1. The experience of unemployment, in context

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This volume, the *Handbook on Unemployment and Society*, focuses on the experiences of jobless workers, with particular attention on how labor market institutions, policy regimes, and cultural norms generate differences and similarities in such experiences across different contexts. Our focus on variations highlights the role of structural forces and counteracts the tendency to understand unemployment experiences as largely driven by individual factors.

The chapters of this handbook present scholarship from a variety of countries, allowing us to both recognize some common trends and appreciate the ways workers' experiences diverge. Structural shifts in the nature of the global economy have meant that people everywhere increasingly find themselves in precarious circumstances. At the same time, institutional differences in policies and norms, and factors such as gender and race, continue to situate individuals in more or less advantaged positions when they confront the loss of their livelihoods.

In this introductory chapter we summarize some of the major themes of the volume, highlighting and connecting some of the key takeaways from individual chapters.

While many chapters discuss broad economic and societal patterns, this volume also makes a point of delving beneath the numbers and exploring the lived experience of unemployment in all its complexity. Among the most important subjective aspects of this experience is the way jobseekers come to understand their difficulties in finding work. This volume considers how such understandings may reflect various forms of internalized stigma and self-blame, which are cultivated by state institutions and cultural contexts. Its chapters demonstrate how disconnection from secure and dignified employment can severely undermine well-being, challenge one's fundamental identity and sense of meaning and purpose, and cause strains in families and close relationships. They capture the intensely personal experience of work insecurity more broadly, showing how one's location along a continuum of precarity has repercussions that are not only financial and material, but also social and emotional. And in different ways, they identify the institutional machinery and dynamics that underlie these patterned experiences.

THE IMPACTS AND INSTITUTIONS OF UNEMPLOYMENT

A key theme of recent research is that the loss of wages is only one of many challenges facing unemployed people. As **Sarah Burgard** and **Janet Wang** point out, a large body of literature shows that involuntary job loss is associated with a host of poor health outcomes, including greater incidence of cardiovascular disease, physical disability, self-destructive behaviors and suicide, and mortality. The empirical evidence largely supports the view that unemployment causes these outcomes, with the depression and anxiety that often accompany it being the chief culprits for subsequent declines in health—in addition to being problems in themselves. Job loss not only causes distress by straining household budgets and threatening poverty, but

in some countries it can cut off households from health insurance, hindering the use of medical care that may become all the more essential following such a stressful life event.

An early and highly influential theory that sought to explain unemployment's wide array of negative repercussions was Marie Jahoda's (1982) latent deprivation model, which brought into view the many noneconomic costs of losing one's job. These include being stripped of what Jahoda called the "latent benefits" of work, such as the imposition of a daily time structure, enforcement of regular activity, and frequent contact with people outside the nuclear family. Jahoda's theoretical model was used by Pierre Bourdieu to understand the conditions of unemployed people both in Algeria in the 1960s and in Europe in the 1990s. In both cases, Bourdieu followed Jahoda in conceptualizing unemployment as the "de-structuring of existence, which is deprived, among other things, of its temporal structures, and the ensuing deterioration of the whole relationship to the world, time, and space" (Bourdieu 1998:82).

Numerous other studies have followed Jahoda's latent deprivation framework to analyze the hardships associated with unemployment (e.g., Creed and Macintyre 2001; Wilson 1996). The chapter by **David Blustein**, **Camille Smith**, **Michael Gordon**, **Alekzander Davila**, and **Whitney J. Erby** reviews some of these approaches while highlighting the psychology of working theory (PWT), which considers how unemployment keeps individuals from enjoying various psychological and social benefits of work, such as "survival and power, social connection and contribution, and self-determination." The authors discuss various empirical studies that illuminate the specific ways in which being disconnected from these dimensions of "decent work" lowers the life satisfaction and well-being of unemployed people.

While Jahoda's early theoretical framework helpfully pointed to the wide-ranging and sometimes invisible effects of being deprived of work, this theory has also been criticized as universalizing and homogenizing the experience of unemployment (Boland and Griffin 2015). Recent research—some of it done by the co-editors of this volume—has sought to explain important variations in the economic, psychological, and social consequences of unemployment across populations. For example, Ofer Sharone's (2013) research in the United States and Israel shows how workers who are similarly deprived of the benefits of work nonetheless report very different experiences of unemployment, with unemployed Israelis tending to blame the government or hiring system while white-collar unemployed Americans tend to blame themselves. Similarly, Victor Tan Chen's (2015) study of autoworkers in Canada and the United States underscores how losing one's job leads to different material and subjective consequences depending on the distinct social safety nets and cultural norms that jobless workers encounter in their day-to-day lives. Sabina Pultz's (2017) research explores how unemployed people are governed and govern themselves in the Danish welfare state, describing how traditionally employed individuals who lose their jobs and search for new full-time positions have experiences that are very different from those of the entrepreneurial "unemployed by choice"—for example, photographers, artists, and consultants who strategically use the unemployment benefit system to pursue less stable career paths (Pultz and Mørch 2015).

Various chapters in this volume advance the critique of Jahoda's deprivation model by investigating this heterogeneity of experiences and theorizing unemployment as an institution that varies across social contexts. Drawing on Michel Foucault's theory of governmentality, with its focus on how power is exercised by states, **Tom Boland** and **Ray Griffin** argue that unemployment is a "category produced by experts and policymakers that creates the very deprivation" that researchers find among unemployed people. Such hardships are not "natural attributes of individuals or social universals but generated by how a 'job' is governed"—that

is, the particular set of employment norms and government policies that structure how people experience unemployment. In the same vein, the chapter by **Michelle Peterie** and **Alex Broom** underscores how the deprivations of unemployment are "not *inherent* to participation in or separation from paid work"—a fact obscured by theories that pay insufficient attention to social context. Rather, the authors contend that these negative outcomes result from the larger culture, which rigidly holds up paid employment as the chief way to contribute to and participate in society.

A repeated theme in this volume is the role of the state in directly shaping the experiences of unemployment (and precarity more broadly) by deciding who receives safety net benefits, and under what terms. The rules and practices that govern unemployed people by determining whether and how the state extends support to jobless individuals are often referred to as *activation policies*. In their chapter, **Dorte Caswell**, **Flemming Larsen**, and **Mathias H. Nielsen** elucidate the dilemmas and coping strategies involved when various groups of actors confront activation policies on the ground. Drawing upon interviews not only with unemployed people but also the managers and frontline staff at five Danish job centers, their research highlights the conflicting motivations at the heart of the state's activation policies. The staff at such centers find themselves trying to balance the agency's imperative of making the provision of assistance conditional on a set of strict criteria while at the same time attempting to meet the agency's other stated goals of providing assistance with a personal touch and maintaining the dignity of the unemployed. Under this regime, not only are unemployed people forced to meet a growing list of demands to be eligible to receive state support, but similarly stringent conditions are steadily being expanded to other government programs that assist vulnerable groups who struggle with problems beyond finding a job.

In their chapter exploring the lived experience of unemployment in the Danish welfare state, **Sabina Pultz** and **Magnus Paulsen Hansen** identify three different stories, or cultural "repertoires," that influence how individuals respond to unemployment, and whether they retain a sense of personal dignity when confronted with activation policies and labor market norms. The first repertoire, the "rights" repertoire, holds that people have the right to jobs with certain minimum benefits, such as pensions and paid vacation. The second, the "work" repertoire, essentially reflects the Protestant work ethic, emphasizing that dignity comes solely from paid labor. The third, the "meritocratic" repertoire, views the labor market as ideally a fair system of sorting that connects people who have certain skills to jobs. When individuals adopt a "rights" repertoire, Pultz and Hansen argue, they often respond to unemployment with indignation and a critique of the system, such as the widespread practice of age discrimination in hiring. In contrast, thinking about unemployment through the second "work" repertoire promotes "work first" policies, putting pressure on unemployed people to seek out, and feel grateful for, any kind of work, regardless of job quality. Finally, a "meritocratic" repertoire can lead to two very different perspectives on unemployment depending on whether the current hiring system is seen as living up to the meritocratic ideal. If the labor market is fair, unemployment is a deserved verdict on a worker's unworthiness, which justifies any difficulties they face; if not, then unemployment merely reflects the fact that many employers overlook the actual skills of workers. Pultz and Hansen note that these three conflicting but coexisting repertoires become more or less salient depending on the policy context and the culture's ongoing negotiations over what sources of dignity are legitimate. Feelings of dignity—and indignity—are thus intimately linked to politics and policies.

The chapter by **Sarah Damaske** further demonstrates the importance of context. Arguing that unemployment is an institution structured by laws, practices, and language, Damaske describes the United States as an outlier in terms of its meager protection from terminations, its low level of support following a job loss, and its harsh culture of judgment of those not working. Stringent eligibility requirements mean that only about a third of unemployed American workers qualify for benefits. The norm across US states was once to provide at least 26 weeks of support, but since the Great Recession state policies have diverged sharply, and in several states this threshold has been slashed more or less by half. Furthermore, unemployment benefits now cover, at most, only half of prior earnings, which drives many into poverty. In Pennsylvania, the state where Damaske conducted her research, unemployed people must reapply for benefits every two weeks to continue receiving them. Such policies convey the message that jobseekers should take any job available regardless of its quality—clearly reinforcing the "work" repertoire discussed by Pultz and Hansen.

As the body of research collected in this handbook emphasizes, the ways that government institutions govern unemployed people deeply influence how these individuals come to view their difficulties in the labor market and how they relate to themselves as being unemployed. There is no single story that captures how unemployed people experience their situation, and this is especially the case for any feelings of shame and blame that emerge after losing a job—subjective responses to unemployment that, as we describe later, vary greatly based on the institutional context.

SUBJECTIVITIES AND WORK INSECURITY

A key contribution of this volume is its detailed examination of the subjective understandings that accompany unemployment. Through activation policies and labor market norms, unemployment institutions encourage workers to adopt three viewpoints: (1) an acceptance of the idea that job security no longer exists, and that employers owe no loyalty to their workers; (2) a willingness to downwardly adjust one's aspirations and accept downward mobility; and (3) a view that unemployment is at least partly one's own fault, even if there is also unfairness in the hiring system.

Widespread resignation about the end of job security can be clearly seen among **Annette Nierobisz**'s interviewees, unemployed white-collar workers over the age of 50 in the Midwestern US state of Minnesota. As her chapter describes, even older jobseekers—some of whom once knew a less precarious labor market—have internalized the neoliberal norm that it is the responsibility of workers to be flexible and maintain their employability. Nierobisz's findings echo prior research on how today's workers are learning to take charge of their "company of one" by investing in their portfolios of personal capital (Chen and Goldstein 2024; Gershon 2014; Lane 2011; Pultz 2018), even as this line of inquiry also suggests crucial ways that the allure of such individualistic mindsets differs across cultures and types of workers (Pultz and Sharone 2020; Vallas and Christin 2018).

In his chapter, **Travis Lowe** dives deeply into both the structural roots and subjective experience of work insecurity. On the one hand, employers have wrung greater profits from workers by demanding labor market flexibility. Practices like downsizing and precarious work arrangements have lowered the costs of labor. And regardless of the actual likelihood of layoffs at a particular firm, management can threaten job cuts to cow workers, taking advantage

of the modern economy's general climate of uncertainty. Here, Lowe draws a crucial contrast between perceived *job* insecurity and perceived *labor market* insecurity—the former concerning whether one will keep one's current job, and the latter regarding whether one could find a similarly decent job if laid off. While both are growing concerns, Lowe highlights the increasingly decisive role of the latter trend in a more polarized labor market characterized by fewer career ladders within companies and more job-switching between them. Even workers who still enjoy relative job security, such as government employees and union members, worry about their ability to find good jobs should they lose the ones they have.

To further understand the labor market insecurity identified in Lowe's statistical analyses, we can turn to the ethnographic work of **Allison Pugh**. Delving into the perspectives of the many workers she has interviewed over the years, Pugh's chapter describes a widely embraced narrative of how the US labor market has evolved, one that presents job insecurity as inevitable, and downward mobility (when it occurs) as justified. According to Pugh, the narrative begins with a story about a "mythic past," an older era when workers could stay with one employer their whole career (a level of security that, Pugh adds, was only really available to white male workers). The narrative ends with a story about a "mythic future," in which technological change and artificial intelligence make jobs increasingly scarce. The result of this mythmaking is a sense that job insecurity is here to stay, the product of forces beyond our control. Workers recount these stories to avoid seeming foolish or naïve in their expectations about the future. As Pugh points out, with no good options before them, workers can at least come across as "savvy" in the face of inexorable trends. While perhaps comforting, these stories also exact a cost by reinforcing a "presumption of inevitability" and squelching any demand for systemic change. Left unchallenged is the stunted and otherwise dubious nature of the labor market's supposed meritocracy, as well as the active role that elites have played in imposing and endorsing insecurity while framing it as a natural economic law (Chen 2015, 2021; Sharone 2024). Indeed, in her analysis of the language adopted by unemployed people to describe their circumstances, **Damaske's** findings echo Pugh's, with unemployed people discussing their former employers' actions in a way that "blurs" management's agency and responsibility, using passive phrasing to discuss "positions eliminated" or "units being closed."

If many workers expect no loyalty from employers, they still have high expectations for themselves. In past work, Pugh (2015) described this contradictory perspective as a "one-way honor system." Americans in particular talk of themselves as being driven and passionate about their careers, holding tightly onto an image of themselves as supremely dedicated to hard work—even as they let downsizing companies off the hook for not steadfastly rewarding that hard work. In her chapter in this volume, Pugh argues that these asymmetrical expectations "shape the emotions that people are allowed to feel"—including whether they express anger at employers and the larger economic context that offers them no security, or whether they direct any such frustrations toward themselves.

In short, stories matter. They determine what degree of forgiveness and grace we permit ourselves and others, how we emotionally react to events, and what we think we owe each other (Chen 2016). And the institutions of unemployment tend to promote certain stories that the jobless absorb and then go on to tell themselves whenever they wonder why it is they cannot find work.

UNEMPLOYMENT STIGMA AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

As many of the volume's chapters describe, shame and self-blame are among the most common and challenging experiences that accompany unemployment (Newman 1988). It is useful to distinguish between the two concepts. Shame is tied to social stigma, which Erving Goffman (1986) defined as the outcome of classifying someone as an "other" *and* as "inferior" and "tainted." It is related to a fundamental sense of *being* wrong (Brown 2006). Self-blame is about guilt, arising from a sense that a person *did* something wrong—for instance, making mistakes in their career or failing in their job search (Chen 2015).

Goffman's pioneering analysis of stigma offered a critical starting point for understanding how it shapes the everyday interactions and experiences of stigmatized individuals. Missing from this theory, however, was an explanation for why some individual attributes, such as unemployment, and not others, become the target of stigma (Sharone 2024). In their chapter, **Peterie** and **Broom** argue that this stigma is rooted in the very institutions of unemployment. The state "naturalizes" inequality and justifies an unfair distribution of resources through its relentless messaging to denigrate the so-called idle. First, it promotes the view that individuals can only realize their potential and achieve the good life through "hard work and market participation." Second, it paints unemployed people as lazy and shames individuals who receive unemployment compensation. These practices produce "enthusiastic workers" who gladly snatch up the economy's scraps of precarious work, thereby rendering state violence unnecessary and making individuals "complicit in their own exploitation."

In short, shame becomes a powerful weapon for ensuring compliance. (As we discuss further below, promoting self-blame serves a similar, but distinct, role.) Individuals will go to great lengths to avoid it—in some cases, even engaging in difficult emotional labor (Hochschild 2003) to conceal or amplify aspects of the self and to bring their feelings into alignment with social expectations, which Peterie and Broom call "self-governance." Policymakers, in turn, can design their policies in ways that either accentuate or diminish these feelings. For instance, as **Pultz** and **Hansen** point out, making unemployment compensation conditional on engaging in required job search activities and attending mandatory meetings predictably leads jobseekers to feel suspected and mistrusted, contributing to their sense of otherness and inferiority.

Weighed down by feelings of shame and self-blame, unemployed people may come to doubt their own worthiness as members of communities—or even as human beings. The consequences can be devastating. In her chapter, **Dawn Norris** emphasizes that employment is the central anchor of many people's identity, and that threatening this identity harms their mental health and well-being. Her interview data show how negative experiences in the labor market can, with time, convince people that they cannot maintain their prior identities, or identities that match their expectations of themselves. As **Blustein** and his collaborators note, this disconnect between an individual's previous, desired self-conception and their present, inferior reality is a major source of psychological strain for the unemployed.

To avoid feelings of shame, unemployed jobseekers may try to conceal their stigmatized status. Rather than describing themselves as simply "unemployed," they may instead present themselves as entrepreneurs or freelancers (Pultz 2018) or play up their family care commitments. (Notably, one reason that they can position themselves in such a gray zone is that the distinction between being employed and being unemployed is no longer as clear as it may have

been in prior eras, but is characterized by various gradients of precarity and powerlessness, as we discuss later.) Yet, these strategies of concealment are not equally available to everyone. For example, most of the men Norris interviewed were not able to shift their identities to caregivers given the widespread belief, often internalized, that a "real man had to be a breadwinner."

The loss of a socially viable identity and the stigma of unemployment more generally can isolate individuals of any gender, weakening their friendships and straining their marriages (Chen 2017; Sharone 2024). **Pultz and Hansen** find that for those not in relationships dating can also become more difficult—not just because of financial pressures, but also because shame about their inferior status heightens their self-doubts. That said, the impact of unemployment on relationships differs for men and women. On the one hand, unemployed married men are more likely than women to experience marital tensions (Basbug and Sharone 2017). On the other hand, as **Aliya Hamid Rao** discusses in her chapter, heterosexual couples tend to allocate ample time and resources to unemployed men whenever they look for new jobs, while not giving the same priority to the job searches of women. This divergence in how households respond to job losses emerges because unemployment tends to be perceived as a more urgent problem for men than it is for women, Rao concludes. In addition to making their job hunting harder, such a lopsided response makes unemployed women doubt their professional value and feel more detached from the labor market than men do.

PSYCHOLOGIZING UNEMPLOYMENT AND PROMOTING SELF-BLAME

The institutions of unemployment derive their power not only by regulating the flow of material resources to unemployed people, but also, critically, through the discourses they promote. One of the striking characteristics of how unemployed people are governed today is the use of psychology and "softer" forms of power. This psychologization of unemployment involves government institutions increasingly drawing on constructs such as morals, motivation, and passion in an effort to cultivate the employability of unemployed people (Pultz 2018). The end result of these strategies is to channel blame toward the unemployed person instead of the labor market or other structural factors. In this context, the meritocracy repertoires that **Pultz** and **Hansen** discuss take a more pernicious form—a "predatory meritocracy" (Chen 2021) that institutions can wield to quash challenges to their interests.

In his chapter, **Brian Halpin** describes how this prevailing narrative plays out at job centers, as unemployed people learn to see their unemployment as a personal problem rather than a public issue—a belief hammered home by job coaches and unemployment workshops. Halpin draws from his fieldwork at a state employment center in the US state of California, which includes in-depth interviews of unemployed people and coaches as well as participant observations of jobseeker workshops. As Halpin puts it, the message at such centers is "crystal clear" that "unemployment is the result of a flaw of character and not of political economy." Over time, the center's coaches convince jobseekers to lower their aspirations and accept downward mobility. Exhibiting system-blame in addition to self-blame, some workers do recognize that the issue is not their ability to find a job but the low quality of the jobs available, Halpin points out. They also express frustration about the absurd rules for accessing state resources for retraining, which simultaneously require that jobseekers be deemed not only

"unemployable" but also financially stable enough to be able to finish a training program—a contradictory (and painfully ironic) set of requirements for unemployed people that ultimately lead many to wind up in low-wage, dead-end jobs.

Even if some complaints are leveled against the system, however, the unemployment narrative promoted by job centers concentrates the attention of jobseekers on their own "perversity"—the aberrant nature of their habits and attitudes. The discourses are not subtle, and include workshops that tell unemployed people that to succeed "you just need to make changes inside." The underlying message is that they fail to find jobs because they are not searching in the right way. The perversity narrative ultimately leaves unemployed people feeling a persistent guilt about their failure to relaunch. Receiving money thus comes with an affective price—what Pultz (2024) calls a state of "emotional indebtedness."

The chapter by **Boland** and **Griffin** comes to a similar conclusion about Ireland's unemployment system, which has outsourced the implementation of its activation policies. The contracted private firms require jobseekers to undergo psychological evaluations and training, write (and rewrite) CVs according to their specifications, and apply to particular selections of jobs. The "discipline, surveillance, guidance, and advice" extended through Irish activation policies are meant to mold the jobseeker's subjectivity in line with a work repertoire, pushing them to find any job as soon as possible and contributing to a sense of exclusion and shame. The upshot of these practices, again, is to foist responsibility for unemployment onto individuals.

In her chapter, **Jie Yang** describes the novel approach that Chinese officials have taken—amid massive levels of youth unemployment—to frame joblessness as an individual problem and not an issue for society to address. Due to the lingering effects of Covid-19 and the policies meant to eradicate it, at the time of writing, one in five young people in Chinese cities was out of work. In response to a growing disillusionment about the labor market among younger generations, the government pursued a strategy that Yang calls "therapeutic governance," emphasizing the responsibility of jobseekers to rely on their own "psychological resources." The state also turned to gendered discourses that selectively drew from ancient Chinese philosophy to suggest that the root cause of unemployment was the "chaos in the hearts" of individuals.

In their promotion of personal responsibility and self-blame, the activation policies that many countries are pursuing appear to be built upon the assumption that a job is always better than no job. However, as **Greg Marston** and **Rose-Marie Stambe** point out, this assumption overlooks research that finds some types of paid work—in particular, jobs that offer workers little autonomy—can be detrimental to well-being. It also fails to recognize the deep harm that activation policies can cause by exacerbating the self-blame of unemployed people, which contributes to emotional pain and declining mental health alongside the already difficult challenge of finding a job.

THE MANY FACES OF THE PRECARIOUS ECONOMY

The chapters in this volume also ask us to consider how the nature of joblessness has changed in recent decades, as work arrangements have become more complex and insecure, and stable full-time jobs more elusive. The growth of precarity in the labor market has critical implications for our previous discussions of the noneconomic consequences of joblessness and the

role of the state in shaping the experience of unemployment. After all, similar points could be made about the individual consequences and institutional underpinnings of economic precarity more broadly—though the mechanisms connecting these phenomena are often different. Indeed, as **Burgard** and **Wang** point out, there is some evidence that chronic job insecurity is associated with even worse health outcomes than an actual spell of unemployment (Burgard et al. 2009; Kim and von dem Knesebeck 2016). This may speak, again, to some of the inherently subjective aspects of the experience of precarity: much like happiness can peak prior to the actual experience of an expected positive event such as a vacation (Nawijn et al. 2010), stress can soar merely in anticipation of a possible job loss, with the individual stuck in a limbo state of uncertainty and powerlessness that may be more damaging than the actual separation event—the latter at least allowing the worker to respond and move on. As **Blustein** and his associates point out, psychological theories of the harms of being unemployed can be fruitfully applied to underemployment and other states of being deprived of "decent work" beyond involuntary job loss.

As noted previously, the availability of decent work has always differed starkly by gender and race. That said, for a time, modern industrialized economies widely provided relatively secure employment and middle-class wages even to those with less in the way of formal education. The principal dividing line in this bygone era was between those who were employed and those who were searching for employment. Over the past half-century, the so-called social contract between companies and workers that promised secure employment in exchange for industriousness and loyalty has eroded around the globe, all but vanishing in liberal market economies like the United States. Recent years have seen not only the rise of nonstandard arrangements of contingent, part-time, and gig-based labor, but also the growth of other marginalized positions in the labor market—informal, undocumented, prison, and student workers, for example (Hatton 2020; Kalleberg 2011, 2018). Individuals often flit between these varied forms of underemployment, in addition to experiencing prolonged unemployment and, in some cases, dropping out of the labor force altogether. The experience of not working, therefore, has become less defined by a sharp dichotomy between being employed versus unemployed, and instead is more of a continuum that describes an individual's relative disconnection from long-term, secure, regulated, and well-remunerated work—a division of nonlabor (Korte and Chen 2020).

At one end of the spectrum is the rising number of prime-age workers not in the labor force. This cohort of workers (typically defined as being between the ages of 25 and 54) would be expected to be done with schooling and not yet retired. Across advanced industrialized nations—but dramatically so in the United States—labor force participation among prime-age men has declined, and for US women, the rate has stalled since 2000 (Eberstadt 2016). In important ways, labor market dropouts are worse off than the unemployed or even long-term unemployed. For example, **Dingeman Wiertz** and **Chaeyoon Lim** show how this population's degree of civic engagement—measured by their volunteering—is substantially lower than that of the unemployed, who are actually more engaged than the employed. A mix of factors influences the amount of volunteering that people do, including their free time and the reach and health of their personal networks. Wiertz and Lim argue that a person's specific location along a continuum of joblessness may be connected to the salience of each of these factors, with those who stop looking for work facing the greatest social and psychological hurdles to civic engagement. "This extreme type of joblessness is most likely to undermine people's sense of social membership and elicit feelings of superfluity, inducing them to withdraw from

public life more generally," the authors write—underscoring the broader social and political ramifications of this expanding, yet largely invisible, population.

Drawing from his study of rural working-class men, **Robert Francis** also demonstrates the more complex nature of joblessness in today's economy. One of the questions he takes up is whether US men are dropping entirely out of the labor force or merely moving in and out of it—a reality that some research has suggested is being missed by cross-sectional statistical snapshots (Coglianese 2018). Based on his interviews with working-class men in rural Pennsylvania, Francis shows how most of those who at one point in time might be classified as dropouts have largely been employed throughout their prime working years. The apparent decline in labor force participation, he concludes, partly reflects this "participation churn," which regularly saddles disadvantaged workers with spells of unemployment and sometimes falling out of the labor force altogether. The chief issue that these workers confront is not finding work per se but rather securing lasting, well-paid employment, Francis notes. Most of his respondents are able to obtain what he calls "bad(ish) jobs"—not the worst in terms of pay, but ones that lead nowhere and are easy to lose. Especially in rural areas, which tend to offer fewer opportunities for stable full-time employment, being trapped in such a cycle of dead-end work followed by no work is a real danger.

The perception that bad jobs are widely available, but good jobs are not, may explain **Lowe**'s previously discussed findings about labor market insecurity. Two groups tend to express low levels of this type of insecurity, he notes: part-time workers (who could easily find another part-time job) and workers who enjoy high levels of autonomy (many of them highly skilled employees commanding high wages and favorable working conditions). In her chapter, **Nancy DiTomaso** presents a provocative historical account of how the fates of these two types of workers—the privileged and the precarious—are intertwined. She argues that some elite workers, particularly in tech sectors, remain prized by employers for their outsized potential to drive innovation and thereby profits. Precarity of the many allows for this privilege of the few, as companies lift up the latter group through the immiseration of the former—by rationalizing and outsourcing labor costs, but also by weakening the social safety nets that corporations and elites perceive to be costly.

Anna Kiersztyn describes how a similar historical process has played out in a very different national context—Poland. She teases out specific factors that led to a rapid growth in nonstandard work arrangements and illicit employment practices after Poland's transition to a free market economy, thus underscoring the noteworthy role that policymakers also play in paving the way to precarity and branding it as business-as-usual. Also pursuing this line of inquiry into the role of the state, **Jacqueline Olvera** traces some of the historical roots of modern precarious work back to US guest work programs, where the federal government worked with employers to tie foreign labor to fixed-term contracts, again normalizing the precarity of temporary work in ways reminiscent of twenty-first-century digital platform work. All of these shifts in policy and practice speak to how the absence of stable and remunerative work that reliably leads to a dignified career is a feature, not a bug, of the current market economy.

In their chapter, **Victor Tan Chen** and **Erin Hatton** tie together these recent developments in joblessness and precarity and argue that scholars need to move beyond simple binaries—employed versus unemployed people, "good" versus "bad" jobs—in describing the nature of power in today's workplace. They argue that we need to understand how employers exert control over their workers across multiple dimensions—economic, cultural, and political—and

how practices from downsizing to nonstandard work arrangements to worker surveillance are all different faces of employer power.

JOB SEARCHING AND HIRING PRACTICES

From prior research, we know that unemployed jobseekers typically start their search by looking for a job that is similar to the one they lost (Sharone 2024). Over time, however, they broaden their search to include other kinds of jobs they had not initially considered, including positions that do not utilize their skills or that are poorly paid. Policies can make a difference. For example, Markus Gangl (2004) finds that the provision of unemployment benefits for a longer period in Germany as compared to the United States allows jobseekers to maintain a focus on finding jobs that match their skills.

Based on in-depth interviews with unemployed French workers, the chapter by **Didier Demazière** embarks on a deeper investigation of the job search experience. In contrast to influential theories in economics, which depict jobseekers as sorting available employment options and making utility-maximizing choices (Mortensen 1977), Demazière's research shows that job searches actually occur in a context of extreme uncertainty. While most of the workers he interviewed aspired to long-term positions, they had little knowledge of what jobs might be available, making it difficult to decide whether to widen their search or lower their expectations. In the face of such uncertainty, unemployed people engaged in a series of "trials and errors" and "experimentation and adjustment," looking for positions that they saw as "feasible" to land. Demazière discusses the various factors that shape workers' perceptions about what jobs are feasible, including the important role of state employment services, which tend to lower jobseekers' aspirations and pressure them to accept downward mobility (Pultz and Hviid 2018).

Nierobisz's chapter also emphasizes the ways that real-life job searches fail to unfold according to the rationalist logics of many economic theories, which largely dismiss unemployment as a temporary inconvenience. Among the older jobseekers that Nierobisz interviewed, most limited the scope of their search to their home state of Minnesota. Far from the free-floating agents depicted in classical economic theory, these jobseekers were deeply embedded in communities and connected with family and friends in relationships of mutual care and responsibility. Drawing on a theory of "linked lives," Nierobisz shows how networks of interdependence influence major life decisions such as where to look for work. Ironically, her interviewees' lack of faith in any remaining job security made the notion of relocating seem especially risky. It would mean giving up the known support of their local community and family to pursue uncertain job prospects, they reasoned.

Ilana Gershon's chapter explores how people apply for jobs and how "hiring rituals" have changed over time, providing a unique lens to understand historical changes in capitalism. When people learn to apply for jobs, Gershon argues, they inevitably "learn to see the world through neoliberal-colored glasses." In making this case, her chapter details the specific advice that jobseekers receive in workshops and other support settings, helping us to understand the hegemonic conceptions of the employment contract and the ideal worker that abound in today's labor market. This analysis connects macro-level societal changes and broad ideological shifts to small-scale interactions and day-to-day encounters.

Leveraging in-depth interviews in South Korea with recent college graduates as well as seasoned white-collar jobseekers, **Gokce Basbug**'s chapter fills other important gaps in the literature on job searching, which has been dominated by studies in the North American and European contexts (van Hooft et al. 2021). His research identifies several unique features of job searching and hiring practices that are shaped by South Korea's institutional and cultural context. Looking for white-collar positions places an inordinate amount of strain on jobseekers, Basbug finds, given tightly segregated alumni networks, high-pressure interviews, and other intensely competitive mass-recruitment practices popularized by large conglomerates. Interestingly, Basbug also describes how behaviors favored by Western employers are shunned in South Korea's corporate culture, which, for instance, tends to view displays of self-confidence as "overaggressive." In drawing these contrasts in the domain of job searching and hiring, Basbug adds another dimension to the volume's overall theme of cross-national variation, while at the same time showing through everyday practices how broader ideas about what it means to be an ideal worker have shifted across economies.

SUPPORTING WORKERS AND IMAGINING OTHER WORLDS OF WORK

While this volume mostly expands our empirical and theoretical understanding of the challenges of unemployment, some chapters also review promising evidence-based interventions to support the well-being of unemployed people. Currently, the most common forms of support unhelpfully individualize the experience of unemployment due to their exclusive focus on improving job search skills and maintaining a positive attitude. As we have seen in this volume, much of the support offered at state agencies in various countries tends to encourage jobseekers to blame themselves for their unemployment and to take any available job regardless of quality. As an alternative, the chapter by **Norris** recommends strategies of "identity work" to mitigate some of the hardships of unemployment. She discusses specific support programs using this approach, including one that assists unemployed people who are also facing substance use challenges. Getting involved with organizations can help jobseekers partially sustain broader identities or support the formation of "liminal identities," such as being a "person-in-recovery." Along with other institutional supports, these strategies may help during a period of transition, Norris suggests.

Critiquing classic studies in vocational psychology, **Blustein** and his collaborators discuss how traditional support approaches assume "significant work volition" on the part of jobseekers and therefore focus on encouraging them to find positions that fit their personalities. But given the daunting structural obstacles and difficult labor markets that, as we have seen, confront many unemployed people, the authors counsel a different approach. As they describe, the Work Intervention Network (WIN) model (Autin et al. 2023; Blustein et al. 2024) explicitly addresses the isolation, self-blame, and internalized stigma that often accompany unemployment by seeking to build the emotional resilience of jobless individuals. At the center of the WIN approach is the fostering of a critical consciousness—that is, an understanding of the social, political, and economic conditions that have brought about the hardships that unemployed people have been experiencing. This model of intervention has been shown to be protective against the negative effects of self-blame, building on and extending what Sharone (2024) describes as "sociologically informed support."

While the volume's chapters paint a rather grim picture of the oppressive institutions that confront many jobless workers, there are also hopeful signs that societies can find ways to deal with unemployment that avoid promoting stigma and individualizing blame. For example, **Boland** and **Griffin** encourage us to rethink how we view joblessness. If we stop treating being without work as a deprivation, they suggest, "forms of life outside employment can be imagined and made possible." That such a statement might seem radical speaks to the need to challenge a larger mainstream culture that upholds mastery and merit over other sources of existential meaning (Chen and Bland 2022, 2024). To that end, **Pultz** and **Hansen** call for casting aside prevailing norms that single out paid work as the primary source of dignity. Similarly, governing unemployed people more as subjects than objects, they add, will better equip them to imagine other systems of value.

A vision of what an alternative institutional order might look like arguably came into being during the Covid-19 pandemic (Chen and Sharone 2020; Pultz et al. 2021; Ravenelle 2023). In response, countries like Australia and Denmark not only increased their support for unemployed people but also waived stringent eligibility requirements. After the pandemic ebbed, the old policies returned, but **Marston** and **Stambe** urge us to see this brief but muscular state response to crisis as pointing toward other possible futures, perhaps even "inspiring the moral imagination of policymakers" to challenge the "centrality of the paid-work ethic." Societies can move in this direction, the authors add, by extending universal basic incomes and universal basic services—in line with other scholars' proposals for an "economy of grace" (Chen and Chen 2021, 2022). But transforming the institutional context in this way, **Chen** and **Hatton** point out, requires an especially imaginative approach to politics and collective organizing. The hope is that workers can creatively exploit new technologies as well as their strength in numbers to resist market trends toward greater precarity, push for alternatives within the political and cultural landscape, and build values-driven and collectively run enterprises not so fixated on strip-mining labor for greater profits.

Harkening back to Pultz and Hansen's "rights" repertoire, such bold prescriptions for a new economy are rooted in the idea that all of us have a "rightful share" of resources, given that the world's wealth has been amassed not solely based on the efforts of living individuals but also on the toil and wisdom bequeathed to all by prior generations. With the knowledge that policies that were once fantastical possibilities suddenly became a reality when states could no longer ignore a groundswell of public pressure, new social movements may emerge to push for robust interventions that directly address growing economic precarity and the stigmatization such inequalities unleash. As **Peterie** and **Broom** remind us, one of the great ironies of stigma is that it can "bind stigmatized people together and animate collective action" to overturn the existing order so that, in the end, the "stigmatizer is stigmatized for their prejudice."

Even outside the realms of policy and activism, individuals can resist the dominant narratives that justify their redundancy and encourage self-blame. Returning to her classic work on joblessness and dispossession (Dudley 1994, 2000), **Kathryn Dudley** eloquently voices the hope that lingers among people cut off from their past livelihoods, who can find meaning in their labors of repair and remembrance even if the market economy considers them superfluous. The more fortunate among us might take a similarly holistic view, expanding our notions of what infuses life with purpose. We might look with grace upon the losers today of capitalism's economic game, knowing that we could be among them tomorrow. We might recognize in them a fundamental dignity and fundamental desire to be of service, giving them the tools they need to find meaningful, and lasting, work. And we might see the losses they endure as

part of a more universal struggle—a lifelong effort to hold on to the labors we love and the good works we build, all of which must, in time, slip away.

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