated through consumption. Economic security facilitates people’s ability to continue consuming beyond the basic necessities and to maintain some of their usual consumption patterns, in turn providing a feedback loop that firmly situates one’s sense of belonging, class identity, and allows people to continue to believe in the American Dream.

Ontological security is understood to be a sense of confidence in identity, a sense that others are reliable, a trust in the continuity of the social order, the predictability of everyday practices, and a feeling that the material environment is secure (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Giddens, 1990). The concept initially appeared in the context of mental health by R.D. Laing (1964) where he contrasted mentally “sane” people (ontologically secure) with those individuals who had schizophrenia (ontologically insecure). But it was popularized by the sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990) who drew a distinction of ontological security between traditional societies and the contemporary world. According to Giddens, traditional societies were more stable, thus were relations, status, and identities, which strongly supported ontological security. By contrast, kinships and locality in modern societies are more fluid, thus making people’s sense of ontological security more fragile, characterizing contemporary societies with a sense of crisis of ontological security. It is within this framework that I see people’s subjective descriptions of middle class, where they emphasize economic security and stability along with their ability to continue consuming, even if in a limited form.

Some of these responses directly used words and phrases like “having some security,” “stable well-paying income,” “not struggling to pay everyday necessities.” Others inferred security and safety discourse by using phrases like “living comfortably,” “saving money,” “covering bills and having some extra.”
Um middle class is you know, if you can cover your bills and …and you put a little away to save, you are still able to go out to camp or vacation, have fun. I do not think middle class is the house, 2.3 kids… not those. I think it is mostly…a comfortable life with a safety net.

Financial stability indicates that members of the middle class need some sense of security that enables them to feel comfortable at the moment by covering what they consider to be their basic needs, in the case of above participant, paying rent, utilities, student loan payments, and entertainment, all of which are consumption items or costs associated with consumption items. The ability to save money provides them with a cushion for emergencies, the capacity to help their children pay for college, and it allows them to enjoy comfortable retirement in their old age. These descriptions indicate a desire to plan for the future, which is a defining characteristic of contemporary life in the U.S. (cf. Adams, Murphy, & Clarke, 2009), but they also indicate the desire to consume during the present via leisure (e.g., camping, taking a vacation, having fun).

Some people used more explicit emotional phrases to describe what middle class status mean, such as “not worry about the basics,” not worry about the next meal,” and “not feeling resource deprived.” They are basically explaining both what middle class is and is not for them, doing conceptual boundary maintenance work:

On the one hand it is like a state of mind that you are feeling that you can afford certain things like going to an eatery once in a while… If you are really underclass or impoverished, that, you could not do… So middle class, you aren't constantly worried about how you’re gonna pay your bills…. You wanna feel a certain amount of independence and not that you are constantly worried about every single dime that is in your wallet…

These voicings of anxiety in relation to material trappings and consumptive power can be contrasted with the easy going understanding of the American Dream narrative, which assumes
equal opportunity for everybody to succeed on the condition that they work hard. Somewhat in contrast to this, the job seekers’ descriptions of middle class in this research was focused on the benefits that jobs provide rather than a hard work ethic or even having a job. Even the “independence” mentioned above is linked to the ability to consume and maintain economic security, the hallmark of ontological security. In the case of above mentioned participant, she was getting financial support from her parents in the form of free housing and free products from Costco where her parents shop in bulk. For her, financial support and the ability to continue her consumption is tied to her ontological security and her views on her middle class status.

Some participants were explicit about their awareness of the middle-class myth in the U.S. and how emotionally loaded it is. They made sure that I knew that they knew the idea of middle class was a partial myth. Yet, rather than questioning its existence, they were questioning its content and redefining it (partly) in their own terms, often underlining the importance of both economic security and consumption items (e.g., owning a house):

I know the myth… I was raised to believe- so middle class would be- you go to college, you have a good paying job and you own your house in the suburbs and you are married and you have a couple of kids, you have a life. Um but I think about these things and Americans are indebted to and mortgaged into [becoming] middle class….If I really think about what it means to me…. it would be either having enough of an income regardless of what the actual dollar sign means so that you feel certain level of financial and psychological freedom. I think that at some point in time we had to find the middle class emotionally… I think it is more about feeling of you are not resource deprived.

After explaining the myth of middle class in the U.S. (i.e., college education, well-paying job, house in suburbs, married with kids), this participant, who owns two houses with two mortgages (none of which are underwater), is critiquing this myth with a mortgage reference. Then, she relativizes income to the needs of individuals, so that people can feel “psychological
and financial freedom.” Her definition of the middle class is one that people can continue consuming what they want within reason, and feel a sense of freedom and comfort. It is the ability to sustain economic and emotional safety that is at the crux of their class identity and therefore central to their ontological security.

To further flesh out this middle-class identity, below I provide two consumption domains that emerged in job seekers’ descriptions: 1) Everyday spending and 2) Homeownership, to show the prioritization and articulation of middle-class identity and ontological security through consumption. These two domains encapsulate the majority of elements that participants expressed during interviews describing the middle class.

**Two Domains of Consumption**

**Domain 1: Everyday Spending**

While the analysis of the concept of class through occupation is common in the study of social stratification (e.g., Coleman et al., 1978; Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Lamont, 1992, 2000), in the course of this study, descriptions of middle-class status rarely invoked work and/or occupation oriented criteria. Having a college education or the ability to send children to college were mentioned by a few participants, which are also common ways to describe middle-class status. Many participants’ descriptions included having a car and/or some form of entertainment, most frequently a vacation (22 out of 35). This indicates that descriptions of class identity as well as ontological security are tied to the ability to hold onto their consumptive power.

When asked about lifestyle changes linked to their underemployment or unemployment, many participants indicated spending less on groceries, not buying clothes, going out less, thinking twice before buying things, using thrift stores more often, cutting cable TV, purchasing
cheaper brand products, and so on. For example, in order to cope, Hector and his wife’s strategy is getting more involved in their church’s food canning nights to reduce their monthly food spending. During the house tour, Hector showed me his half-empty pantry with a few big shining cans of oats, black beans, pancake mix, pasta, and sugar. Canning activities also help Hector to participate in stable social relations independent from his part-time work. As previously mentioned, Hector’s description of middle-class identity was a “house, car, vacations, family dinners, Thanksgivings, you know Christmas dinners. I guess a settled feeling that fiscally everything is OK. No anxiety.” Hector’s description starts with two important consumption items, a house and a car, and then transitions into iconic “cozy” family moments, that are consumption rituals symbolizing prosperity (Wallendorf & Arnould, 1991).

Some participants had a “frugality talk,” which often came out when people were describing the reasons for the Great Recession. While people acknowledged the responsibility of the government and corporations in creating a crisis by not regulating certain economic transactions (government) and by providing loans to people who could not “afford” to pay them (corporations), participants also pointed out their individual responsibility to be frugal, to “live within one’s means.” Some of this frugality talk was linked to the housing crisis. Others focused on everyday consumption where participants were happy to reveal that they were shopping in thrift stores or going to stores to which they imagined “mainstream” (read: college educated and White) Americans were not going, indicating the attempt to modify some consumption patterns. For example, during a talk about expenses, Tim, a White man in his early 40s, was very proud to tell me that he shops at Food City, an Arizona grocery chain known as an Hispanic food market with low-cost vegetables. Food City is particularly popular among working and lower middle-class Arizonans. When I asked Tim if he shops on Wednesdays, the day the store offers the
lowest prices on vegetables and fruits, Tim looked at me with a blank stare indicating that he does not pay attention to when to shop for cheaper products and his frugality and modified consumption in grocery shopping only extends so far.

Looking at the participant observation and interview data, job seekers had everyday spending that could be described as “conspicuous consumption” despite their employment insecurity. These consumption items were meaningful enough to these participants that despite being unemployed or underemployed, they did not want to forgo these expenses and/or “luxuries.” In other words, continuing some of their usual consumption patterns are important, as it allows them to maintain a sense of ontological security and class identity. For example, Matt who is in his 30s and single, regularly goes to play bar trivia a couple of times a week, spending around $10 for beer and snacks each time he goes. He declared bankruptcy in 2008 on his $24,000 credit card loan. He was unemployed during the interview and borrowed money from his parents for food and rent. Another unemployed participant, Lyndall, was on a severance package; her main fear was losing her health insurance when her severance package ended. Despite being unemployed, she continued to shop at Sprouts and Trader Joe’s, both middle to upper income level grocery stores. During my second interview with Lyndall, I was sitting at a corner in her kitchen watching her take out vegetables and sausage from her grocery bags, some of which were organic items. When I asked her if she always buys organic food, she said she does not always buy organic. Her preference was local and organic food, but only if she thought she could afford it. Lyndall was not necessarily cutting her grocery shopping expenses down or changing her purchasing habits despite being unemployed for months. Another participant in his early 60s, Henry, was trying to reduce his expenses down to a minimum and wait until he turned 67, so he could get his social security income without any cuts. However, Henry did not want to
cut his expense on a gardener whom he paid $70 a month. He enjoyed his low-water use yard very much and was unwilling to curb this expense.

These job seekers were not alone in their unwillingness to remove certain items or purchases from their lives. I interpret the money spent on these “conspicuous consumption” items as helping to reproduce a middle-class identity by providing people with a sense that they still have the means (however limited) to consume the things that are beyond bare minimum consumption or basic necessities. Paying $7 for organic sausage from Sprout’s or spending $70 a month for a private gardener do not contribute to people’s ontological security in the financial sense, but they contribute to their ontological security in terms of the constancy of their social and material environments. One’s preferred activity and shopping habits or backyard maintenance expenses can create a perception of constancy in one’s class identity, and allow people to continue believing in the American Dream—even if their present consumption habits are not funded as a result of their present labor.

Job seekers who had full-time employment or full-time employed spouses were also not drastically cutting their everyday expenses. Dan, who is in his early 30s, was working part-time and making less than $15,000 a year; however, his wife was working in a medical field and had a $60,000 annual income. They recently purchased a home, and were planning a vacation to Hawaii. The couple’s main concern was cutting their monthly expenses on utilities to be below their current average of $400, a plan that entailed watering the garden less and giving up on having green grass in Arizona’s desert, which they considered a luxury. Another participant, Jennie, and her husband had just put their home on the market for a short sale, and they were getting ready to move to another town soon due to her husband’s new job. The living room was full of moving boxes. They were very disappointed about their household expenses, particularly
because their house maintenance had been a drain on their budget over the years. Their house had poor insulation, and they recently had to replace the air conditioning unit and furnace. They were also apologetic about the $11,000 they had spent on a bat mitzvah, which they had referred to as a religious and social obligation. On top of that, Jennie’s chronic health problem was another major drain on their budget. After explaining all of these expenses, Jennie and her husband also made sure I knew that their daughter’s iPad was a gift from her grandparents who are well off. While their combined annual salary of $100,000 looked good on paper, most of it was spent on housing, healthcare and, for this year, on a bat mitzvah, leaving them with little savings.

Many college-educated job seekers, who are often under- and unemployed, are far from poverty, yet they are struggling on their own terms. The stress and insecurity participants express are potentially linked to an individualized sense of fear of losing their current consumptive power and a disruption to their ontological security. The ways they articulate middle-class status and their identity are strongly tied to consumption items like a garden, iPad, vacation in Hawaii, and even the ability to host an obligatory socio-religious celebration. These consumption items, whatever they may materialize as, not only mediate people’s expression of their identity but also enable the constancy of class identity itself.

Domain 2: Homeownership

The American Dream is often narrated with visions of a “home with a white picket fence” within which the home is seen as the material representation of achieving this dream (Jefferson, 2013; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013; Vale, 2007). Homeownership has been promoted in the U.S. since the 1862 Homestead Act (Dickerson, 2009; Jackson, 1985). In this sense, the connection between the American Dream and middle-class status with homeownership is already
produced by the existing ideological mechanisms in the U.S. Homeownership is strongly emphasized as the key to financial security and stability by U.S. legislators (Iglesias, 2007; Krueckeberg, 1999) and is associated with having and maintaining greater control over one’s own life, with self-reliance, and with American citizenship (Saegert et al., 2009). A home is also a meta-consuming good where people can stage other consumption items, such as vacation photos, art, furniture, big screen TV, stainless steel appliances, granite countertops, and so on. In this sense, a home as a consumption item is seen as having the potential to provide economic security (e.g., savings) and personal security (e.g., private space) by enabling the continuity of one’s consumption habits.

What makes the association between a “house” and middle-class identity so significant is the context of when this research was conducted: the post-Great Recession Tucson, Arizona. Nearly everyone in the state has been affected by the mortgage crisis like in many other Sunbelt cities. In fact, Arizona is among the most affected states from the recent crisis along with California, Nevada and Florida. In Tucson, home values fell nearly 40% between 2006 and 2012. During the time period which I conducted these interviews, over one in three homes in Tucson were underwater—worth less than their outstanding mortgage. Most people in Arizona have friends, family members, and/or acquaintances who have lost significant value in their home, and/or have foreclosed on a home or had a short sale. Despite having a negative personal experience with housing, the majority of job-seeking college-educated participants (22 out of 35) continued to utilize a lexicon of middle-class identity situated in an earlier time period where homeownership is seen as a priority:

Middle class means you have a house, you live in a suburb. [silence] I do not know, it is hard to define. I mean- umm you have a job that pays enough for you are not just living

9 I thank Dr. Jane Zavisca for this observation.
month to month. You are able to put money away for retirement. You go out, do fun things. [silence] To me middle class just means you are stable. Below that…you have needs that are not being met. And above that…you could be…extravagant and you got a car that is nice and gets you around, you can go out spend money on a fancy car. ‘Cause you have the money, you can do that.

After the above participant mentioned “homeownership,” “a job that pays enough,” “saving money for retirement,” and “having fun,” he summed up middle-class identity to be “stable.” These are either directly consumption items (i.e., having fun) or they are factors that enable the continuity of consumption (i.e., job, savings) or both (i.e., homeownership). I interpret this description as this participant’s interpretation that stability in life, thus middle class status, is mainly achieved through an ability to continue to consume “in moderation”—e.g., not a mansion but an ordinary home, not a new BMW but a Toyota Camry.

Another participant, Jack, who foreclosed on his house in 2010, started his description of middle-class identity with owning a home but stopped himself right after to add “or not”:

Jack: I think middle class means to be able to own your house, own piece of real estate or not, you know, you could rent now and still be considered middle class and that may be the preferable route. Um being able to pay all your bills. Being able to afford good health care. Having sufficient income such that you do not have to worry about paying for stuff or you can take care of the petty necessities and the things that come up, OK? And being able to save a little bit, yeah OK. Um what else? Those are some of the main things for an individual, yeah.

Ufuk: Why is housing so important?

Jack: Why is housing so important? Well you know that is the first basic need, shelter and I think [for long time] in this country…, how I can put it, [it was] viewed as being the middle class, if you owned your own home. That was one of the tickets or one of the indicators that you were in the middle class, if you owned your own home.

Jack is a divorced father with one teenage child; he lost his house (through a foreclosure), and then subsequently his job. I conducted the interview in the large basement of his old friend’s
house in an upper class neighborhood where Jack has been living for the past year. Rather than talking about his college education or occupational status which are common ways to describe the middle class (e.g., Coleman et al., 1978; Jackman & Jackman, 1983; Lamont, 1992, 2000), Jack’s description of middle class started with homeownership, which many scholars views as the basis of ontological security and the gateway to the American Dream (Saegert et al., 2009). The rest of the description consists of consumption items or factors that enable consumption. Upon asking Jack about the importance of housing, he talks about a house as a biological or basic need, as well as a ticket to a middle-class identity.

Scholars make a certain connection between consumption and basic biological needs, yet consumption is more than just satisfying those basic needs (Slater, 1997). It is also a means for identity formation. For example, the home Jack foreclosed on was not ordinary. It was newly built in an upper middle-class neighborhood with views of downtown Tucson. When Jack talked about his former home, his description was also a statement of his middle-class lifestyle: good neighborhood, gym in the basement, and views of the city. Home provided a secure base for Jack to articulate this class identity, until it was no longer available to him.

Another participant, Miriam, is in her 50s, single, and originally from California. While she could not afford to buy a house there, she bought one in Arizona in 2004 for her future retirement, and let her single mother live there, paying a portion of the mortgage. After losing her job in 2011, Miriam decided to move to Arizona and live with her mother. At the time of the interview, she was not underwater on her mortgage, and she did not have a problem with making her monthly mortgage payment. Her monthly payment was around $700, and her mother was paying half of it along with utilities. To my question of what middle class means to her, Miriam started with a very positive description of it, with an emphasis on economic security, which has
implications on consumption practices. She pointed out that homeownership or striving for a home is important for middle-class status. Yet, pretty soon, she emphasized that this description is not working anymore. Her description indicates that middle-class status involves or at least used to involve the consumptive power to purchase a home. In addition, this class identity also describes being able to afford a college degree for yourself and your children, the ability to save, and to live in a particular type of environment. As with other participants, being middle class extends beyond one’s income and has more to do with feelings of economic security and all that it entails:

Well I think a middle-class individual is educated, with at least a bachelor's degree; [living in] an urban environment; kind of mainstream, that is how I look at it. A home or striving for a home. It is all about economic security for the family and the kids. And it is not as much about money. I mean it is money but it is more of the sense of security. You’re gonna keep your job. You are gonna be able to save for your children's education and yeah. That [model] has been reeking you know… I think it is all about economics, gross domestic product… I guess that the housing industry led so much of that - because that is where middle-class income is established - in a sense of security. Because it [house] is valuable, so it should go up in time, you know this is just a sure investment but I do not think it is guaranteed security anymore. It used to [be] but I think things have changed. Now we are in a different era…

However flawed, as evidenced by the recent mortgage crisis, homeownership is an extraordinary resilient aspect of the American Dream (Cullen, 2003). Increasingly promoted by the government through tax exemptions, homeownership has come to be seen as a nest egg for middle-class families to save for the future (Schelkle, 2012). While the home is a consumption item in and of itself, homeownership can enable consumption in the present by being considered a meta-consumption item (e.g., a space to utilize goods) and also later in life by earning equity and therefore lending itself to one’s ability to increase their future consumptive power and provide economic security. But more importantly, Dupuis and Thorns (1998:29) point out that
people derive ontological security from homeownership as opposed to renting when the following four conditions are met: 1) home is a site of constancy in the material and social environment; 2) home is a place in which the day-to-day routines of human existence are performed; 3) home is a site where people feel most in control of their lives because they feel free from the surveillance that is part of the contemporary work; and 4) home is a secure base around which identities are constructed. Even when so many of the above conditions are chipped away, as seen with the recent mortgage crisis, Americans continue to prioritize homeownership in their descriptions of middle-class identity over many other factors (e.g. occupation, income, education), and articulate their class identity through this consumption item.

**Conclusion**

While consumption is one of the most recurring lenses to analyze middle-class identity (Heiman et al., 2012), this scholarly attention to consumption was a larger trend in the social sciences. Ackroyd et al. (2006) observed a “cultural turn,” since the 1990s, away from studying economies and work organizations toward studying consumption and identity. Similarly, Bauman (2005, 2007) declared a move away from work ethic to the aesthetic of consumption in which self is produced and consumed by self. Some scholars saw this cultural turn as the “death of class,” (Pakulski & Waters, 1996) pointing to the paradox of class phenomenon—the fact that structural inequalities grew but people seem to not interpret this inequality in class terms (Savage, 2000). One frequent explanation is the rise of consumerism in which people pursue individualized lifestyles (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1994). Others have rejected seeing this cultural turn as the “death of class,” stating that the experience of class is often implicitly and indirectly expressed through culture (Reay, 2005; Savage, Bagnall, & Longhurst, 2001; Skeggs, 2004).
Likewise, I ultimately see the emphasis on consumption and the centralization of ontological security discourses in defining American middle-class identity among college educated job seekers as implicit and indirect ways of expressing class identity. Indeed, people derive their sense of security and notions of middle-class identity from their ability to consume beyond their basic needs.

Additionally, unlike studies that create a strong link between middle-class status and consumption with the concept of aspiration, which gives a sense of eagerness, craving, and a desire to belong to a “better” grouping (Fehérváry, 2011; O'Dougherty, 2002; Schielke, 2012; Zhang, 2008), I argue that consumption among job-seeking participants in the post-Great Recession is a signal for making a decent living and having economic and social stability and security in the face of threatening economic conditions. My participants’ descriptions of middle-class identity, in other words, what they imagine to be the basic tenets of middle-class status, revolve around the capacity to continue consuming, even if this consumption is modified. The ability to go to camping provides a break from work; hosting a Thanksgiving dinner brings the family together; and eating one’s usual foods can provide a psychological comfort. This consumptive power (and the ability to maintain it) provides a sense of ontological security for these college educated Americans, perpetuating belief in the American Dream, even if they cannot presently fund it based on a result of their individual labor.

An avenue for future research is job-seekers’ views of healthcare insurance. While some scholars analyze healthcare within the consumption sector (e.g., Hacker, 1997; Hay, 1989), lay people do not always view it as a consumption item. Interestingly, despite the vast negative media and political discourses surrounding healthcare and health insurance, in tandem with high healthcare costs, only a third of participants in this research indicated a concern for health
insurance coverage and costs during interviews. Additionally, very few participants mentioned healthcare in their descriptions of middle-class identity. As a worked-based benefit, healthcare insurance may become increasingly salient for middle-class identity when its loss increases out-of-pocket expenses and replaces other everyday consumption items.

As previously mentioned, the concept of ontological security has been the most useful in studies on housing. Homeownership is seen as an important signal of middle-class status, and scholars have argued that homeowners attain more ontological security than renters, for a home provides a physical and permanent location in an uncertain world (Dupuis & Thorns, 1998; Saunders, 1990). Yet this linking of housing tenure to ontological security came under critical scrutiny. Hiscock, Kearns, MacIntyre, and Ellaway (2001:62) stated that “greater ontological security is not necessarily to do with tenure itself: it is to do with having wealth, living in a nice area, living in a larger and better quality dwelling and being settled in relationships and work.” In this sense, housing relates to larger patterns of consumption where aspects of work, health, neighborhood, and stable social relations converge. Thus, people drive ontological security from broader lifestyle conditions, not just from homeownership alone. Discussions among participants about their various consumption items in describing this class position supports this argument.

It is clear that middle-class identity in the U.S. is complex and varied in it definitions. What is important to note is that college-educated job seekers articulate their middle-class status through their consumptive power and their ability to maintain it, even if this maintenance requires modification. The centrality of consumption to middle-class identity relates to the participants’ sense of ontological security, which allows for the reproduction the American Dream metanarrative.
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