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# Sociology as a Strategy of Support for Long-Term Unemployed Workers

Ofer Sharone[1] · Alexandria Vasquez[2]

**Abstract** In recent years workers in the United States have become increasingly vulnerable to spells of long-term unemployment, which are often accompanied by self-devaluation and the internalization of stigma. The existing literature consistently finds that dominant self-help career support institutions activate individualistic cultural narratives that obscure the shared and structural determinants of career challenges and often intensify the self-stigmatization and emotional toll of long-term unemployment. This paper examines an alternative approach to support based on sociologically-informed discourses and practices. Drawing on in-depth interviews of long-term unemployed white-collar workers who received such support we explore whether and how sociologically-informed support practices can reduce self-stigmatization and help workers confront the challenges posed by long-term unemployment. We show that self-stigmatization is not an inevitable outcome of unemployment in the American cultural context, and that the application of a sociologically-informed approach to support can activate narratives focused on the shared and structural roots of unemployment. The activation of such narratives counteracts the debilitating internalization of stigma and generates what we call a "re-valuation" of the self. Beyond long-term unemployment, the findings in this paper suggest broader benefits to American workers from institutions that foster a sociological imagination for contextualizing employment-related challenges.

**Keywords** Unemployment · In-depth interviews · Self-help · Self-stigmatization · Individualism · Applied sociology

✉ Ofer Sharone
  osharone@soc.umass.edu

[1]  Department of Sociology, University of Massachusetts Amherst, 528 Thompson Hall, Amherst, MA 01002, USA

[2]  Department of Sociology MS-71, Brandeis University, Waltham, MA 02454, USA

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Six years after the official end of the Great Recession long-term unemployment in the U.S. remains at levels unseen in at least seven decades (Van Horn et al. 2014). In addition to financial devastation, a well-established literature shows that long-term unemployment poses one of the most difficult contemporary challenges to worker health and wellbeing (e.g., Paul and Moser 2009, Strully 2009; Sullivan and von Wachter 2009). A related line of studies reveals that a key mechanism undermining wellbeing is self-devaluation and the internalization of stigma with many long-term unemployed workers feeling shame and fearing that "something is wrong" with them (Brand 2015; Lassus et al. 2015; Newman 1999; Chen 2015). Prior research also shows that currently dominant self-help approaches to support tend to intensify this self-stigmatization among long-term unemployed workers by framing career challenges as largely within the control of the job seeker and thus activating individualistic understandings of labor market outcomes (Sharone 2013, Smith 2001). This paper examines whether an alternative approach to support based on sociologically-informed discourses and practices may help diminish self-stigmatization among long-term un-employed workers by activating narratives focused on the shared and structural roots of unemployment.

One important determinant of the viability of sociologically-informed support (which for brevity we refer to as "soc-informed support") depends on the relationship between currently prevailing self-help support and the broader American culture of individualism. If self-help's emphasis on the role of individuals simply mirrors a ubiquitous and powerful broader culture of individualism (Newman 1999) then it is unlikely that a local effort to utilize sociologically-informed support practices could counter self-stigmatization unless accompanied by broad and fundamental cultural change. Existing research, however, suggests that American culture is multifaceted, containing a mixture of individualistic, mutualistic, and structural narratives, and that concrete institutions play a critical role in activating certain cultural narratives to frame subjective understandings of outcomes (e.g., Swidler 2001; Bellah et al. 1985). This literature challenges the idea that an all-powerful culture of individualism renders self-stigmatization inevitable and thus suggests the possibility of de-stigmatization strategies rooted in developing alternative institutions that activate mutualistic and structural narratives. Guided by this literature, and a recent line of studies focusing on social resilience (Hall and Lamont 2013), this paper explores the mechanisms by which soc-informed support may reduce job seekers' self-stigmatization by fostering the recognition of the shared nature of the long-term unemployment experience, and the underlying role of social and economic institutions

## Unemployment, Internalized Stigma and Support Institutions

Research showing the stigma of unemployment in the United States traces back to the Great Depression (e.g., Bakke 1933), and the persistence of this stigma in our present era is suggested, among other findings, by audit studies that reveal employers' dis-criminatory bias against hiring unemployed workers (Kroft et al. 2013; Ghayad 2013; Ho et al. 2011). In addition to erecting a barrier to re-employment, a line of studies shows the stigma of unemployment is often internalized by job seekers who report feeling shame or that something is wrong with them, and blaming themselves for their

continued unemployment (Newman 1999; Sharone 2013; Zukin et al. 2011; Chen 2015, Smith 2001; Cottle 2001; Uchitelle 2006). This research also shows that internalized stigma and self-blame are among the most difficult aspects of unemployment. For example, Katherine Newman's (1999) in-depth interviews with unemployed white-collar workers show that self-blame is often at the center of the unemployment experience with unemployed workers acting as their own "inquisitors" and "delving deeper and deeper for the character defects or other failings that led to their demise" (1999:64). Other studies describe long-term unemployed job seekers as feeling as though they are "guilty of grievous offenses" (Cottle 2001, p.229) or fearing that they are "flawed" (Sharone 2013).

The internalization of stigma has several important implications. First, once job seekers internalize the stigma of unemployment it often becomes emotionally difficult to continue to search, leading workers to drop out of the labor force (Kanfer et al 2001; Kaufman 1982; Sharone 2013). In addition, a long line of studies associates long-term unemployment with negative physical and mental health outcomes, and one mechanism linking long-term unemployment to such outcomes is the toll of internalized stigma and self-blame (Rantakeisu et al. 1999; Eales 1989; Creed and Dee Bartrum 2007; McKee-Ryan et al. 2005). Studies about the effects of internalized stigma on health directly connect negative health outcomes to the kinds of experiences routinely associated with long-term unemployment, namely continuously exposing oneself to social evaluation under conditions of uncertainty and threat to one's identity (Keating 2009, p75; Major and O'Brien 2005). Another important implication of internalized stigma and self-blame is that it makes very unlikely the mobilization of collective action on the part of unemployed workers to seek structural changes that address the underlying roots of long-term unemployment (Sharone 2007). Finally, the internalization of stigma is also linked to social withdrawal and isolation due to fears of being rejected or otherwise subjected to the pain of the stigma (Hatzenbuehler et al. 2013; Link and Phelan 2001). Such social isolation becomes a further barrier to re-employment as well as another mechanism undermining wellbeing and health (Keating 2009; Umberson et al. 2010; Kawachi and Berkman 2001).

Unemployed American workers' day-to-day experience of repeated employer rejections is mediated and framed by self-help support discourses and practices disseminated through books, videos, workshops, support organizations, and coaching services. Self-help encourages job seekers to see themselves as in control of their career destinies and deemphasizes the role of factors outside job seekers' immediate control such as labor market institutions (Newman 1999; Ehrenreich 2005; Lane 2011; Smith 2001). For example, Sharone's (2013 p.45) ethnography of a self-help organization for unemployed professionals found that the organization's central message was: "Take control…The main barrier is yourself, not the government, not the market, it's *you.*" Any job seeker skepticism about their degree of control is preempted by the claim that skepticism reflects a negative attitude and is a form of self-sabotage. Moreover, under the self-help model of support, job seekers are expected only to display positive emotions and to keep to themselves the negative emotional toll of long-term unemployment (Ehrenreich 2005; Lane 2011; Smith 2001; Sharone 2013). Self-help's twin focus on individual control and positive attitude have been found as exacerbating self-stigmatization and emotional isolation by systematically de-emphasizing the shared and

institutional roots of labor market obstacles and of the resultant emotional crisis (Sharone 2013; Smith 2001).

Given the varied negative effects of internalized stigma and the shortcomings in the self-help support model it is important to examine whether other models of support are viable in the American context. While self-help is currently the most common mode of support prior research suggests that the preeminence of self help should not be viewed as a cultural inevitability reflecting an all-powerful American culture of individualism but rather as a selective activation of *particular* cultural narratives from among multiple available narratives (Swidler 1986, 2001; Bellah et al. 1985). Although self-help draws upon discourses that have been part of America's collective cultural toolkit for centuries, American individualism exists alongside other more mutualistic and solidaristic narratives, as well as sociological discourses of the structural roots of negative labor market outcomes.

The structural roots of unemployment are routinely articulated, among other places, in sociology classes in colleges and universities, but such discourses are conspicuously absent in support settings where unemployed workers gather to make sense of the labor market challenges they face. By examining the effects of sociologically-informed support discourses and practices in the context of unemployment support this paper builds on the work of Hall and Lamont (2013); specifically focusing on how institutions may facilitate "social resilience." Unlike psychological approaches to resilience that emphasize individual qualities or resources, the concept of social resilience focuses on "institutional and cultural resources that groups and individuals mobilize to sustain their well-being," (Hall and Lamont 2013 p.2); specifically repertoires that enhance "the capacity of individuals to maintain positive self-concepts; dignity and a sense of inclusion, belonging and recognition" (Lamont et al. 2013. p.130). For individuals facing an assault on their sense of self from the workings of economic and social institutions the key question is "whether they have at their disposal alternative repertoires for evaluating themselves" (ibid. 2013 p.18).

The availability of alternative repertoires of self-evaluation is necessary but not sufficient. Social resilience also requires an institutional context that *activate*s narratives of the shared and structural underpinnings of the challenges one is facing. As Hall and Lamont (2013 p.14) recognize resilience is not something that passively happens but requires action:

> Social resilience is the result of active processes of response. Groups do not simply call passively on existing sets of resources. Social resilience is the product of a much more creative process in which people assemble a variety of tools, including collective resources and new images of themselves, to sustain their well-being in the face of social change.

Swidler (2001) shows the critical role of institutions in accounting for the activation of narratives, explaining that "even when each individual's worldview taken as a whole may seem incoherent…consistent patterns appear in the culture of many individuals when they all confront similar institutional constraints" (Swidler 2001, p. 134). Or, as Lamont et al. (2013 p.136) put it, institutions help us understand "why individuals are more likely to draw on one script rather than another."

For long-term unemployed workers the needed institutional context to foster social resilience is likely one that is markedly different from the self-help focus on individual control. We hypothesize that facilitating social resilience requires sociologically-informed institutions that elucidate the limits of individual control and the structural nature of obstacles. This hypothesis is rooted in a growing literature that suggests that recognition of structural barriers provides protection from the assault on the self that comes with the internalization of stigma (Major et al. 2003; Stephens et al. 2014). Examining this literature Hing (2013 p.173) shows that for members of a stigmatized group being aware of potential barriers to employment, such as employer discrimination, means that when facing negative outcomes they are less likely to blame themselves and internalize stigma. For example, Major et al. (2003) found that maintenance of self-esteem following employer rejections was much more likely among women who understood such negative outcomes as potentially the result of prejudicial attitudes toward women. Similarly, showing the importance of elucidating barriers, Stephens et al. (2014) reveals how an intervention to support first generation college students navigating university life is only effective when support resources are offered together with facilitating such students' awareness of the structural and class-based roots of the obstacles they face. Having an understanding of systematic and structural barriers, as opposed to blaming oneself for negative outcomes, has also been shown to have significant positive health consequences and to increase longevity (LaVeist et al. 2001). These findings have led numerous scholars to critique individualizing forms of support noting that ignoring constraining external conditions can intensify the stigmatization and marginalization of the intended targets of support (Aronowitz et al. 2015) and calling for a "more reflexive tack, cognizant of context as well as social structure" (Scambler 2009 p452; Hatzenbuehler et al. 2013).

In short, the existing literature on the internalization of stigma, when applied to the context of long-term unemployment in the U.S., suggest both the viability of and need for sociologically-informed support institutions that activate narratives of mutuality and structural obstacles to reduce self-stigmatization. While internalized stigma has severe negative consequences, such internalization is not inevitable and can be countered with efforts to challenge and resist stigma (Thoits 2011). As Lamont (2009 p.152) emphasizes "how individuals interpret and deal with" stigmatization, particularly whether or not stigma is internalized, "is a key intervening factor" in affects on mental and physical health. Building on Lamont (2009) we examine how institutions of support may facilitate individuals' destigmatization strategies. The support explored in this paper fits Cook et al.'s (2014) broad category of an interpersonal-level intervention targeting members of stigmatized group, but is distinct in its focus on raising unemployed workers awareness of labor market structural obstacles. The findings described below shows that this support illuminates external obstacles and the shared nature of the unemployment experience, which in turn facilitates social resilience and destigmatization.

## Soc-Informed Support and Methodology

To explore the effects of soc-informed support for long-term unemployed workers we began by reaching out to the community of Boston area career coaches and counselors

(which we will refer to collectively as "coaches") using professional associations, e-mail listservs, and word-of-mouth. We invited coaches to attend meetings to discuss recent sociological research about long term unemployment, including findings regarding employer discrimination against long-term unemployed job seekers and the emotional toll of long-term unemployment. At such meetings we also invited the coaches to participate in our research on the effect of support. Ultimately 42 coaches agreed to have us match them with long-term unemployed job seekers and to provide to them three months of free support. The coaches did not receive compensation for providing such support or for participating in our research but were motivated by the opportunity to help long-term unemployed workers directly through support and indirectly via research.

The coaches were not given any particular instructions with respect to the content of their substantive advice on job search strategies but were encouraged to depart from the self-help support model in two important respects. First, meetings with coaches focused on prior research showing job seekers' tendency to self-stigmatize and how self-help support discourses emphasizing job seeker control may exacerbate this tendency. Based on this research coaches were encouraged to avoid control discourses and openly acknowledge structural barriers to reemployment, including discrimination on the basis of unemployment duration. Open recognition of barriers was also directly communicated to job seekers by the researchers sharing findings from studies concerning unemployment discrimination during an in-person group meeting. Second, meetings with coaches emphasized and explained the emotional toll of long-term unemployment and how self-help support that only allows sharing of positive emotions can result in heightened emotional isolation. Based on this research coaches were encouraged to create support environments in which job seekers felt welcomed to share the full range of their emotional experiences. While some coaches initially hesitated to engage in support which sounded to them like "therapy" (which they felt unqualified to do), discussions with fellow coaches and the researchers clarified that the intent of this dimension of support is not inner-work or psychological analysis but creating a context which would allow the recognition of shared conditions and experiences, and which may activate narratives of mutuality and structural underpinnings to interpret of one's unemployment.

To recruit long-term unemployed job seekers we reached out to Boston area career centers, networking groups, and libraries, and invited job seekers to sign up for the opportunity to receive free support and participate in research. Interested job seekers were asked to complete a short survey in order for us to determine whether they met the following criteria: (i) unemployed six months or longer, (ii) between the ages of 40–65, (iii) white-collar occupations, and (iv) looking for work in the Boston area. While over 800 job seekers signed up for the opportunity to receive free support only 125 met the criteria for participation. From among this group we randomly selected 100 to be matched with coaches to receive free support either in one-on-one or in small-facilitated groups. The job seekers meeting the criteria for participation were 55 % male and 45 % female with a mean age of 54 and 27 years of work experience.

The study focuses on workers over the age of 40 because older workers are more likely than their younger counterparts to get trapped in long-term unemployment (e.g., Lassus et al. 2015).

Our specific focus on older white-collar workers is motivated by prior research that suggests that the internalization of stigma is particularly prevalent among this group of workers (e.g. Newman 1999; Sharone 2013), which, on the one hand, creates a tougher challenge for soc-informed support, but on the other hand, might render more clearly visible any mechanisms of de-stigmatization generated by soc-informed support. We recognize that due to self-selection our sample likely consists of unemployed job seekers with higher than average levels of motivation to receive support, but do not think the level of motivation to receive support corresponds to a higher or lower likelihood of soc-informed support facilitating de-stigmatization.

This paper primarily draws on qualitative data gathered by means of in-depth interviews of 40 long-term unemployed job seekers, 25 of whom were interviewed both before and after they received 3 months of soc-informed support. These semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted either in-person or by telephone and lasted approximately 60–120 min each. In interviews conducted prior to job seekers receiving support we asked questions regarding their experience looking for work, the effect of unemployment on their emotional wellbeing and personal relationships. In interviews conducted after support we asked similar questions as well as a set of questions about the effect of the support they had received. Job seekers were motivated to share their experiences with the researchers as participation was understood as reciprocation for receiving free support.

## The Challenge of Long-Term Unemployment

To examine how soc-informed support may mediate the experience of long-term unemployment it is necessary to first describe briefly the most salient challenges of long-term unemployment for our research participants. We focus on elements of the experience that are specific to being long-term unemployed, the essence of which is enduring a string of labor market rejections.

In interviews long-term unemployed job seekers describe the job market as akin to a "black hole." This metaphor conveys the utter lack of employer response to their applications despite the fact that such applications often require significant effort. Arnold describes the black hole as the "thing that really kills me." He continues: "You never find out why you didn't get it…What is it that you're judging me on?… You just end up with this big void." This void leaves it up to job seekers to interpret the reasons for their labor market difficulties, which frequently results in highly individualized accounts. Dan explains how creeping self-doubt fills the empty space. Like so many other job seekers, Dan experiences the job search as a roller coaster ride. Each application starts with excitement:

> You see a new thing on the web, and you read the description … I'll say, 'That's me! I can do all that.' And the first thing you do is you hit the apply online button and you go through the whole application online … 'Hey, I'm going to get that job because I'm the right guy for that job.' Where it turns into a negative is when you don't hear back anything…That's the frustrating part and the part where you feel like you're just going into a black hole…It makes you question yourself more because it makes you feel like your background, your experience is just not

enough. It hits a lot of different buttons. It hits your self esteem. If you don't hear anything it leaves you with self doubt and the self esteem thing gets hit.

Together with the hit to one's sense of self often comes discouragement about continuing with the search. Becky explains the black hole experience as "*deadening*." She continues: "I don't know how else to say it. I guess that's the best word I can think of. It sets you back. *Makes it difficult to roll up your sleeves and try again*." In Gail's case she became so discouraged by the lack of employer response that she completely ceased searching. She explains:

Gail: It's horrible. It's the most depressing thing I can think of…Once you send in a resume or a cover letter or go through the application process online, it's this black box where you're not sure what's happening behind the scenes with your information. So it's very depressing because either you get absolutely no response at all, or you get a computer generated message most of the time. That was probably one of the reasons that I … needed to walk away from it for a while. It was emotionally really bad. It was just very depressing and I couldn't sustain the search.

Au: What makes you feel most discouraged?

Gail: Not getting any response at all. I would just get very discouraged and I would stop…Even though I had these feelings of desperation financially, I just didn't have any confidence that anything I did for looking for a job was actually going to get me anywhere. I just didn't think anybody cared to employ me, to be quite honest. I felt like my resume was going down a black hole.

Gail's experience of the black hole and the resulting discouragement is typical for the long-term unemployed workers we interviewed. A month prior to this interview Gail had ceased her job search and therefore would be classified by the Bureau of Labor Statistics as a "discouraged worker," one of millions of Americans who have dropped out of the labor force at record levels since the Great Recession (BLS 2016). The word "discouraged" implies that a worker stops looking because s/he perceives the likelihood of getting a job as low. This certainly captures part of the Gail's experience but misses the core emotional dynamic which leaves job seekers feeling *unworthy* of a response. The void left by the black hole is filled with a personalized account, as Gail put it: no one "*cared* to employ me."

The dispiriting black hole experience leads most job seekers to believe that their only chance of gaining employment is networking –understood as reaching out to one's existing network of social contacts and forming new contacts to obtain referrals. Joyce explains that despite the fact that she has not networked much she perceives the utmost importance of networking for someone in her position:

I should be networking more than anybody else, not less…Especially for me, where I recognize I've been out so long. My chances of getting even an interview where I don't have either a push or a recommendation or something from

somebody who knows somebody at the employer, means that realistically my chances are very low, based on my resume alone.

Yet, the same black hole experience that leads job seekers to perceive it necessary to network also makes it harder to do. While feeling a need to increase the frequency of their social interactions, most long-term unemployed job seekers report a decrease in interactions. Strikingly, an overwhelming majority of job seekers we interviewed reported a difficult time reaching out to precisely those contacts that they believe would be beneficial to landing a job, including previous colleagues or other employed friends. Job seekers' reflections on this difficulty focus on their internalized stigma and sense of lacking self worth. Carl explained the difficulty of networking this way:

> I don't talk to my friends as much. I'm unemployed. I'm different than they are at this point. I think the hardest thing is this loss of the social prestige of just having a job. Now you're just unemployed.

Deborah likewise explains the difficulty of connecting with others as rooted in the loss of status and self-devaluation:

> I have self-flagellation…This is a fairly major yardstick that we all put against ourselves, our employment. We define ourselves partly by what we do. Right now I've had the rug pulled out from under me in terms of how I identify myself. I'm right back in high school and college, trying to find myself again.

The internalization of stigma leads job seekers to perceive interactions with former colleagues and friends not as an exchange among equals but necessarily, and humiliatingly, focusing on their unemployed status. As Robert explained: "me being unemployed is like this hole in lots of things to talk about. People are saying, 'How are you doing getting a job?' It's not a fun conversation." Ruth elaborated how negative feelings about herself create an intense obstacle to interacting with others:

> I don't want to contact people, my friends. I'm embarrassed. I'm humiliated. I feel like a loser. And I don't want to call anyone, I just don't want to talk to anybody… I had very close friends, people that I worked with at [company name]. I mean seven years! I had friends there and I just don't contact them.

It is precisely Ruth's former colleagues who are likely to be her most effective networking contacts because they can vouch for her qualifications. Yet, these colleagues are difficult to approach because of internalized stigma—the fear of appearing like a "loser" among one's professional peers. The reluctance to connect with others, including friends, not only makes it impossible to receive job search support such as referrals, but in many cases also entails severe social isolation.

Unemployed job seekers tend to become progressively more isolated over time. Isolation begins with the loss of coworkers that accompanies the loss of one's job. Kevin describes the isolation as "the hardest thing." When Kevin's wife passed away several years ago the workplace became his primary location for social interaction. "I miss the guys. The voices. The ten minutes to get coffee…Their friendship." But

isolation is also an issue for those who are married. Mickey does not share his negative experiences with his wife because he has found that she is not supportive, often telling him "you are not doing enough." This kind of spousal attitude becomes a source of additional intense emotional pain. As Mickey puts it: "What the hell?…[She] might think I'm not doing anything, but looking for job is more than 40 h. You always have to be on. That's a stress." Other job seekers remain isolated in their experiences because they do not want to burden loved ones with their anxieties. Sam, for example, has not told his parents that he is unemployed, rhetorically asking: "Why do I need to have them worry about that? I don't like to burden people with how I'm feeling." Whether job seekers are protecting loved ones from the despair as in the case of Sam, or are subjected to interactions that exacerbate it as in the case of Mickey, the tendency among most job seekers we interviewed is to isolate themselves and not share their experience.

## Soc-informed Support and the Mechanisms of Destigmatization

The long-term unemployment experiences of deepening self-devaluation and social withdrawal described above are substantially generated by two mechanisms: On the one hand, these are produced by the objective scarcity of good jobs together with employers' often discriminatory hiring practices which systematically screen out long-term unemployed candidates with silent rejections—giving rise to the black hole experience. On the other hand, these experiences are also partially a product of job seekers' activation of individualizing narratives to interpret such negative labor market outcomes.

Interviews with unemployed workers after three months of soc-informed support suggest that for most workers soc-informed support facilitated de-stigmatization and a re-valuation of the self. While the first mechanism, the scarcity of good jobs and discriminatory hiring practices are unchanged, soc-informed support countered and mitigated the second mechanism of activating individualizing narratives. The remainder of this paper examines the processes and mechanisms of re-valuation generated by soc-informed support with the goal of contributing to the development of a theory of how the application of sociologically-informed discourses and practices outside of academic settings may contribute to de-stigmatization, social resilience, and re-valuation.

Our interview data suggest that soc-informed support diminishes the internalization of stigma and facilitates a revaluation of the self through a number of mutually reinforcing mechanisms, including: 1) breaking job seekers' emotional isolation which in turn normalizes the experience of negative feelings and self-doubt, 2) recognition that others in the same boat are meritorious but nonetheless shut out of the labor market, which creates an opening for revaluing one's own merits and a destigmatized understanding of labor-market outcomes, 3) engaging in practices to construct a self-narrative of value, and 4) illumination of institutional barriers to finding a job and developing a structural understanding of the search process which further de-individualizes outcomes. Reflexivity about structural and shared conditions not only make possible a re-valued self but as a consequence of re-valuation counters job search discouragement and allows for more effective engagement in difficult job search practices such as networking. In short, the challenges facing long-term unemployed

workers—the black hole leading to self-devaluation, withdrawal and isolation—are met by experiences of connection with similar others, re-valuation of the self, and re-engagement in job searching.

The first mechanism is breaking the emotional isolation. As previously described, unemployed job seekers tend to become increasingly isolated over time. In the context of soc-informed support, where openly discussing hardships and external obstacles was encouraged, job seekers described the relief that came from recognizing that they are "not alone" in their experiences. Kevin, who had described isolation from former colleagues and friends as the "hardest thing," explained it this way:

> It was great to talk with people on a regular basis who were in the same position as I was. Some of them had been unemployed longer than I had been, some somewhat less. But they were all facing many of the same things I had.

Crucial to breaking the sense of isolation was hearing about others' similar emotional experiences. Robert, who previously discussed isolation from friends, explained how the support helps with knowing "you're not alone and the emotional feelings you have are not just yours alone, these other people have them." In some cases job seekers like Ruth, who had previously told us how she feels "embarrassed" and "like a loser," expressed surprise upon learning in her group that others felt just like her:

> Everybody feels very blue. *I had no idea.* I thought I was the only one, and when somebody brought it up, then we started talking, and it sounded like everybody was pretty much feeling like they were circling the drain. In some ways it felt better that I wasn't alone, that I wasn't isolated in the discouragement. Others were discouraged, too.

Walter described the process of realizing that he is not alone in his experience as "being with other people who were in a similar situation and just realizing that everyone has these *hidden* issues." Unlike the dominant self-help approach of job seeker support, where typically only positive displays of emotions are welcomed (Ehrenreich 2005; Lane 2011; Smith 2001; Sharone 2013) it is precisely the soc-informed approach, where the negative emotional toll is encouraged to be shared in the context of empathic peers, that job seekers come to feel relief from isolation. Kate, a former executive, felt that this form of support allowed her to share and receive empathy from others, giving her the sense that others also cared about her: "That's where the support comes in. Even just people who are in the same situation as me, but knowing that they care enough."

Breaking the emotional isolation is a necessary first step. Yet, given the specific challenges facing long-term unemployed workers, an important second step is addressing the core struggle against self-devaluation through a set of reinforcing discourses and practices that make apparent structural barriers to employment unrelated to individual skills and abilities. For example, Becky, who had previously described the black hole experience as "deadening" and as making it hard to "roll up your sleeves and try again," explained that "it's helpful to be part of a group and recognize I'm not alone." But in Becky's case "not being alone" meant something different from reducing social and emotional isolation; it meant getting to know and appreciate the merits of the other

people who are similarly stuck in long-term unemployment, which creates an opening for interpreting one's long-term unemployment in a new light. Becky describes her experience as follows:

> I *try* not to let [unemployment] have an impact on my self esteem and confidence, but I wouldn't be completely honest if I said it had no impact. …. Jane [another group member] is doing everything she can and she's not getting anywhere either, although she gets a bunch of interviews. There's another woman who I think is incredibly thoughtful and very, very [pause] I would hire her in a heartbeat if I had a job to give her, which I don't. I think she's wonderful. So it's nice to be among people you think are very competent and just unfortunate in that situation. That sounds like misery loves company, but I don't mean it like that. I mean it's just kinda nice to mix it up with other people that are also trying to move in the same direction

Becky's quote reveals how in her struggle to maintain a self understanding as a valuable and skilled professional it is helpful to recognize that others who she sees as putting in great effort in their search ("doing everything") and who have much value to contribute ("very competent") are nonetheless also long term unemployed. This recognition allows job seekers like Becky to entertain the possibility that they are likewise competent and hardworking and "just unfortunate in that situation." Dan, who had previously shared how not hearing anything back from employers "hits your self-esteem," provided a similar example how soc-informed support helped re-value the self:

> And being with a group of people who are in the same boat, it's very [pause] what's the word? It makes you feel less strange. Because when you're unemployed, you tend to feel like there's something wrong with you, even though there isn't. But after a while you get that way because people keep rejecting you for jobs and stuff. So when you're with this group of people and you realize there's two lawyers, there's a marketing professional, there's all these *people with all these skills* and they're also having trouble finding stuff for whatever reason. It just helps you feel better about yourself.

The twin recognition of one's long-term unemployed peers as experiencing similar emotional turmoil ("circling the drain") and as accomplished professionals ("people with all these skills") alters the lens of self-evaluation. Replacing the interpretive lens—typically reinforced by self-help—through which job seekers understand negative job search outcomes as reflecting a meritocratic judgment with a broader lens that includes a sociological appreciation of external barriers that keep even highly skilled workers unemployed and which wreaks emotional havoc and sow self-doubt without regard to actual merit. Recognition of structural barriers conveys to job seekers a powerful if indirect message that negative outcomes in the labor market, as Gina put it, "are not just something about me." In short, soc-informed support allowed the participants to observe themselves in relation to others, and thus activated mutualistic and de-individualizing narratives to interpret of their own predicament.

With soc-informed support practices facilitating the recognition of the merits of others in the same boat more conventional support practices can work to fill the interpretive vacuum created by the black hole with a re-constructed narrative about the self. For a few this re-valuation of the self is helped by the simple act of having the coach or group reflect back to the job seeker the valuable skills they posses. For most, however, more powerful than the validating recognition of others was the re-valuation produced by active practices of re-constructing a self-narrative. Here re-valuation of the self is an unintended byproduct of support practices focused on honing job seekers' self-presentation to employers. Coaches encourage job seekers to dig into their past, excavate successes and accomplishments, and then deduce from these successes a list of skills and strengths that can be clearly conveyed in the writing of resumes and cover letters, and communicated verbally during networking and interviews. Beyond self-presentation to others the interpretive space created by the twin recognitions of the shared and structural roots of obstacles also makes possible a re-constructed presenta-tion of the self to the self. For example, Bob shared how "when you're let go, you get discouraged, frustrated, disappointed, feel like a failure," but he explained that the support he received helped him recognize "the positive things that I've done in my career and has helped me see that focus. So keeping me aligned with what I can offer an organization, rather than what it was that I wasn't able to offer." Describing the same effect Michael explains that the support he has received has been "fantastic," exclaiming: "It's been just phenomenal emotionally for me." The emotional boost is due to the way support engaged him in self-analysis practices that transformed his self-perception:

> Here's what I have done. Here's where I have succeeded. Here's what I have achieved. It has helped my self esteem by realizing, yes, I have done things, and I am proud of some things that I have done…No one is putting on any airs in the group. There's nobody who is bragging, arrogant, whatever it may be. But people who are finding out things that they should be proud of and sharing that with each other.

Gail, who had previously shared her deep discouragement about the job search describes how this active process of excavating past successes "made me realize that I have a lot of skills that never go away." She then linked her recognition of skills that "never go away" to countering her discouragement: "If I keep pursuing it, eventually I will find the right connection, the right match."

The self re-valuation that takes place in the soc-informed support context is also aided by job seekers' experience of helping others in the group. Mickey, who previ-ously discussed feeling isolated in his own marriage because his wife thinks he's "not doing enough," explained his improved emotional wellbeing as generated by going to meetings where "[I] try to help people, give advice. So at the end of the day [I] can say 'I helped somebody.' So you feel good." Beth likewise reported feeling better about her self due to "being part of a group. I like feeling like I'm helping other people there with my thoughts or giving them my responses or confirming how they feel etc." Or as Mitch explained: "The group has helped my self-esteem. It is the fact that I feel like I'm doing something in terms of participating in this and *trying to contribute to my group…* It's been priceless and I think vital."

Practices that encourage job seekers to excavate past accomplishments to hone self-presentation to employers, or to provide peer support to other job seekers, are fairly widespread in American support organizations, including self-help support. Prior studies suggest that in the typical context of continuous silent rejections from employers, filtered by individualizing and stigmatizing self-help narratives, such practices in and of themselves do not counter the tendency of job seekers to self-devaluate (Newman 1999, Smith 2001, Sharone 2013). Yet, our findings suggest that undertaken within the broader soc-informed support context, which works to activate destigmatizing narratives about negative outcomes, these practices do contribute to the process of self-revaluation.

The soc-informed support as described thus far facilitates destigmatization through fostering the recognition of the shared and structural roots of the emotional toll, and the recognition that meritorious others are trapped in the same situation. Another way soc-informed support works to destigmatize unemployment is by illuminating the often invisible institutional barriers which job seekers confront in seeking employment. Hiring institutions–the patterned practices and discourses that structure the labor market—are often obscure to job seekers who only perceive a black hole. Unlike self-help messages that emphasize individual control (McGee 2005, Sharone 2013) soc-informed support clarifies the inner workings of these institutions, which helps job seekers activate a less personalized and more structural ways of interpreting outcomes. This effect is crystalized in Deborah's description of the support she received. As previously discussed Deborah had shared, prior to the support, about experiencing "self-flagellation" and how unemployment has meant having the "rug pulled out from under me in terms of how I identify myself." Deborah adds that this self-flagellation was partly the result of her sense of "working blind," and that "unless you've got oodles of self confidence, it's very difficult to work blind." In Deborah's case soc-informed support shed light on what happens when "applications come in online. How many people do they actually pick up the phone and call?" Deborah continues how now she recognizes that:

> *It's a probability thing*. If you're up against 20 people, you have less of a chance than if you're up against three people…I felt like I was given encouragement that it isn't really going to a black hole, or it doesn't always go to a black hole. But more than that, really was the fact that it's a numbers game.

This interpretation of difficulties in finding a job as at least partly reflecting institutionalized forces unrelated to individualized evaluations of merit not only takes the personal sting out of rejections but importantly allows for greater resilience in going forward with the search. This depersonalized interpretation of silent rejections motivated Deborah to once again begin actively job searching. The support, as she put it, helped her recognize that "I'm still eminently employable…I just have to keep working at it." The increased resilience as a result of the support was a common theme discussed by job seekers. In addition to de-stigmatizing negative outcomes, the activation of narratives of institutional barriers is also important in changing job seekers' expectations about length of time required for finding a job. Instead of a sprint the job search is now understood as a marathon. Arnold, who had discussed the black hole as the thing that "really kills

me," explained how a clearer understanding of the hiring process has changed the experience from a futile black hole to one that requires persistence:

> Before it was more a feeling of futility of things going into black holes in the Internet when applying for jobs. But now it's just a matter of hanging in there and continuing with the process and continuing with the flow. And at some point, things will connect.

The understanding of the job search as involving external obstacles, and therefore requiring significant time and endurance, similarly helped Mary maintain the resilience needed to continue with the search, explaining: "It just gave me more of a spirit. You've just got to keep going. Something is going to happen eventually. You've got to keep working at it. You've got to put your time and effort in." Resilience in continuing to search is also fostered by reminding job seekers that unlike other games, in the job search game, as Marc put it: "You only need to succeed once. Success does *not* require being "like a baseball player batting three hundred." To succeed in this game "you can bat one in one thousand."

An important indicator of the destigmatizing effect of soc-informed support were the changes in job seekers search practices. As previously discussed, while job seekers recognize the importance of using their networks as part of their search they are often reluctant to do so. Networking is fraught for long-term unemployed workers who have internalized stigma. Rather than reaching out long-term unemployed job seekers tend to back away from social contacts. The destigmatization facilitated by soc-informed support can be seen by job seekers' expression of greater confidence in reaching out to others. As Carl, who previously discussed not reaching out to his network because "of the loss of social prestige," explained how the soc-informed support helped him:

> It gives you the confidence you need to go to the next level of connecting with people who have knowledge. Being confident, being assertive, getting people to notice and respond. I'm more confident in what I bring to the table.

Joyce, who also had previously discussed her difficulty networking prior to support, similarly explained one of the main effects of the support was "feeling good about myself in general. Then I think that the picture I projected to whoever I was talking to was better." She continued by noting that "the words might have been the same and the circumstances, but it was just because I was feeling better about myself. I could make a better impression."

The de-stigmatized interpretation of outcomes is also evident in how supported job seekers dealt with the most loaded moment they typically face in the search process: Being asked by an employer to explain their resume gap. When asked this question job seekers perceive a clear if unstated employer presumption of laziness, incompetence, or some other flaw. Arnold describes his experience with the gap question:

> I went to one interview for a senior accountant position. The comptroller walks in with this other guy and the first question he asks is, 'So what have you been doing the last couple years?' I just couldn't believe it…Just to hear this guy, I felt like smashing his face in. This guy has got no clue what's going on.

Soc-informed support helped job seekers shift employers' default assumptions. Linda explains the challenge as well as how support helped:

Linda: Critical to getting me back, into motivating me to continue searching online and doing the job search, was getting support about how to explain my down time when I haven't been employed…I worry how I'm perceived because when you go, they *always* do ask: What have you been doing the past 3 years?… They want somebody who has been working to date. They don't want to take somebody out of the employment market…That's my personal fear."

Au: Support helped to handle that?

Linda: We've talked about the answers. For example, last week I went through the whole [interview] process and they didn't seem at all questioning of my response. I explained it. I said, 'I got laid off…The economy tanked.'

The support diffuses this emotionally loaded moment by helping job seekers take a more structural perspective on their own position (and those of millions of others in the same situation) and in turn communicate to potential employers that the gap is not a reflection on merit but of structural factors.

For employers the resume gap creates an interpretive vacuum much like the black hole of silent rejections for job seekers. The black hole leaves it up to seekers to interpret employers' silence while with resume gaps it is employers who are faced with a void –the empty time at the top of the resume—into which stigmatized narratives are typically inserted to interpret the gap. As Linda's story illustrates, soc-informed support and destigmatization can empower job seekers to challenge employers' default interpretations.

Soc-informed support and recognition that "we're in the same boat" is not uniformly a positive experience. In some cases the group can exacerbate fears. For example, for Peter the "group is not a good place." He explains:

The group that I'm in…They've all been out of work a very long time…What got me down was when some of them have been out of work for 8 years…That's not motivating me in my situation.

While Peter has been unemployed 7 months, the unintended and disturbing message he perceived from the group is that the others, who are unemployed much longer than he is, may foreshadow his fate. Yet, Peter's experience was the exception. The more common response of interviewees was reporting that the soc-informed support was useful on multiple levels. Sam, another member of Peter's own small support group, who prior to support had described suffering from isolation, explained the effect of the support as follows:

The support has been priceless. It's been just absolutely wonderful. I feel like I'm in a group with some other people who are having successes in moving through this process of self-analysis. Everyone has bumps in the road, but the assignments and our coach have been just great and encouraging each other. So it's been just priceless.

## Conclusion

Long-term unemployment frequently leads to debilitating internalization of stigma and self-devaluation that challenges American workers' wellbeing as well as their prospects for reemployment. Prior research suggests that dominant self-help support institutions tend to exacerbate such self-devaluation by activating individualizing narratives. In this paper we examine whether and how sociologically-informed forms of support may activate an alternative set of narratives that counter such self-stigmatization. Our findings suggest that soc-informed support can indeed activate more structural and shared understandings of long-term unemployment among white-collar American workers. The American culture individualism, as powerful as it might be, does not mean that self-blame is an inevitable outcome of unemployment for American job seekers. Narratives that "we're all in the same boat," and that unemployment is not "just something about me" are available as a "collective resource" (Hall and Lamont 2013), and in particular institutional contexts these narratives can be activated to counter long-term unemployment's tendency to lead to self-stigmatization.

The currently dominant institutions of hiring in the U.S. generate an experience of a black hole, which leaves unemployed job seekers with no institutionalized recognition of their value or even existence. Our interviews with job seekers prior to receiving soc-informed support showed that when facing silent rejections an internal narrative typically gains force about individual shortcomings as job seekers activate dominant and self-stigmatizing narratives for understanding their labor market challenges. These findings are consistent with prior research (Newman 1999, Smith 2001, Sharone 2013). While the literature also finds that this self-devaluation may be exacerbated by self-help support approaches that activate individualizing narratives by framing the finding work as within the control of the individual job seeker, this paper suggests that soc-informed support can interrupt this process. By breaking job seekers' isolation this form of support facilitates unemployed workers' recognition that the emotional turmoil they are privately experiencing is shared by similar others, and that contrary to dominant stigmatizing narratives of unemployment, these others are talented and meritorious. This dual recognition creates an opening for activating a different set of narratives for self-valuation which reflect back a self that is not flawed but facing structural obstacles and experiencing the widely shared emotional fallout generated by such obstacles. Soc-informed support appears to provide a counterweight. Institutionalized silent rejections are met with institutionalized forms of recognition. Soc-informed support works by transforming the interpretive lens through which job seekers experience the black hole by de-stigmatizing outcomes and activating mutualistic and sociological narratives that enhance social resilience and allow for more effective engagement in job search practices.

In short, sociological discourses focused on the structural roots of unemployment—when taken outside the academic classroom and utilized in supporting unemployed workers in tandem with practices which allow workers to recognize the shared nature of structurally rooted experiences, facilitate "social resilience" (Hall and Lamont 2013). This form of resilience is not the product of psychological mechanisms. It is a resilience to counter social devaluation, stigmatization and discouragement not by focusing on inner work or individual qualities but by tapping collective cultural resources and

activating available mutualistic and sociological narratives to illuminate the role of institutions in creating shared and structurally rooted challenges. Building on the social resilience literature this paper shows how activating such narratives and facilitating the understanding the institutional roots of challenges can contribute to self re-valuation and wellbeing.

In addition to building theory, the findings in this paper also have important practical implications. While conceptualizations of American culture as monolithically individualistic suggest that local institutional innovations are unlikely to succeed absent a broad and fundamental cultural change, this paper points to the viability of a strategy of developing and gradually diffusing sociologically-informed support institutions. Our findings of re-valuation after only three months of weekly support suggest that long-term unemployed workers' self-devaluation is not as deeply embodied and internalized as implied by theories such as Bourdieu's (1990, 2001) symbolic violence. The soc-informed support described in this paper does not work by retraining a deeply ingrained habitus but by activating alternative narratives about the workings of the labor market, and more broadly, about the self in relation to others and social institutions. These encouraging findings suggest the value of further research to explore the scalability of this form of support as well as the most effective ways to deliver it.

Unemployment frequently triggers a dual crisis: the loss of income and the loss of self. While fully addressing the problem of unemployment would require policies that eliminate both elements, including the scarcity of good jobs and discriminatory hiring practices, soc-informed support does address the devastation to the self wrought by internalized stigma. Addressing self-stigmatization is of substantial importance in its own right, with its well-known consequences for health and job search discouragement. But, moreover, diminishing self-stigmatization may also be perquisite to the possibility of collective action aimed at addressing the underlying structural roots of unemployment (Felstiner et al. 1981).

The findings in this paper also have important implications for mitigating the negative health effects of unemployment. As discussed in the introduction to this paper one important link between negative health outcomes and unemployment is self-stigmatization. Given this link, to the extent that soc-informed support examined in this paper counters self-stigmatization it can be expected to also shield unemployed workers from some of the negative health consequences of unemployment. Future research should particularly focus on the effects of destigmatization on those health outcomes that are typically linked to internalized stigma.

Finally, beyond long-term unemployment, we hope the encouraging findings in this paper inspire considerations of other institutional innovations that activate mutualistic narratives and foster a sociological imagination. The internalization of stigma described in this paper arises in a variety of contexts. As Hall and Lamont (2013 p.10) show currently dominant neoliberal institutions and discourses result in varied populations coming to be defined, and often self-define, as "losers." While the nature of such challenges is particularly acute for the long-term unemployed, this extreme case allows us to more clearly see the kind of institutional practices and mechanisms that can counteract this more broadly felt sense of devaluation.

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