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Job search success among the formerly-unemployed: paradoxically, a matter of self-discipline

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Abstract

At a time when activation is an essential cog in the fight against unemployment, looking for a job is top priority in the life of the jobless, and becomes their professional occupation. Job search experience is studied here in the light of the institutional norms and prescriptions that frame it. Our fieldwork has focused on the supposed correspondence between these two, since our interviewees were formerly-unemployed people who have managed to land relatively long-term positions. Three results were identified: first, their experiences espouse a self-help model; second, in spite of compliance with this model, the search is jeopardized by its uncertain outcome, and third, an alternative model has emerged, characterized by job search limitations in the emotional, temporal and behavioral registers. These adjustments deviate from institutional standards yet are nonetheless the result of thoughtful and personal management, *i.e.* of applying a principle of self-discipline that is paradoxically in line with the institutional model of job search.

Keywords

Getting a job, experience, institutional standards, job search, self-discipline, unemployed people

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Introduction

The experience of unemployment has been amply researched ever since the 1930s. Many qualitative and comprehensive studies describe the negative consequences of joblessness, yet the job search itself has not been significantly documented (Demazière 2006). In recent decades, however, unemployment has become inseparable from looking for work because unemployed people are increasingly forced to search for a job. This consequence of the dynamics of welfare regimes has been characterized by what is known as “advanced liberalism” (Dean, 1999). Social policies have increasingly been shaped by logics of activation (Clasen and Clegg, 2006) and responsabilization (MacDonald and Marston, 2005), reinforcing the process of making welfare recipients more active and autonomous in improving their situation. For the unemployed, this means that they are driven into the role of job seeker (Boland and Griffin, 2015a). The job search is the crux of the relationship connecting the unemployed to the welfare state that registers, checks, and supports them. So, we suggest that the unemployed are defined by the job search, *i.e.* by the injunction to look for work. The job search is the hub of both the jobless condition and public policy targeting the unemployed.

In our view, sociological analyses of the ways in which unemployed people conduct a job search have not fully appreciated the importance of legal norms, institutional injunctions and administrative control procedures. Indeed, job search is often studied in a decontextualized way, one step removed from institutions and social policies. One dominant approach involves measuring research intensity (Benhabib and Bull, 1983), which leads to the comparison of such population categories as men and women (Kulik, 2000). Then, the focus is placed on individual behaviors, taking little account of the normative and institutional context in which they are embedded. The same is true when it comes to measuring the impact of unemployment on job search, including growing discouragement as unemployment duration lengthens (Wanberg et al., 2005).

This article focuses on the job search and how it is experienced by job seekers within the normative context that frames unemployment. It is not a matter of comparing individual behavior patterns with institutional demands, nor of considering the latter as a benchmark by which to evaluate the compliance of unemployed people’s activity. Ethnographic studies on the welfare state have already detailed the concrete practices through which the unemployed and jobseekers are controlled and disciplined (Dubois, 2009; Boland, 2016). Extending these critical approaches, our analysis concerns the job-search experiences of the unemployed, which are, in our opinion, a major component of public policy toward the unemployed. We define lived experience as a combination of practical acts, interpretation of events, making sense of things, and reflective thinking (Mack and Paylor, 2016) that can be captured through in-depth interviews. This approach makes it possible to question job search standards (which are part of social policies) from a new perspective, focusing on their appropriation by the unemployed. The literature on employment services suggests that in job seeking, the unemployed are not allowed to neglect the institutional norms that are at once both resources for action and supportive of control and sanctions. And our hypothesis is that, at the same time, they are unable to simply comply with the institutional program which sets unattainable standards, so they have to define and follow specific rules so as to achieve the intended goal.

Scholars have recently analyzed the job search experience by highlighting what the institutions responsible for spreading norms, distributing roles and governing behavior do. Such studies underline the potency of the obligations that weigh on the unemployed, transforming the job search into “the work of unemployment” (Griffin, 2015: 123). These studies also show that

such work implies, first and foremost, working on oneself, which in turn involves a considerable amount of personal discipline, the outcome of which is put down to individual responsibility (Boland, 2016). These investigations describe how institutions offering the unemployed support and guidance (such as job search clubs and state-funded organizations) frame the job search experience (Sharone, 2013; Van Oort, 2015). On an empirical level, the present article rounds out those contributions, since we interviewed formerly-unemployed individuals having managed to land a job, rather than currently-unemployed individuals participating in these programs. Their job search can, then, be considered to have been both active and consistent, since the end result was a return to employment. But does this in-a-way-successful-job-hunt mean the person acted in line with institutional norms and frameworks? Or does it point to a capacity to adapt, and a mindset that allowed them to distance themselves somewhat from the normative model? On a theoretical level, this paper supports the thesis that the job search is institutionally framed (and job seekers' behavior monitored) by pinpointing a paradoxical logic: normative prescriptions were transgressed, but this was as a consequence of the remarkable regulation of the job search by the job seeker themselves. **The article's main argument is that a successful job search entails distancing oneself from institutional norms, though at a cost of self-discipline that, though different, is equally strong. And this transgression makes it possible to achieve the goal shared by the unemployed, and the institutions, namely: getting a job.**

The article begins with a discussion of the current literature on unemployment experience and the place devoted to job search within it. It continues with a presentation of the methodology, data and the French context in which the fieldwork was conducted (based on in-depth interviews with formerly-unemployed people who have succeeded in getting a job). Next, the results are developed in two steps, corresponding to the two identified facets of the job search experience. First, we observe that, since looking for work is organized round the norms that govern individual activity, being in charge of one's own future and taking personal responsibility for results, it is bound to reflect institutional injunctions. Yet the activities undertaken by unemployed people in order to get a job reveal the limitations of those norms, which instill discouragement, confusion and doubt at the heart of the experience. Consequently, tensions arise between the strategies implemented and the ordeals endured. Second, we argue that these tensions are contained and overcome by keeping the job search in check, which entails people limiting their own emotional involvement, as well as the amount of time devoted to it and the corresponding tasks. A successful job hunt thus appears to be both moderate and mitigated, keeping the activation norm at one remove. **But these moderations in turn are the result of rules that not only distort but also mirror institutional norms, forming what we call a model of self-discipline.**

Job search experience and unemployment

For sociologists seeking to analyze the experiences of the unemployed, the job search remained peripheral, barring a few notable exceptions (Bakke, 1940b). This strong trend was initiated in the 1920s by the famous investigation carried out in a small town hit by a wave of massive unemployment (Jahoda, Lazarsfeld and Zeisel, 1972). The authors deciphered people's reactions to losing their jobs and registered the negative consequences: loss of self-confidence, shrinking social networks, weakened collective memberships, disruption of daily schedules, etc. Described as a "weary" or "resigned" community, the unemployed were seen as apathetic. Later on, several studies served to enrich our sociological knowledge of the effects of unemployment by showing the breakdown of self-esteem (Tiffany, Cowan and Tiffany, 1970); the destabilization of family life (Fagin and Little, 1984); damaged social relations (Bakke, 1940a); economic pauperization (Gallie, Paugam and Jacobs, 2003); deregulated life styles

(Burman and Rinehart, 1990); psychological or emotional imbalance (Hayes and Nutman, 1981); health hazards (Wilson and Walker, 1983) and eroded social position (Procoli, 2004).

These powerful empirical studies provide an overall picture, where unemployment is portrayed as a set of privations that undermine (or even paralyze) the jobless, the process of looking for a job received very little attention. Sociological research seems to have been shaped by a “deprivation theory of unemployment” (Boland and Griffin, 2015a), which was as much a presupposition (Cole, 2007) as it was a result. Yet the jobless are also forced to look for work. And nowadays, that activity has become indissociable from their status and occupies an ever-larger place in their daily life. These people are considered, and treated, as jobseekers rather than unemployed (Demazière, 2019).

The development of the welfare state and its array of institutions, systems and professionals responsible for supervising the unemployed is reason enough to pay more attention to the job search. In the mid-20th century, it became a major criterion in the statistical codification of unemployment. Above all, with the development of activation policies (Barbier, 2007; Van Berkel et al., 2012), the job search has become a crucial aspect of the role assigned to the jobless. Their daily life is increasingly monitored: they must actively look for work, are under supervision and subject to punishment (Dubois, 2009), as are other populations experiencing social insecurity (Wacquant, 2009). Jobless status is based not so much on the lack of a job as on a job search that has to be both active and evidenced. This explains why both the “death of unemployment” and the “birth of job seeking” figure in the framework of activation policies (Boland and Griffin, 2015a). Henceforth, the unemployment experience is to a large extent a matter of looking for work – a search inseparable from the institutional norms that frame it. Also, the job search cannot be reduced to a combination of techniques in which the unemployed must invest in various ways, for example by studying job adverts, applying for jobs, making calls, visiting firms, asking around among friends and relations, updating their résumé. The search is the subject of institutional framing, through prescriptions and control. And we believe that its consequences, far from being limited to activating the unemployed, run deeper, affecting the job search experience as a whole, which is comprised of a combination of meaningful activities - events, situations, acts, and real-life episodes, including the interpretations, interrogations, projections and evaluations that make them significant (Demazière, 2014).

The job search experience has been documented in fieldwork carried out within the institutions that are in charge of the unemployed. In the wake of Michel Foucault’s work, those institutions are often looked upon as cases of “governmentality” – that is, because their aim is to socialize and mold individuals into compliance with normative requirements, they go beyond control and punishment. Reflecting Foucault’s neo-liberalism, offering the job seeker guidance and support is then viewed as the “strategic programming of an individual’s activity” (2008: 223). Piloting the experience of joblessness and transforming it into the experience of looking for work has also been described in fieldwork carried out within organizations specializing in adult education, coaching, and competence enhancement (Garrett-Peters, 2009; Gabriel, Gray and Goregaokar, 2013; Boland and Griffin, 2015b). A finding emerges that is true across all these fields with regard to various categories of jobless people (managers, white collar workers, and professionals): everything serves to keep the problem of unemployment and its solutions at a strictly individual level. As a result, the job search now means working on oneself and exercising personal discipline; rather than finding work, it means transforming oneself to become recruitable, attractive and employable. It becomes a “governance of the self” (Boland, 2015: 146) that comes in several varieties, each of which amounts to no more than a precept – stay positive, build connections, know how to sell yourself, make new contacts, etc. All of

which implies that you will take charge of your own destiny, becoming the entrepreneur of your own self. Much of the fieldwork demonstrates this conversion, a process that consists of convincing yourself that you are both on top of, and responsible for, your own situation, and that finding a job depends on you alone, in other words a conversion to a “self-help paradigm” (Sharone, 2007: 406).

The institutions and systems that target the unemployed are therefore places in which people are socialized toward finding a job, where methods and techniques are learned, and above all where a new self is manufactured, in line with the logics of individualization and responsabilization that dominate current social policy (Ferge, 1997; Hamilton, 2014). It is all about producing active (and indefatigable) jobless people (or, to be more precise, job seekers) whose to-do list endlessly grows, who are autonomous and responsible, who are convinced that their future depends on the effort they put in, and who are willing and able to believe in their own capacity to be transformed into the ideal candidate for a job. Learning self-government and self (personal) work can be more or less successful, more or less long-lasting. Doubts can undermine both the job search and the belief in personal work, and even distort its meaning: “from boost to bust” (Sharone, 2007: 416). Such a reversal has often been noted among the long-term unemployed, who are easily discouraged (Cottle, 2001). In contrast, fieldwork carried out at career counseling firms underlines the extent to which institutional norms influence the job search experience and conclude that, to quote Foucault once again, any force that promotes self-discipline and self-transformation is “productive”. However, these analyses fail to examine precisely the extent of the effects of these institutional actions on the unemployed. Focused on institutional logics, they consider the unemployed to be converted, more or less acutely, to activation and self-responsibility. But, in terms of the experiences of the unemployed, what happens to the institutional prescriptions? Are they followed? Or are they adjusted or transgressed?

Thus, in order to analyze job search experiences, we performed an empirical switch. Instead of targeting the long-term, discouraged, unemployed, whose behavior disregards established norms, or jobless people registered in training periods, who take part in institutional activities, we ventured into virgin territory: that of formerly-unemployed people who had landed a job. This made it possible to generate job-search narratives unshackled by the need for self-justification, because, whatever else they may have done, these unemployed people had succeeded. This allowed us to question the experience of looking for work from the perspectives of those who have been through it (Bruner, 1987; Ezzy, 2000). Which is not to say that normative models were excluded from their narratives or our analysis. We argue, however, that this empirical switch can lead to the assignment of a different meaning to the gaps that separate the experiences from the norms. Rather than boiling down to a lack of compliance with institutional norms, these experiences are the expression of a counter-model that is based on several self-limitations: in terms of job search, emotional involvement, and time devoted to job search.

Methodology: in-depth biographical interviews

Our fieldwork was carried out in France in 2015, when the ILO unemployment rate was at a high of 9.9%. The situation of the unemployed had considerably deteriorated, with rises in the duration of joblessness (over one year, for 43% of unemployed people); the number of people wanting to work but classified as inactive (1.5 million to add to the 2.8 million ILO unemployed), and the sort of work they obtained (fewer than 15% landed open-ended contracts). In such a setting, the end-of-unemployment experience of the population we

interviewed was relatively positive: these were unemployed people who got jobs and were still in the post a year later. Formerly-unemployed people, then, whose work situation has become fairly stable. The French context combines activation policies that are fairly soft, in comparison with other countries having high unemployment levels (Barbier, 2007; Serrano-Pascual, 2007). In France, unemployed people are registered with a public employment office (*Pôle Emploi*), then supported and monitored by the agents of this institution. Since the 2000s, the persistence of mass unemployment has led to advisers spending less time with the unemployed. Thus, those considered most employable (and perceived as autonomous) are rarely seen, whereas those experiencing most difficulties are seen monthly, for varying amounts of time. Those who fall between these two extremes are seen for 30 minutes at least every six months (Clouet and Pillon, 2017). As a result, the impact of *Pôle Emploi* support on job seekers' careers is limited, and unemployed people's confidence in the institution has weakened (Lavitry, 2015).

For those who have successfully escaped unemployment, job search can be deemed active and effective from the outset, allowing analysis to concentrate on personal logics and rationales. Our hypothesis is that this active job search reflects an adaptation and adjustment to the prescribed standards, rather than a simple alignment with them. However, since each formerly-unemployed person has a specific career path, we diversified the sample so as to avoid a concentration of profiles that were favorable to finding work. *Pôle Emploi* provided us with a list of candidates, from which we selected a sample of formerly-unemployed people who, having secured a job in January 2014, had not returned to *Pôle Emploi* one year later, varying their sex, age, qualification and unemployment duration. The profiles of our 38 formerly-unemployed interviewees, including the professional positions they obtained, are diverse (Table 1).

TABLE 1 here

Our method sought to break with the requirement of justifying the job search that is imposed on unemployed people by the services in charge of advising/controlling them. Conversely, it does risk collecting heroic stories that highlight individual ability to cope. Yet this risk appears theoretical, since what the material collected shows is self-limitation of the job search. Nevertheless, in the future we plan to compare narratives collected from different categories of unemployed people: those who got a job, who have been excluded after a check, and who are still looking for work. In any case, building trusting relationships was of particular importance, since being jobless is often synonymous with being made to feel worthless (Burman and Rinehart, 1990; Ezzy, 2001). The interviews were carried out in locations chosen by interviewees - often within their homes. They were conducted in a conversational mode that was marked by interactive reciprocity. The interview length (often almost 2 hours) and the gratitude expressed by some of the interviewees indicate that a climate of mutual trust had indeed been nurtured. The protocol was neither exclusively aimed at the job search, nor *a fortiori* at their present occupation; it also sought to elucidate their experience of unemployment, their professional careers, living conditions and ways of life. We frequently picked up on, or returned to, what interviewees had said, because we wished to obtain and encourage detailed accounts of their activities and behaviors while they were unemployed in order to trigger the reflective processes that can generate meaning and interpretation. The people contacted were of course informed that they were free to refuse to answer, and that their anonymity was strictly guaranteed.

Thematic analysis was applied to the transcribed interviews, so as to describe the forms of unemployment experience (Huberman and Miles, 1994: 245s). Here, we focus on the job search

experiences *per se*. For each interview, several consecutive methods were then combined for analysis, paying special attention to the evaluative dimensions of the narrative (Gergen and Gergen, 1988): pinpointing passages relating to recent job search experience; making an inventory of the activities actually performed; listing the arguments associated with initiatives that were either acted upon or rejected; recalling outstanding episodes; identifying intervening changes; distinguishing ways of doing things, and characterizing the actors involved. Comparison of these analytical accounts allowed us to identify the most striking features that most had in common. Beyond differences in approach (reflecting the diversity of occupations, skills and sectors of activity), close or similar meanings and interpretations emerged. The points of convergence (that is, how institutional norms are kept at a distance) are sufficiently blatant to be foregrounded. The results show, however, that these differences have varying intensities, so we shall return to this point in our conclusion. Choosing to position job search narratives at the heart of our analysis, we have sought to understand the relationships between successful job-search behaviors and institutional norms and prescriptions.

Tensions in the job search experience

It comes as no surprise to learn that the formerly-unemployed people we interviewed put their success down to their own efforts; such an attitude is coherent with the self-government and personal work model. Yet, in the light of the difficulties and obstacles that had shaken their self-confidence, this claim must be taken with a pinch of salt. What emerges from their narratives is that job search is difficult to maintain over time, while remaining a highly-valued priority. This tension is apparent in the main dimensions of the “self-help paradigm” (Sharone, 2007: 406) that frames the job search as active and continuous, masterfully controlled and skillfully conducted, a commitment supported by the belief in its effectiveness.

Between being active and being discouraged

The people interviewed claimed to have sought work very actively, counting both the number of steps they took and measuring the intensity of their efforts. They stressed the amount of time spent on the search: “a full-time job”, “long weeks”, “I didn’t count the hours”, “more time-consuming than work”, “always on the go”¹. Their daily schedule was organized around the job search, and they also set deadlines for it: “no more than six months”, “before my daughter’s birthday”, “after this summer, it’ll be sorted”. The conjunction of these two temporalities – maximizing temporal expenditure and minimizing the period of time necessary – reveals the centrality of the job search. It is a concrete translation of the command to search actively, expressed by imperative formulas used by interviewees such as “you must” followed by such expressions as: “get a move on”, “get a hold of yourself”, “act”, “go for it”, “react”, “stay with it”, “stay strong”, “move forward”, “be realistic” and “make an effort”. This imperative does not refer to any external source, or the fear of being checked up on or punished. Rather, it is presented as stemming from a personal need, self-imposed by the unemployed person (and sometimes forcefully relayed by their entourage). They describe it as a self-imposed obligation.

However, multiplying attempts to land a job also means accumulating disappointments and setbacks. In that sense, beyond being an established norm, searching actively is also an experience that exposes the unemployed to exhaustion that is equal to their exertion. The narratives show that the job search moves forward in a rough, ragged manner, alternating moments of high and low intensity, periods of activism and lethargy. Most interviewees spoke of times when they lost heart, were depressed, or stopped looking for variable periods of time. The longer the period of unemployment last, the more pronounced and difficult these events

become - or else, they occur suddenly following unexpected failure. Searching actively also means becoming discouraged, due to the uncertainty of outcome and disillusionment that follows shattered expectations. Discouragement is therefore an intrinsic part of the active job search. It surfaces when the search becomes unbearable, and points to a loss of control due to a loss of meaning:

The job search is a trip, but nobody tells you where you're going (laughs). You think you've got a chance but then nothing happens. At one point I couldn't go on, I just couldn't, that's all, I lost faith. I was worn out (...) Little by little, I bounced back, but I don't know how it all happened. It had just become impossible (man, 56, university degree, sales manager, following a 20-month period of unemployment).

Between control and confusion

Interviewees claimed (with varying levels of insistence) to be competent job seekers. Yet not all had received specific job-search training - and those that had, were both the youngest and most highly-skilled. Competence is defined here as the ability to manage the job search, and to do so in a way that is compliant with your own professional goals. The job search is defined less as mastery of techniques than being capable of applying them in an appropriate manner. The variety of techniques (both applied and rejected) is therefore considerable. This selection process is a sign of attempts to improve an already good, reflective and flexible job search. Each interviewee thus places their job search within specific sub-spaces of the labor market, aligning it with local characteristics by giving precedence to the methods they consider most pertinent.

My CV, I tried a bit at first, but it ended up in the trash can. As for the want ads, I know they're rigged (...) I know my sector well, I've just got to adapt. The basis is easy. Afterwards, it gets horrid. An avalanche of emails and ringing them after. Be a prospect, catch their eye. That's it, they've got to remember who you are. I stepped back and took stock but it's hard, very hard. But you'd be a fool to do it differently, because that's how it works, so that's how you must do it (woman, 52, two years of university, communications manager for an association, following a 21-month period of unemployment).

However, the power these people claim to have over the job search comes up against the difficulty of anticipating the outcome. In that sense, their ability to manage the process is strongly challenged by the unreliability of results. This throws them off kilter, creating confusion. Certain events clearly bring that tension to the fore, e.g. when interviewees are unable to explain why they were taken on, given their previous, fruitless attempts at landing similar positions. But the experience most often reported is that of the inexplicable failure, highlighting a huge gap between the hope of being appointed to a post that matches your profile and skills and then being turned down after a series of interactions with recruiters. These episodes reveal the fragility of expectations and cause people to lose their bearings, destabilizing a job search that had seemed under control.

I was sure I'd get it, it had all gone so well. An excellent, high-quality encounter. And then they took on somebody else (...) I didn't understand what was happening. It was a nightmare. I'd done everything right; the job was tailor-made for me. I felt like everything I'd ever done had been swept away. There was nothing left, everything I'd set up, down the drain (woman, 47, Master's degree, employed in care work, following a 9-month period of unemployment).

Between responsibility and doubt

Responsibility for one's own future is another theme that crops up in job search narratives. The argument is less concerned with the fact of having landed a job than it is with the belief that it is worth trying. This belief expresses the self-confidence that comes from personal work, three components of which can be identified: these correspond to the three demands made of the job seeker. You must have a positive attitude so as to act with your whole being: "believe in it", "go the whole hog", "get rid of the negative vibes", "stop going around in circles". You must also be open and ready to take full advantage of every situation, "be on the lookout", "keep your eyes open", "stay awake", "grab your chance". But you must also reflect on how your job search can be improved, "understand what went wrong", "listen to others", "learn from your mistakes", "find that little something that will carry the day". Certain incidents in the course of the search force job seekers into intensive periods of soul-searching, and these contribute to maintaining their belief and faith in their own chances of success. That is the case, for example, with job interviews, which have been obtained after having overcome several hurdles in the selection process. Being hired, then, seems to depend on your personal ability to clinch a deal - confirming the feeling of personal responsibility for what happens next.

The worst is being called in for an interview. The pressure is unbelievable! I was already going crazy, especially at first. You prepare like mad, because it's your own life that's on the line. You know it's going to hang by a thread. The pressure - that's what gives you the adrenaline (man, 46, low-level vocational qualification, franchised shop-keeper, following an 11-month period of unemployment).

Nevertheless, claiming responsibility is dampened by actual experience as well as by the repeated let-downs that make so many dents in a person's belief that results depend on their own actions. This leads interviewees to express doubts as to their own ability to carry out an effective job search. They mull over their behavior, laying blame on the amount or suitability of the efforts they put in: "How can you be sure you did everything you could?" "Shouldn't you have spent more time doing it?" "Were you responsive enough?" "What more could you have done?" And so it goes on. Their belief in their own ability to remain in charge of their job search, and get results, is thus counterbalanced by the impression of not having many hits, or having exhausted their resources.

Everybody will tell you I'm pretty self-confident. But although I say I did everything right, it's hard to always believe it. At one point I didn't see what more I could do. I began doubting everything, maybe I should go about it differently, that sort of thing. But I saw that - no, I *had* done everything I could. That's when you go crazy. In fact, I thought I was finished (woman, 45, high school diploma, sales-person, following a 15-month period of unemployment).

Job search as self-discipline

The story of a successful job search is told as the ability of unemployed people to undertake personal work, persevere, gain control of their own destiny and feel responsible for their own situation. But this claim of self-improvement is contradicted by the frustrating events that breed discouragement, confusion and doubt. To reduce anxiety, these people resort to various forms of "DIY", which, when combined, create an alternative type of job search. Backed up by the claim that their control of the search is strategic and well thought-out, this model entails putting limitations on that search. Emotional involvement is kept as low-key as possible, and the amount of time spent looking is restricted, so that people manage to step back somewhat from the role they have been ascribed. We refer to this as the self-discipline model.

Setting the emotional limits

Formerly-unemployed people having landed a job repeatedly argued that their job search was central for them. Not only was it what filled their days, but it was the only thing that opened a window onto the future: “My last hope”, “I saw that and only that: search, search, look, look”, “All my energy went into that”, “My only chance to come out on top”. These words show that the job search is the object of an intense, subjective investment. It helps them get moving and make an effort. But it can also become an obsession – one that is difficult to channel or frame. In this event, looking for a job becomes all-pervasive, and knows no limits. Rather than triggering action, it risks becoming deadly - like a serious and invasive illness whose development can no longer be curbed.

I lived through that; it was terrible. A sort of frenzy I couldn't get rid of. It gnawed away at me inside. I couldn't sleep, in fact it was like a sickness (...). But when I realized it was eating away at me like a cancer, I thought, I must get rid of it. That was the turning point, catching on to the fact that the job search can do you in (man, 39, two years of university, real-estate employee, following a 16-month period of unemployment).

In the end, this subjective investment is kept in check by “little tricks”, techniques aimed at mitigating (and thus sustaining) their commitment. Interviewees spoke of principles that suggest some sort of psychological or mental preparation: “avoid talking yourself into believing in the existence of any “tailor-made” job offers; “be prepared to fail”, “show you believe in it but don't fool yourself”, “keep a cool head”, “be clear about the drawbacks of the job”. For these people, it was a matter of controlling their emotions and limiting their enthusiasm while remaining self-sufficient and self-contained. Such an attitude boils down to taking a hard look at one pillar of the self-help model, since it means accepting that failure depends on many factors. Forcing yourself to admit this means taking better charge of the job search by maintaining a critical stance – so that the inevitable setbacks and disappointments are less painful.

Once you've been slapped down a few times, there are two options: either you're a masochist and you keep doing it, or you know you have to get a grip. That's how I figured it out, it was very simple. I couldn't go on as I was, so I forced myself to slow down. Control the energy. The first thing to do is tell yourself that it doesn't all depend on you. It's not surprising that it doesn't work. You have to learn to be humble, otherwise you drown (woman, 51, MA, manager in a public service, following a 24-month period of unemployment).

Setting temporal limits

Unemployment leaves you with time to kill, empty time that the job search can fill and even colonize. Many interviews revealed a temporal dynamic specific to the job search, fueled by a range of elements, depending on the situation: being unsure of how much time to give it; feeling guilty for being jobless; the urgency to put an end to it; the pressure put on you by friends and family and the internalization of a moral obligation. It is a vicious circle: the “never enough” syndrome. Though it is variously expressed, this shapes the job search experience. It reveals the other facet, the negative aspect of the active search: an aberration in which the job search devours all your available time, becoming an obsession.

It was my duty. I had to do my duty, to the best of my ability of course. That's what doing your duty means, inherited from the work ethic and all. Except there's no schedule. No limit. How can you know if you did well? (...) As long as you have nothing, there's no way of knowing. Because I thought to myself it's not enough, I'm not enough, well, not

active enough, I mean (woman, 42, high school diploma, supervisor in the social services sector, following a 23-month period of unemployment).

The pressures imposed on your time by the job search are heavy, and the longer it lasts, the harder they are to bear. At some point, fatigue sets in, a prelude to deterioration of the job search. To overcome this difficulty, formerly-unemployed people experimented with temporal arrangements that sustained the job search by setting limits. They decided on time slots, diversely defined: “a maximum of four 8-hour days”, “nine-to-one, and that’s it”, “one four-day week and one two-day week”, “I counted 20-hour weeks, no more”. Though diverse, all of these temporal frameworks shared a similar objective: to channel the job search, that is, to reserve set time-sequences capable of supporting individual commitments, while at the same time imposing limits allowing an escape from that all-pervasive activity.

Organizing is primordial. When you’re not working, everything disappears. It’s impossible to go on as you were, schedules and all that. You no longer... To look for work, you have to go about it differently. I did four days a week, maximum, until early afternoon. You’ve got to know how to set limits on yourself, if not you get swallowed up, you go around in circles (man, 47, high school diploma, office worker in a small firm, following a 15-month period of unemployment).

Compensating through personal activities

When the time allotted to looking for job is self-restricted, interviewees develop activities unconnected to the search. These are the “off-work” of unemployment and constitute the third aspect of the self-discipline model. These activities vary considerably: family life, private breaks, DIY, sports, cultural practices, diverse leisure activities, or, more rarely, volunteer work. The amount of time given over to these activities also varies from regular and often to more irregular and seldom. Yet this diversity is subsumed in a common meaning: the idea is to counterbalance the job search with activities that both have value and give you value in return, bringing pleasure and personal satisfaction. These activities are often a return to old habits – during periods of employment – yet they compensate for the ordeal of unemployment by letting you “forget your problems”, “do something else”, “clear your head”, “put yourself on hold”, “be yourself again”.

At the same time, they can also be interpreted as an extension of looking for work by other means. Though independent of the search, they support and back it up. What interviewees were pointing out by declaring that they are “observing the rules of life”, “aiming for a healthier existence”, “applying survival principles”, “maintaining a balance”, “inventing a viable environment”, is an overall organizational mode. What is at stake here is a day-to-day pattern aimed at staving off the pressures of the job search, at channeling it in order to sustain their enthusiasm. In this way, the two types of activity – the job search specific to unemployment and the personal activities that delineate a sort of off-work pursuit – are kept clearly separate, and any potential for rivalry between them is neutralized by the fact that they occupy different time slots and can bolster each other. Being active in the job search also means being active on the side, according to a dual-activity model in which the role of the second element is to sustain and preserve the first element.

I made up my mind to use some of the time for myself. Well, so as not to be down in the dumps all the time, let’s put it that way. I went out a lot (...) I went to the library a lot. It’s an escape, well - not to bury your head in the sand but to get some fresh air. After that, it’s easier to be in shape to tackle the firms that don’t want you (laughter) (woman, 57,

low-level vocational qualification, office worker in an association, following a 28-month period of unemployment).

If you want to make it, you need a whole system. Everything in its own time (...) Look for a job and give yourself to it whole-heartedly. But you've got to take a break, you can't stay with it fully all the time. What I like is getting out of the house, taking a walk ... without any specific destination, just a walk, that's all. In this case I forced myself, I wrote it down in my agenda, I got off my a... If you don't do that, there's no life anymore, you don't feel like doing anything anymore, not even looking for a job (man, 30, high school diploma, restaurant employee following a 9-month period of unemployment).

Discussion

Analyzing the narratives of formerly-unemployed people who have landed a job and durably exited unemployment illustrates how paradoxical the hold of the institutional job search model can be. Indeed, we observed a strong correspondence between their behavior and the normative prescriptions documented in a number of previous studies: these unemployed people were active, on the ball, involved and responsible, autonomous and self-disciplined. They consented to doing personal work, managing to become the main protagonists in their own job search, mastering it and keeping it under control in their lives. As a result, they conducted job searches in line with overall institutional norms (activation and responsibility paradigms) and with more precise prescriptions (identification of targets, use of appropriate methods, maintenance of positive approach and flexibility, etc.). Yet this compliance is ambiguous in that it is eroded by repeated failure, which instils discouragement, confusion and doubt. This weakening is not the consequence of having lost faith or letup on the amount of effort made. It is neither a sign of resistance to the public employment service nor the beginnings of a withdrawal into inactivity. Rather, it is the result of well-thought-out management of personal behaviors. The job search experience leads the unemployed to distance themselves from institutional norms, inventing different rules that tinker with these norms. So, the limitation of the job search we have highlighted converges with the self-help paradigm, becoming a sign of personal discipline. At the same time, by instilling emotional, temporal and behavioral moderation into the job search, it creates a distance from it.

These results enrich existing analyses of how the behaviors of the unemployed are monitored. They show that the job search experience can be perceived differently, depending on whether fieldwork was conducted close to or distant from the institutions responsible for supporting them. Where it was close to these institutions, what stands out is the powerful effect of having been socialized according to a self-help model. Where it was distant from them, what emerges is the ambiguous nature of that socialization. These two kinds of observations do not contradict one another, because our fieldwork confirms the importance of being trained and socialized to respect the discipline necessary to securing a job. The fact that our study was carried out outside of, and distant from, those institutions in which the jobless are converted into potential job seekers, allowed us to enrich the analysis of the gaps between norms and experiences.

One important finding is that these gaps do not indicate inadequate compliance, showing for example that unemployed people have internalized job search norms and prescriptions to a greater or lesser extent, or could apply them well, or less well, or were more or less convinced of their relevance. It is true that the events punctuating the job search made adjustments necessary in order to deal with the pitfalls encountered. The experience of the formerly-unemployed people interviewed here does not boil down to a lack of compliance with the

normative model disseminated and instilled by the institutions in charge of them. Rather, it charts a different model, a counter-model, a transgressive model that is based on self-limitation: of the job search and the emotional involvement; of the time given over to it, and the steps actually taken. These limitations aim to preserve the job search during a period that is marked by pitfalls and obstacles. Far from being indicative of a loss of control, these people have personally taken things in hand, demonstrating self-control. Because it is framed by a high level of self-discipline, this transgression is closely linked to a rise in compliance. The transgression is thus paradoxical, because it ultimately leads to getting a job. Contravening institutional norms can therefore be considered functional, since its result contributes to the institutional objectives of escaping unemployment and getting into work, albeit by deviating from the prescriptions. Yet this self-discipline (a pillar of the institutional model) aims to master the tensions inherent in the job search experience, rather than being oriented toward a general norm of activation.

In the end, the exercise of self-discipline means that, despite repeated failures, these formerly-unemployed people were able to find in themselves the resources necessary to keeping the personal work associated with the job search alive. This is just one more example of the power inherent in governing the behavior of job seekers, leading to new questions and new research directions, and underlining the breadth and influence of this model of self-discipline. In particular, the experiences of the unemployed should be cross-referenced with institutional actions. It would be necessary to design an inquiry cross-referencing the work of front-line advisers with adjustments in the job search of the unemployed. This would also allow us to question the Foucauldian theoretical framework that inspires many studies, and confront the concept of "governmentality" with other concepts, such as "domestication of the dominated" (Bourdieu, 2012: 565), or "relations of ruling" that regulate the everyday world (Smith, 2005), etc.

Our investigation has focused on a specific sub-population: formerly-unemployed people having managed to find relatively stable and lasting professional positions. Does this mean that the model is limited to this specific population? Or that it is necessarily connected to a successful job search? As for how the model is disseminated and what the conditions (both favorable and unfavorable) in which it might spread might look like – this is an open question. Exploring internal differences was tricky, due to sample size. The narratives suggest that some respondents adopt self-discipline attitudes earlier and strongly, especially among those who have higher levels of education, are relatively young, and are white-collar or intermediary professionals. This observation converges with other results showing that unemployed people having these characteristics are also more confident in their own job-finding abilities, more able to organize their job search methodically, and see themselves as competent job seekers (Schnapper, 1994; Demazière, 2014). We can also hypothesize that these categories of unemployed are more embedded in social worlds in which standards of autonomy and responsibility are powerful, and which bring them closer to institutional norms, than certain others. For other unemployed people, groups and socialization spaces convey different or contradictory norms. The results obtained thus argue for complementary qualitative research, considering two sources of heterogeneity together: socio-demographic profiles of the unemployed, and the relational entourage in which variable conceptions of job search circulate. This would make it possible to test and refine the hypothesis that the unemployed are pressured – or better yet, self-propelled – into both self-help and self-discipline.

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Table 1. The Sample

	Number	Percentage
Sex		
Male	17	45%
Female	21	55%
Age		
Under 30	4	11%
30 – 39	12	32%
40 – 49	14	36%
50 and over	8	21%
Educational Level		
Secondary school or vocational qualification	11	29%
High School Diploma (<i>Baccalauréat</i>)	9	24%
Two years of university	7	18%
University degree	11	29%
Duration of most recent period of unemployment		
Under 12 months	13	34%
12 to 17 months	13	34%
18 to 23 months	8	21%
24 months and over	4	11%
Occupational status (when interviewed)		
CDI (open-ended contract)	14	37%
CDD (time-limited contract)	21	55%
Temporary work	1	3%
Self-employment	2	5%
Occupational position (at time of interview)		
White collars & professionals	3	8%
Technicians and intermediary professions	7	19%
Employees	18	47%
Workers	8	21%
Non-waged	2	5%

¹ The short expressions between inverted commas were borrowed from interviewees. Where excerpts are longer, we indicate the characteristics of the interviewee.