Foucault Studies

ARTICLE

Avowing Unemployment:
Confessional Jobseeker Interviews and Professional CVs

TOM BOLAND

University College Cork, Ireland

ABSTRACT. While contemporary welfare processes have widely been analysed through the concepts of governmentality and pastoral power, this article diagnoses the dimension of confession or avowal within unemployment, job seeking and CV writing. This argument draws together the threads of Foucault's work on confession within disciplinary institutions, around sexuality and genealogies of monasticism, adding the insights of writers in 'economic theology'. Empirically the focus is on UK JobCentrePlus, whose governmentality is traced from laws and regulations, street-level forms, websites and CV advice. From the requirement of avowals of unemployment as a personal fault in interviews to professions of faith in oneself and the labour market, a distinctly confessional practice emerges – with the welfare officer as 'pastor' but with the market as the ultimate 'test' of worth. Furthermore, the pressure to transform the self through 'telling the truth' about oneself is taken as a normalising pressure which extends from the institutions of welfare across the labour market as a whole. In conclusion, the demand for self-transformation and the insistence on tests within modernity is problematised.

Keywords: Avowal, confession, CV, jobseekers, welfare

INTRODUCTION

Unemployment benefits or entitlements must be claimed, usually through a declaration of being without, available for and actively seeking work – the tripartite definition of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) which is instituted in national welfare systems across the OECD. Losing a job, being fired or going out of business are events which happen to people, but moving from being without work to being unemployed simply cannot occur without some form of claim by the subject about themselves. Herein, this claim or declaration is interpreted as a form of 'avowal' – as required and monitored by

welfare offices, and culturally informed by the broad and diffuse influence of 'confession' in modernity identified and analysed by Michel Foucault.

Governmentality studies of welfare-offices, job seeking and the labour market abound in contemporary scholarship, with many contributors highlighting how the disciplining of the self reflects forms of 'pastoral power' as a genealogical influence in welfare.[1] These studies span the forms and processes of claiming welfare at the 'street-level' through to the coaching and 'psy-science' interventions in the lives of the unemployed through to the enticement towards practices of job seeking.[2] Focusing on the UK, this article identifies the confessional dimensions of welfare processes, particularly how interviews with jobseekers by welfare offices require 'avowals' of unemployment, creating regular 'confessions' of faults or the need for self-improvement and unsuccessful attempts to find work, but also how they require 'professions' of work-readiness – CVs and profiles required by the welfare office which express 'faith' in oneself and the labour market. Tentatively, I suggest that this disciplinary government of welfare claimants and the production of CVs under pressure has a normalising effect across the labour market, wherein the threat of falling into unemployment models the 'good' jobseeker or worker.

By focusing on confession, this article hopes to contribute to our understanding of how the unemployed are shaped as subjects; indeed the numbers who pass through welfare offices are increasing, both because of the spread of precarious work and short contracts, and due to economic shocks like the Great Financial Crisis and Covid-19 pandemic.[3] Particularly, how individuals come to 'transform themselves' through 'telling the truth about the self' is diagnosed by Foucault as a key element of subject-formation in the 'West'. The term 'confession' must be used with caution, as it denotes numerous distinctive practices from early Christianity, medieval Monasticism, Lay-confession, Protestant private confession and proliferates across modernity in distinctive and hybrid ways.[4] Indeed, the term 'confession' is sometimes interchangeable with 'avowal' or even 'penance', so the first task here is clarifying the crucial elements of the practice.

No genealogical tracing of 'confession' as a practice from medieval 'pastoral power' to modern governmentality is offered here; indeed, the presence of 'confession' is so widespread and endemic to Christianity up to the twentieth century that such an exercise would be superfluous. Nor is the adoption and adaptation of 'confession' by

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[1] For instance, Mitchell Dean, "Governing the unemployed self in an active society," *Economy and Society* 24:4 (1995), 559-583; Del Roy Fletcher, "Workfare - a Blast from the Past? Contemporary Work Conditional-ity for the Unemployed in Historical Perspective," *Social Policy and Society* 14:3 (2015), 329-339; or Imogen Tyler, *Stigma Machines* (2020).

[2] Lynne Friedli and Robert Stearn, "Positive affect as coercive strategy: conditionality, activation and the role of psychology in UK government workfare programmes," *Medical Humanities* 41:1 (2015), 40-47; or David Frayne, *The Work Cure: Critical Essays on Work and Wellness* (2019).

[3] Two key accounts of this are Guy Standing, *Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (2011); or Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (2005).

[4] Chloe Taylor, *The Culture of Confession from Augustine to Foucault: A Genealogy of the 'Confessing Animal'* (2008).

various disciplinary institutions traced in detail. Both of these are beyond the limits of space. Instead, the analysis builds on Foucault's diagnosis of Western man as a 'confessing animal' as have others who have diagnosed the play of confession in areas as diffuse as therapy, coaching, life-long learning and health.[5] Amid the complex, policy-shaped and academically inspired modes of 'conducting the conduct' of welfare claimants, a confessional dimension emerges – among other things.

Finally, this analysis of confession also addresses the dimension of 'profession' – again these words are occasionally interchangeable – for instance, the 'confession of faith' is not an avowal of sins but a credo. Declarations of faith are acknowledged by Foucault as intrinsic to confession, but he was more concerned with 'avowal', the admittance of sin in thought or action, following his interest in madness, crime and sexuality. Herein the scope is expanded to incorporate expressions of 'belief', variously in a creed, an institution or the self, arenas of 'culture' or 'identity'. Tentatively, these 'professions' can be analysed as having a normalising effect, generating models of the good jobseeker or worker.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Contemporary welfare states have turned towards 'activation' – offering training and education – but also making welfare payments 'conditional', that is, contingent on behavioural compliance – the 'conduct of conduct' – with the threat of sanctions of reduced or suspended payments intrinsic to the schemes.[6] This governmentality is particularly prominent in the UK, and the empirical examples here are drawn from UK welfare regulations, JobCentre Plus guides, which are used by staff in dealing with clients, materials such as the 'WorkPlan booklet' given to clients, informal advice on creating CVs and digital platforms, such as 'FindaJob.gov', for instance. More speculatively, this disciplinary confessional of jobseekers is replicated or reflected in CV-writing more generally, and the institutional pressure and sequestering of jobseekers into welfare offices has a normalising effect on the labour market generally.

Despite being posed as a problem of economics in the early twentieth century, unemployment is increasingly responsibilised, that is, seen as resulting from individual choices, psychological deficiency or moral failings.[7] Indeed, CVs are positioned as remedial – any career 'gaps' need to be explained with attractive narratives or represented as salutary lessons – while long-term unemployment is addressed by enrolment in training or internships. Advice is disciplinary and insistent, incorporating psy-science and behavioural nudges, to set the unemployed on the 'right path'.[8] Contemporary welfare

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[5] For instance, Andreas Fejes and Magnus Dahlstedt, *The Confessing Society: Foucault, Confession and Practices of Lifelong Learning* (2013); or Mads Peter Karlsen and Kaspar Villadsen, "Confession," in *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*, ed. Stefan Schwarzkopf (2020), 36-46.

[6] Magnus Paulsen Hansen, *The Moral Economy of Activation: Ideas, Politics and Policies* (2019).

[7] Tyler, *Stigma Machines*.

[8] See Tom Boland and Ray Griffin, *The Reformation of Welfare: The New Faith of the Labour Market* (2021). Metaphors of paths and journeys recur frequently in activation texts.

states have followed an 'activation' turn across the OECD, so welfare benefits have become conditional provisions rather than entitlements and may be suspended if individuals do not demonstrate their efforts to find work and comply with all directives by case officers or work coaches.[9] The threat of sanctions pressurises claimants, installing a punitive or even a penitential mechanism within labour market institutions.[10]

While there is copious research on poverty, unemployment, welfare, careers and work, far fewer studies directly explore the actual experiences of job seeking. Much existing work interprets the institutions and discourses around job seeking as neo-liberal, for instance, rendering the individual as an enterprise, or re-defining the labourer as a 'business solution' or 'bundle of skills', or foisting blame on the unemployed individual for their lack of success.[11] Governmental dynamics of power and resistance are picked out by Foucauldian analyses of jobseeker subject-formation, and the persistence of religious thinking is also striking in that Christian models of penitence, persistence and self-overcoming are openly reproduced in some US jobs clubs.[12] These accounts offer a broad interpretation of welfare governmentality as pastoral power rather than attending to the specifically confessional practices involved.

GOVERNMENTALITY AND CONFESSION

Governmentality studies have blossomed as a paradigm which examines the 'how' of power, the discrete exercises of discipline which form conduct and the play of discourses which (re)constitute society by classifying and evaluating people and phenomena.[13] Turning towards analyses of bio-politics then governmentality in later work refocused Foucault's work beyond specific institutions – asylums, hospitals, prisons – to enable analyses which examine the state and the market. This work scrupulously avoids providing a meta-theory of the state, instead asserting: 'The state is nothing else but the mobile effect of a regime of multiple governmental actions'.[14] Indubitably, confession is an element of medieval pastoral power, which is adapted subsequently within modern disciplinary institutions, but only as one technique among others. Perhaps the genealogical links between Christian pastoral power and the emergence of governmentality in modernity, or between confession and disciplinary

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[9] Hansen, *The Moral Economy of Activation*.

[10] In *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (2009) Loic Wacquant describes this as liberal authoritarianism, yet these systems are not simply cruel but deliberately attempt to reshape individuals, following a penitential or purgative rationality.

[11] See Ilana Gershon, *Down and Out in the New Economy: How People Find (or Don't Find) Work Today* (2017); Ofer Sharone, "LinkedIn or LinkedOut? How Social Networking Sites are Reshaping the Labor Market," *Emerging Conceptions of Work, Management and the Labor Market* 30 (2017), 1-31; or Stephen Vallas & Angele Christin, "Work and Identity in an Era of Precarious Employment: How Workers Respond to 'Personal Branding' Discourse," *Work and Organisations* 45:1 (2018), 3-37.

[12] Gretchen Purser and Brian Hennigan, "Disciples and dreamers: job readiness and the making of the US working class," *Dialectical Anthropology* 42:2 (2018), 149–161.

[13] Mitchell Dean, *Governmentality: Power and Rule in Modern society* (2010).

[14] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College De France: 1977-1978* (2007), 77.

power, might need further genealogical elaboration elsewhere,[15] but this article is limited to analysing contemporary welfare processes.

Confession gradually becomes more prominent in Foucault's work; in regard to disciplinary power, it appears in prisons, asylums and beyond as part of a vast apparatus which demands 'truth-telling' from multiple subjects, approximating the '...colonisation of an entire society by means of disciplinary apparatuses'.[16] As a mode of 'conducting conduct', confession appears as a key dimension of pastoral power and precursor of governmentality. Furthermore, confession is an important part of Foucault's 'later work' on subjectivity, appearing in regard to sexuality, but also in discussions of ancient spiritual exercises and monasticism.[17] Indeed, confession is significant across Foucault's oeuvre, from sexuality to disciplinary institutions, from the ancient and modern worlds, providing a theoreticisation of 'confessional society'.[18]

The centrality of confession is articulated most strikingly in the *History of Sexuality*: 'Western man has become a confessing animal'.[19] Additionally, Foucault suggests in *Security, Territory and Population* that confession is central to pastoral power, which informs governmentality, and specifically how modern subjects are individuated or formed through their conduct.[20] This model of subject-formation informs this diagnosis of 'avowals of unemployment', with the caveat that Foucault tends to emphasise the 'avowal of faults' rather than the 'profession of faith', yet these are linked in situations which require the '…commitment of the speaking subject to what he or she is saying'.[21]

Before becoming a Catholic sacrament, confession has a longer genealogy found in early Christian rituals of baptism or canonical penance; dramatic public displays of conversion or demonstrations of guilt, visible and displayed to a whole community. Monastic confession altered these public demonstrations by combining 'spiritual exercises' with rites of purification, thereafter providing the model for lay-confession after 1215. The crucial elements of monastic confession are outlined briefly in *Security, Territory, Population* as being obedience, truth-telling and salvation; essentially a power-relationship within which a subject is transformed by 'telling the truth' about themselves to another, who judges and directs their conduct.[22] Yet how can talking

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[15] Mitchell Dean, *The Signature of Power* (2013).

[16] Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College De France: 1974-1975* (2003), 68. Foucault's analyses of confession span at least a decade of his research and writing.

[17] See Michel Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self: Two Lectures at Dartmouth," *Political Theory* 21:2 (1993), 198-227; or Michel Foucault, *The Hermeneutics of the Subject: Lectures at the College De France: 1981-1982* (2005); or most extensively Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the College De France, 1979-1980* (2014a).

[18] Fejes and Dahlstedt, *Confessing Society*, 1-8.

[19] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction Vol. 1* (1978).

[20] Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population* (2008), 182-4,

[21] The relationship between the 'confession of sins' and the 'confession of truth' is explored in Philippe Büttgen, "Foucault's Concept of Confession," *Foucault Studies* 29 (2021), 17.

[22] This 'government of souls' was described as the techne technes – the 'art of arts' by Greg of Nazianzus. Michel Foucault, *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling: The Function of Avowal in Justice* (2014b), 176-177.

about oneself be so powerful in shaping the self, and what is so distinctive about this Western discourse about the self?

Whether lay or monastic, confession requires submission, perhaps to an abbot, a priest or another figure, but hierarchical distinction matters less than the requirement for obedience. Following directions and orders without question is the apogee of self-renunciation here, but also crucial is the requirement to 'tell the truth' about oneself, one's thoughts and actions: 'All, or almost all, of an individual's life thought and actions must pass through the filter of confessions'.[23] Past conduct and desires had to be revealed for inspection and evaluation, to be judged, with purgative penances for sin. By speaking about the self, by avowing faults, the penitent also was transformed, 'shriven' of their sins; salvation was attained not just by believing in religious precepts but by purifying the self.

By contrast to Gnostics and others, Christianity since Augustine rejected the idea of perfectibility – the soul had to be constantly cleansed by confession[24]. Thus, confession involved a continuous process of self-examination, self-representation and transformation; a repeated testing of the self; 'This conversion, this establishing a relationship of subjectivity to truth requires probation, the test, bringing the truth of oneself into play'.[25] Salvation through confession is not a single and decisive transformation which establishes subjectivity decisively but a continuous process: 'This movement by which one turns around must be maintained'.[26] Thus, a constant ethic of self-examination, revelation to an authority and reformation of the self emerges.

This transformation of the self is complex, dividing between elements of the self – the self which confesses is implicitly distinct from past misdeeds, wherein the distinction between these 'parts' of the self is constituted through the discursive practices of confession: '...the revelation of the truth about oneself cannot be dissociated from the obligation to renounce oneself'.[27] By contrast to communal purification rituals, this process occurs through private, purgative verbalisations, 'putting the self into discourse', a continuous self-narrative, characterised by the injunction; 'To obey in everything and to hide nothing'.[28] Visible obedience was taken to guarantee the truth of discourse about the self, thus authenticating the purported transformation or purification. Parallels to contemporary therapeutic discourses, penal interrogations and discourses about sexuality emerge clearly here. Implicitly, sins were difficult to confess, as they were devilishly inspired and took hold of the will, and the more suffering

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[23] Foucault, *Abnormal*, 177: The discussion below follows *The Government of the Living* and *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, both of which discuss confession directly and extensively.

[24] In *Les aveux de la chair*, Foucault focuses extensively on Augustine, yet for Taylor (2008), the key auditor or judge of Augustine's Confession is not his bishop, friends or mother, but a virtual auditor, the deity.

[25] Foucault, *The Government of the Living*, 160.

[26] Ibid., 177.

[27] Foucault, "About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self," 221.

[28] *Government of the Living*, 266.

involved in avowal, the deeper the sin.[29] Furthermore, all elements of thought had to be inspected suspiciously, evoking criminological or psycho-analytical interrogations, or the purportedly secret character of sexuality. Thus, rather than a singular conversion or a seasonal ritual, confession becomes 'a permanent court'.[30] Telling the truth about the self, transforming the self becomes chronic in modernity, combining and exceeding the juridical interrogation of the self and a medical diagnosis which prescribes remedies, confession involves moralised 'veridiction' – as do processes of governing the unemployed, as we shall see.

For Foucault, confession is a crucial mode of self-formation because among many other practices it most precisely generates the 'truth of self', both by evaluating and defining the self:

> It involves establishing a relationship of obedience to the other's will and at the same time establishing, in correlation with, as condition of this obedience, what I would call not a jurisdiction but a veridiction; this obligation constantly to tell the truth about oneself with regard to oneself in the form of confession.[31]

Within confession, avowal is crucial for Foucault, the verbalisation of past thoughts and action, effectively linking subjectivity and truth. Significantly, while Christian confession involved the shriving of sins – whether committed or merely contemplated – modern disciplinary institutions generate an 'identity', linking the individual to past misdemeanours or impulses – deviance, delusions, perversions – even while excising or rejecting these as pathological or erroneous. The confessional self is constituted by the perpetual rejection of past or chronic misdeeds and thoughts from the speaking subject, a 'disavowal'.[32] Paradoxically, to confess involves avowing faults or sins, but also disavowing the self which authored them, thereby transforming the self.

While Foucault generally focuses on 'wrong-doing and truth-telling', another element involved is profession; 'avowal had to begin with an act of faith'.[33] Religiously a credo is affirmed or in secular situations shared values are endorsed: '…"belief" in oneself — or more specifically "belief" in oneself as "belief" in the market — has taken on dispropor-tionate relevance today'.[34] Such normative standards inscribe an ideal subjectivity against which actual conduct or thoughts can be judged and indicate a horizon of

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[29] *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 163-171. Drawing a parallel to Descartes' idea of delusion sent by a demi-urge; by extension, this veridiction of faults by the difficulty of confession illuminates contemporary prac-tices of self-purification from prejudices.

[30] Foucault, *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, 20.

[31] *Government of the Living*, 308.

[32] Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power: Theories in Subjection* (1997). Draws on Foucauldian accounts of subject formation but emphasizes less 'avowal' of wrong-doing than 'disavowal' of prior identifications through normalisation.

[33] *Wrong-Doing, Truth-Telling*, 188.

[34] Elettra Stimilli, "Debt Economy and Faith: Philosophy in the Age of Terror," *Diacritics* 47:2 (2019), 8. Economic theology builds on Foucault's identification of pastoral power and confession to interrogate spe-cific elements of contemporary governmentality, see Giorgio Agamben, *The Kingdom and the Glory: For a Theological Genealogy of Economy and Government* (2011).

salvation. Within Christianity this is a perpetual process of self-purification – no self-mastery can be decisively attained, as envisaged by Greek Stoicism, for instance – each subject is involved in chronic confession unto mortality. Within modernity, pastoral power is much more diffuse, and thus obedience is less structured, but the activity of telling the truth about the self and transforming the self, re-articulating identity and self-narrative is persistent and diffuse. Within the sphere of unemployment, self-examination is continuous, and CVs constantly updated, with most applications hopefully signed 'yours sincerely' or 'looking forward to hearing from you'.

Evidently, confessions are embedded in power-relations and involve forms of obedience to pastoral or disciplinary powers; priests or welfare officers. However, these institutions are not monasteries or prisons, with occasional meetings, monthly or weekly at churches or welfare offices – places which are historically entangled with charitable or social provision. Yet, confession is flexible and diverse:

> a ritual that unfolds within a power relationship, for one does not confess without the presence (or *virtual* presence) of a partner who is not simply the interlocutor but the authority who requires the confession, prescribes and appreciates it, and intervenes in order to judge, punish, forgive, console and reconcile.[35] (italics added)

Implicitly, the virtual presence of pastoral power was the deity, all-seeing and all-knowing, judging individuals; the actual authority for obedience and source of salvation. By contrast, contemporary economic confessions, in the form of a public profile or CV, are continuously offered for the virtual authority of the market, which judges worth.[36] Parallel to Foucault's diagnosis of the normalising effect of prisons, asylums and so forth on the population at large, welfare offices implicitly threaten all workers with the possibility of coercive welfare processes and sanctions which induce poverty. Moreover, the form of the CV implies the internalisation of the perspective of employers by the labour market as a whole, re-constituting life as a career and society as a network.

Welfare activation services aim to facilitate transitions from unemployment to work, but frequently involve circular processes, shuttling jobseekers between the labour market and the welfare office. Indefinite periods without finding work are implicitly cast as personal failures, as each review assesses how the individual might improve themselves and thereby succeed: '…encouraging the worker to view themselves as per-petually in job seeking mode.[37] Partially, this evokes Weber's 'Protestant Ethic' thesis, not just through consistent hard-work but seeking signs of salvation, both deciphering the market and interrogating the self. More importantly, it recapitulates confession, wherein faults are assumed and anticipated, but an unlimited number of second-chances for salvation are offered. As outlined earlier, critics of welfare activation have

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[35] *History of Sexuality Vol. 1,* 62. Italics added – the possibility of virtual auditors is central to my argument.

[36] Stimilli, "Debt Economy and Faith".

[37] Ilana Gershon, "Hailing the US job-seeker: origins and neoliberal uses of job applications," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 60:1 (2019), 87.

highlighted the suffering of jobseekers, under pressure, threatened with sanctions, stigmatised and impoverished. Yet such suffering obliquely reflects underlying cultural models:

> the transformation into good takes place at the heart of the very suffering caused, inso-far as this suffering is actually a test that is recognised, lived and practiced as such by the subject'.[38]

Obedience, telling the truth about the self, seeking self-transformation; these elements of confession are adapted by modern disciplinary power and form part of governmentality but also reflect an interpretation of life as a trial. Experiences are taken as tests of character, choices as expressions of 'inner' desire or will, and economic outcomes as indications of the worth of the self. And this extends far beyond welfare: '...every Christian will be called upon to regard life as nothing but a test',[39] an interpretation of experience and conduct which informs contemporary economic ethics, for instance, in conceptions of life as a career or taking meaning or worth from market outcomes.[40]

CONFESSIONAL INTERVIEWS AND PROFESSIONAL CVS

Many researchers have associated the turn towards 'active labour market policies' with the intensifying of disciplinary or governmental power-relations with social welfare systems across the OECD.[41] Within Europe, the UK is a harsh liberal-authoritarian welfare regime, but our concern is not the relative cruelty of the outcomes but the 'governmental rationality' involved.[42] Indeed, between the time of writing and publication, elements of these regulations may have changed, especially in response to the pandemic emergency. Therefore, the materials examined herein are composite legal regulations and advice to welfare offices drawn from the UK context – specifically *DMG [Decision Makers Guidance] Chapter 21: Jobseeker's Allowance - Labour market questions, special conditions for JSA(Cont) and jobseeking periods* and chapter 5 of *JobCentrePlus Guidance* for welfare officers, with associated 'Claimant contract' and 'My Work Plan Booklet', and careers advice from state-run websites.[43] These are articulations and updates of

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[38] Foucault, *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 443.

[39] Ibid., 446.

[40] Stefan Schwarzkopf, "Markets and Marketization," in *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*, ed. Stefan Schwarzkopf (2020), 163-171

[41] Boland and Griffin, *Reformation of Welfare,* 45-60.

[42] A taxonomy of welfare states is proposed by Gosta Esping-Andersen, *The Three Worlds of Welfare Capitalism* (1990), but a more cultural history of policy is offered by Sigrun Kahl, "The religious roots of modern poverty policy: Catholic, Lutheran and Reformed Protestant traditions compared," *European Journal of Sociology* 46:1 (2005), 91–126.

[43] DMG Chapter 21 compiles regulations around conditionality for Jobseekers, derived from laws and acts of parliaments, from between 2011 and 2018, and is reproduced in more instructional and streamlined format as official guidance for welfare officers:
Department of Work and Pensions, "DMG Chapter 21 - Jobseeker's Allowance – Labour market questions, special conditions for JSA(Cont) and jobseeking periods" (2020a), gov.uk.

long-standing laws and regulations, independent from headline social policy initiatives such as the 'Work Programme' or 'Get Britain Working', since replaced by 'Universal Credit', which will eventually be superannuated. Some studies evaluate specific policy initiatives as emerging from political contingencies while tracing their results and how they diffuse across states.[44] By contrast, herein the aim is to diagnose how persistent elements of confession are articulated through contemporary regulations of welfare claims.

The materials examined do not have a single author but are composite scripts drawing from different laws on multiple dates by changing governments. They re-capitulate concerns around social welfare with a longer history, referring at least back as far as the early 20th century ILO definition of unemployment, or even the workhouse test. This is not to suggest continuity or stability; these texts are hybrid adaptations of past discourses, entangled with contemporary concerns. These are interpreted much as Foucault approached confessional manuals as instituting disciplinary regimes, or, following Bacchi, analysed as to how they 'pose the problem' of unemployment and activation. Koopman argues that forms serve to 'fasten' individuals to categories by classifying their conduct and thoughts, thereby 'formatting' subjectivity.[45] This 'formatting' spans a range of texts, and, incrementally, some extra elements are added in the movement from regulation documents to guidance to actual documents distributed to the unemployed in welfare offices. For instance, advice on how to manage and motivate the unemployed are added and integrated into 'guidance' chapters for welfare officers, and motivating metaphors such as the 'journey' towards finding work are added to documents given to jobseekers.[46] Despite these additions, the stipulations and definitions articulated in law are never omitted but continuously restated and never contradicted, forming a reference point for 'street-level' governmentality. Thus, the state 'governs at a distance', exerting pastoral power through laws which format regulations which then govern individual lives.[47]

The rules governing institutions of social welfare are outlined at extraordinary length by UK law, repeatedly, in an accretion of acts and amendments. There is both meticulous attention to detail, from the minutiae of determining initial eligibility for welfare entitlements, to a plethora of definitions, from operational terms like 'availability' or 'training' to simple words like 'week'.[48] What matters here are sections outlining the conditions which must be fulfilled for jobseekers to retain their welfare entitlement.[49] These involve 'microphysics of power', for instance, requiring individuals

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/893675/dmgch21.pdf (accessed, March 07, 2020) [DMG Chapter 21 hereafter, no pagination, reference by item].

[44] Jamie Peck and Nik Theodore, *Fast Policy: Experimental Statecraft at the Thresholds of Neoliberalism* (2016).

[45] Colin Koopman, *How We Became Our Data: A Genealogy of the Informational Person* (2019).

[46] *Reformation of Welfare,* 117-136.

[47] Peter Miller and Nicholas Rose, "Governing Economic Life," in *Foucault's New Domains*, ed. Mike Gane and Terry Johnson (2013).

[48] Department of Work and Pensions, "DMG Chapter 21" (2020a), op. cit. 21122-21173.

[49] Ibid., 21600–21687.

to take 'steps' to find employment, with a list of ten possible steps, from approaching employers to writing a CV. Concurrently, they invoke evaluative but ill-defined criteria; for instance, requiring that claimants 'make all reasonable efforts' to find work, with the criterion of 'reasonable' left to the judgement of Employment Officers or Work Coaches.

Effectively, these regulations set out a juridical apparatus; claimants must be available for work and must be Actively Seeking Employment (ASE), and they must provide evidence of this to the satisfaction of officials. Effectively, the jobseeker must not simply seek work but also match governmental expectations which are both formal but also open to the caprice of street-level bureaucrats.[50] The Claimant Commitment Contract or Jobseekers Agreement sets out the number and sort of steps required, and Employment Officers or 'Work Coaches' are instructed that these steps should be 'SMART'; an acronym for Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound.[51] This combines both diagnosis and prescription on the part of welfare officers; they must assess a claimant's capabilities, their likelihood of gaining employment, but also how much effort at job seeking they should undertake, and set expectations of levels of evidence of these efforts for claimants.

Job seeking activities are reviewed in regular 'Work Search Reviews' – interviews at weekly or fortnightly intervals. What constitutes 'reasonable efforts' is decided by officials: Guidance manuals state 'The claimant must do all that is reasonable to look for work each week'[52] in bold, with requirements for evidence and processes for documentation and review. If there is any dispute as to the 'reasonableness' of the required steps, or doubts as to their being carried out – with the requirement for evidence firmly placed on claimants – cases can be referred to a Labour Market Decision Maker (LMDM), who may impose a sanction of reduced or suspended welfare payments. These range in length from 3 to 12 to 52 weeks for non-compliance, to more severe measures up to 156 weeks for deliberately leaving work or being fired for misbehaviour, or conduct deemed unacceptable by JobCentre Plus ('JobCentre' hereafter). The harshness of these sanctions attracts academic, media and artistic commentary, but the processes which they govern is what concerns us here.

The 'steps' required are agreed via an Initial Work Search Interview, wherein the claimant is assessed by a Work Coach; guidance suggests this interview 'must include a full diagnosis of the claimant's capability and circumstances',[53] and sets out

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[50] Evelyn Brodkin and Gregory Marston, *Work and the Welfare State: Street Level Organizations and Workfare Politics* (2013).

[51] Department of Work and Pensions, "The Jobseeker's Agreement" (2020b), WhatDoTheyKnow.com. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/263193/response/641952/attach/4/JSAg%20guidance.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1 (accessed March 02, 2020). Information here and below is gathered from whatdotheyknow.com, which is the official Freedom of Information Request site for the UK Government, specifically handling queries to the Department of Work and Pensions.

[52] Department of Work and Pensions, "Work Search Reviews" (2015), WhatDoTheyKnow.com. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/301001/response/742479/attach/html/3/Work%20Search%20Reviews.pdf.html (accessed March 04, 2020).

[53] Department of Work and Pensions, "Diagnosis of claimant capacity and circumstances" (2018), NationalCareersservice.gov.uk.

requirements regarding job seeking, the need for evidence and the threat of sanctions. These interviews are repeated either weekly or fortnightly – at the discretion of JobCentre officials – in Work Search Reviews (WSR). These oral interviews assess efforts, demand evidence and prescribe further efforts, and are supplemented by a 'My Work Plan' booklet, which is not entirely mandatory but strongly encouraged, where claimants can fill in plans and keep evidence of actions, or by activity on the 'Find A Job' official website – previously 'Universal JobMatch' – both of which serve to record efforts and results.[54] At these initial and regular interviews, individuals must sign 'Labour Market Declarations' that they are Available for and Actively Seeking Employment; any prior occasions of fraud or previous sanctions are flagged to the officers at each subsequent session by a computerised system.

Significantly, guidelines suggest that job seeking efforts should be 'challenging' and ensure the individual is prescribed an 'active, effective and persistent work-search'.[55] Individuals who are likely to find work may need fewer 'steps' than those who are less likely, who in turn may be prescribed more extensive or onerous job seeking activity; more frequent WSRs are prescribed to those 'further from the labour market'. Claimants have their skills assessed formally and 'barriers to employment' are identified, and claimants are directed to take actions to overcome such hurdles. Yet the interview is also presented as dialogical – claimants are supposed to be drawn into a 'two-way discussion' to foster their commitment to job seeking.

> To help claimants recognise and understand how much they can reasonably be expected to do each week, they should be advised to think about whether they could have actually done more than they actually did.[56]

Strikingly here, psy-science or 'nudges' are re-shaping street-level bureaucracy, as 'work-coaches' are advised to 'conduct the conduct' of claimants. Another series of steps is prescribed before leaving the interview, and will be checked on return, with evidence required. Guidance states these steps should be 'ABCDE': Ambitious, Behavioural, Challenging, Detailed, Evidence Embedded; that is, a precise series of actions, individualised to the claimant, with specific conduct and difficulty involved. If the

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https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/454971/response/1105291/attach/html/7/Diagnosis%20of%20claimant%20capability%20and%20circumstances.pdf.html (accessed March 04, 2020).

[54] Department of Work and Pensions, "Find a job" (2020c), gov.uk. https://www.gov.uk/find-a-job (accessed March 03, 2020). Claimants accounts cannot be accessed by JobCentre staff, but they must prove they have them to prove they have followed prescribed 'steps' in order to retain their benefit:
Department of Work and Pensions, "Jobcentre wants Universal Credit claimant's cv" (2017), WhatDoTheyKnow.com
https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/420642/response/1014843/attach/html/4/Annex%201.pdf.html (accessed March 04, 2020).
[55] Department of Work and Pensions, "The Initial Work Search Review" (2016), WhatDoTheyKnow.com https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/324722/response/802576/attach/html/4/Initial%20Work%20Search%20interview.pdf.html (accessed March 03, 2020).
[56] Department of Work and Pensions, "Work Search Reviews" (2020d), WhatDoTheyKnow.com https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/205952/response/514191/attach/5/Annex%201a.pdf (accessed March 02, 2020).

claimant finds work, the cycle ends, but the very layout of the 'My WorkPlan' booklet implies a relatively long duration; 38 pages to record plans and evidence, with spaces to record half-a-dozen appointments for Work Search Reviews.[57] This booklet formats job seeking into a succession of plans carried out and reported to JobCentres, with tick-boxes for a variety of 'steps' – from having an email address to creating a digital profile – and proffers advice: 'Remember, Jobcentre Plus may be able to help you to establish a work search routine and create a CV.'[58] Furthermore, it reminds claimants of the possibility of sanctions and lists circumstances which must be reported, even being 'away' for a single day.

Thus, job seeking is governed as a circular process of interviews that assesses the claimant, reviews their actions, asks for evidence of efforts, and suggests ways of improving themselves by making future plans, which will be assessed in turn, until employment is found. Both actions and attitudes must be represented, avowed even, exposed to scrutiny and doubt, and future efforts of self-improvement are prescribed. In Bacchi's sense,[59] unemployment is implicitly problematised as a personal failing of character, with returning to work positioned as its solution. A whole plethora of training, re-education and workshops can be mandated by JobCentres, implicitly tutelary, remedial measures.[60] Yet, while surveillance, pressure and coercion are clear here, these interviews also cajole jobseekers into describing themselves as wanting work, inciting them to desire certain futures, enticing them to imagine career trajectories. Rather than taking the welfare office as solely a place of 'discipline and punishment', the Foucauldian analysis of the production of desire is also relevant; each jobseeker is directed to self-reflection to discover their talents and ambitions, their hopes and potential, implicitly hidden within themselves.[61]

Such power-relations are easily recognisable as disciplinary, involving categorising, monitoring, assessing and probing the individual, prescribing specific behavioural remedies and conduct, and involving a range of disciplinary discourses, from psy-science to behavioural economics.[62] Moreover, the processes described above closely follow those of confession: JobCentres and Welfare Offices require certain forms of behavioural compliance and obedience, under the threat of judgement and penance, exposing individuals to poverty and even destitution. The Initial Work Search Interview and frequent Work-Search Reviews require claimants to 'tell the truth about themselves' and undergo scrutiny by auditors, who assess and diagnose them, and press them to

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[57] Department of Work and Pensions, "My Work Plan: What will I do to search for and get work" (2014), WhatDoTheyKnow.com
https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/184115/response/454532/attach/4/WS1%201013.pdf?cookie_passthrough=1 (accessed March 01, 2020).

[58] Ibid., 2.

[59] Carol Bacchi, "The Turn to Problematization: Political Implications of Contrasting Interpretive and Post-structural Adaptations," *Open Journal of Political Science* 5:1 (2015), 1-12.

[60] Del Roy Fletcher & John Flint, "Welfare conditionality and social marginality: The folly of the tutelary state?" *Critical Social Policy* 38:4 (2018), 771–791.

[61] As essential, if not as 'secret' as sexuality perhaps: *History of Sexuality Vol. 1*, 33-35

[62] Friedli and Stearn, "Positive affect as coercive strategy".

reflect more upon themselves to uncover their own faults and identify ways to improve. Contemporary critics of welfare activation point out how individuals are 'responsibilised'[63] for the structural problem of unemployment, but drawing on Foucault, they could equally said to be 'culpabalized', as though not finding work were a sin. Notably, those *less* likely to find employment are subject to more surveillance and prescribed more remedial 'steps', a sort of penitential abacus. Such interventions are not simply intended to 'punish the poor' but attempt to transform them; after each interview, jobseekers are dispatched again into the labour market, hoping for 'salvation' in the form of finding work – yet, in the contemporary economy of short-term contracts and precarity, this penitential process is likely to recur.

The (re)formation of the unemployed into jobseekers, willing workers for any situation whatsoever, has been criticised as state-based 'commodification of labour'.[64] Beyond this, Foucauldian interpretations have highlighted how jobseekers become self-disciplining, absorbing the difficulties of unemployment and presenting themselves as ideal workers.[65] Recognising the adaptation of confessional processes within welfare offices allows us to identify how subjects are 'transformed' through the constant application of subtle pressures, which may be resisted, but the enticement to 'verbalisation' – to speak about the self, to declare oneself a 'good' worker, a genuine 'jobseeker' and not one of the 'real unemployed',[66] adds another dimension. Here we see how the labour market is construed as a test or trial; a 'mode of veridiction' which reveals the worth of each individual. Indeed, this process also involves 'juridiction' – evidence and judgement, and something close to 'medicalisation' or pathologisation and a curative process of transformation, so together deploying the major axes of producing truth in modernity.

The genealogical links between Christian confession and contemporary practices of disciplinary interviews are too complex and numerous to trace, and it is equally important to note the adaptations and hybridisations of confession. Indeed, Foucault notes that while Christian confession meant 'to tell everything in order to efface every-thing', in modernity these avowals are now 'deposited in an enormous documentary mass'.[67] There are many other salient differences; Jobseeking interviews are indefinite, but not usually interminable, as finding work completes the 'salvation'. More importantly perhaps, this judgement occurs outside the penitential institution through the labour market. Another key element is that JobCentres and other welfare offices require claimants to 'put themselves into discourse', not just by telling the truth about

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[63] Sharon Wright, "Conceptualising the active welfare subject: Welfare reform in discourse, policy and lived experience," *Policy and Politics* 44:2 (2016), 235-252.

[64] See Ian Greer, "Welfare reform, precarity and the re-commodification of labour," *Work, Employment and Society 30*:1 (2016), 162–173; or Chris Grover, "Violent proletarianisation: Social murder, the reserve army of labour and social security 'austerity' in Britain," *Critical Social Policy* 39:3 (2019), 335–355.

[65] Steven Vallas and Emily Cummins, "Personal Branding and Identity Norms in the Popular Business Press: Enterprise Culture in an Age of Precarity," *Organization Studies* 36:3 (2015), 293–319.

[66] Ruth Rogers, "Ethical techniques of the self and the 'good jobseeker,'" in *The Ethics of Welfare: Human Rights, Dependency and Responsibility*, ed. Hartley Dean (2004), 155-172.

[67] Michel Foucault, "Lives of Infamous Men," in *Power Vol 3*, ed. James Faubion (2001), 76-92.

the self – conduct and thoughts – but in terms of future hopes and belief in oneself expressed through job applications and CVs. These are required and monitored by JobCentres but also implore anonymous employers or HR departments, and effectively constitute expressions of faith in the 'virtual auditor' of the labour market.[68]

PROFESSIONAL CVS

Minimally, jobseekers must sign a 'quasi-oath' that they are 'available for and actively seeking work'. More extensively, jobseekers must express their capacity and desire for work via CVs, a profession of faith in themselves and the labour market. Creating a CV is typically required by JobCentres as a 'step' towards finding work, as is uploading them onto digital databases, particularly the state's own 'Find a Job.co.uk' platform. While data-protection laws prevent JobCentre officials from examining these digital records, claimants can be asked to provide evidence that they have created and uploaded CVs.[69]

Alongside its digital hiring-platform, the state also provides CV writing advice via the 'National Career Service website' – to which the JobCentre refers its 'clients'. Although very concise, this advice is broadly consistent with generally circulating 'expertise' on job seeking through popular websites or advice books.[70] Jobseekers are advised to examine themselves, to assess their skills and worth, internalising the anticipated gaze of the labour market, subjecting themselves to the surveillance of a virtual or imagined other. Self-presentation through CVs is partially a matter of self-commodification, representing oneself as the 'right person for the job' while tailoring each application to the specifics of different roles; a dramaturgical task of self-transformation. Additionally, 'gaps in the CV' are to be explained away, preferably through referring to skills or experiences gained during this time:

> If you have gaps in your employment history, you could talk about the skills you gained while you were out of work. When you have a gap in your work history you should give a brief explanation and say what you did during that time.[71]

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[68] *Reformation of Welfare*, 141-166.

[69] Department of Work and Pensions, "Using claimants' own digital device or print-out to provide a CV or work search records" (2019), WhatDoTheyKnow.com. https://www.whatdotheyknow.com/request/577867/response/1373732/attach/html/2/FOI2019%2019337%20 Reply.pdf.html (accessed, March 03, 2020).

[70] Analysing the circuits of influence here; where ideas about CVs are derived from and how they are adopted and made mainstream is beyond this article, but, probably, the state-level site represents the most normative discourse – regarding digital platforms, see Ifoema Ajunwa and Daniel Greene, "Platforms at Work: Automated Hiring Platforms and Other New Intermediaries in the Organization of Work," in *Work and Labor in the Digital Age*, ed. Steven Vallas & Anne Kovalainen (2019), 61-91.

[71] National Careers Service, "How to fill out an Application form" (2020a), NationalCareersservice.gov.uk. https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/application-forms (accessed March 10, 2020). This is the official government advice portal, there are many equivalents, see below.

However, if the jobseeker has been made redundant or fired due to misconduct, they are instructed to avow this as a personal failing, explain the circumstances at the time, and indicate how they have spent their time since – with the implication that 'gaining skills' would be a productive activity. Thus, unemployment is represented as a fault which must be confessed to the JobCentre, but either glossed-over or explained away on a CV.

However, where individuals have been dismissed, they are instructed to explain the circumstances, acknowledge their own fault – for instance, if dismissed for poor performance, jobseekers are advised to explain why their 'standards dropped'.[72] Whatever the case, a cover letter should explain 'what you have learned from the situation [and] how you have improved since'.[73] Such experiences are considered faults to be avowed, through scrutinising and interpreting one's own conduct, representing or verbalising it, and professing some sort of personal transformation since the event: Disavowing the past self is warrant of future good conduct, and that in turn is guaranteed by the applicant 'telling the truth' about themselves. By narrating their employment history in application letters thusly, the jobseeker acknowledges past wrong-doing but claims to have been transformed – perhaps by the JobCentre – and expresses their hope to work again, to be redeemed.

While the repetition of Work Search Reviews most closely resembles penance, there is more to confession than putting the self into discourse by revealing sin. Interestingly, sin is etymologically related to debt, and welfare activation implies a continuous indebtedness – receiving benefits is conditional on certain behaviour. Rather than a welfare 'entitlement', the conditional and quasi-contractual support given to the unemployed is closer to a 'debt' – implicitly a sin – to be expiated through job-seeking efforts and finding work. Rather than a 'market-exchange' between equals, welfare-payments appear as investments which create power-relations with requirements for indefinite efforts – 'all that can reasonably done' – an unlimited duty of obedience and efforts to transform the self.

Furthermore, the thread of Christian thinking within contemporary economic life links debt and credit, doubt and self-belief: '…the experience of a debt that, through the gift of grace, does not need to be repaid but that, as such, need be administered in the form of an investment'.[74] Thus, alongside the penitential avowal of unemployment, the jobseeker must repeatedly declare their faith in themselves and in the labour market via the form of CVs and job applications. Even the plans recursively recorded in the My Work Plan booklet express hope – the faith required by capitalism. Participation in the

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[72] National Careers Service, "How to answer common interview questions" (2020b), NationalCareersservice.gov.uk.
https://nationalcareers.service.gov.uk/careers-advice/top-10-interview-questions (accessed, March 10, 2020).
[73] Ibid.
[74] "Debt Economy and Faith," 13.

economy requires actions and choices which exhibit hope that labour markets will reward 'investments' in the self, acquiring human capital or job seeking activity.[75]

Of course, this is a considerably secularised, modernised and hybridised incarnation of confession, and just one element within the general assemblage of the governmentality of welfare. Nevertheless, confession provides a crucial model of 'transforming the self by telling the truth about the self'. Perhaps initially, these seem to be limited to the quasi-panoptic arena of JobCentres, but just as Foucault argued that prisons and asylums constitute and sequester criminality and insanity, so, too, JobCentres and the treatment of the unemployed as a 'residuum' of failed labourers serve to normalise job-seekers across the labour market – even job-changers or school-leavers who never actually claim welfare entitlements.[76] Historically, workhouse discipline was deliberately harsh to ensure it was a last resort, and similarly the strictures of the JobCentre may motivate people to avoid it. However, as a 'transitional institution' through which increasing numbers of jobseekers pass, the normalising discipline within it may shape very many subjects, the labour market and society as a whole.

To illustrate this, it is worth examining the broader spectrum of advice; the 'National Careers Service' cited above condenses generalised popular CV advice.[77] Through extensive examination of advice books and on-line content analysis, what clearly emerges is the idea that unemployment must be overcome through personal improvement:

> Many jobseekers send out dozens of application without getting a single interview. They complain bitterly about their lack of success but the fault often lies in their own hands.[78]

Suggested strategies to gain work include better self-presentation, to be developed through more thorough self-reflection, discerning skills and aptitudes which will be worthwhile to employers – internalising the perspective of the employer. Various tactics of networking or retraining are suggested, with any gaps to be effaced:

> If you have long gaps in your employment history or you are re-entering the job market or changing the focus of your career, a cover letter can explain these circumstances in a positive way.[79]

Such guides often recognise job-seeking and CV writing as intrinsically difficult activities:

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[75] Rowena Pecchenino, "Have we cause for despair?" *Journal of Behavioural and Experimental Economics* 58:3 (2015), 56-62.

[76] *Security, Territory, Population*, 61-63.

[77] Both on-line and off-line job seeking advice is analysed at length by Gershon, *Down and Out in the New Economy*.

[78] Jennifer Johnson, *The Job Application Handbook* (1993), 6.

[79] Katherine Hansen and Randall Hansen, *Dynamic Cover Letters* (1990), 2.

> No-one wants to write a CV. On the list of things we 'want' to do, it comes just above hitting yourself on the head with a hammer, and in part that is because of the self-analysis involved.[80]

The poverty, anxiety and pressure from welfare offices upon the unemployed are not mentioned; instead the difficulty is 'self-analysis', the hard work of subjectification or soul-searching.

While, outside the welfare system, CVs are not produced through the disciplinary power of Work Search Reviews or with the threat of sanctions, there are elements of the confessional nonetheless: Jobseekers are instructed to gather all necessary details about themselves, which may be legal or factual, but this inescapably becomes a matter of self-scrutiny. Education and employment are central here, but correct information must be supplemented with an encoding of how the 'self' has acquired skills and achieved various goals – formatting the self as Koopman suggested. Thus, the accretion of experiences over time is translated into a 'career trajectory', and actual labour is rendered into a series of 'accomplishments'. Perhaps every second word here deserves scare quotes to indicate that these classifications and categorisations are discursively produced by these texts rather than neutral descriptions of reality. Most guides suggest that readers are too modest or brief in describing themselves, that they need to scrutinise themselves to identify their skills and qualities, or even their 'unique selling point'. Furthermore, these efforts are implicitly limitless: 'Your CV is a living, breathing document and the primary CV you so carefully developed is never really finished'.[81] Like confession, CV-writing is recursive and implicitly interminable.

Insofar as jobseekers are transformed through disciplinary practices and incited to self-verbalisation via a CV, life itself is transformed into a career, an 'enterprise of the self'. By writing about oneself as a set of skills, an accumulation of 'human capital' or as a 'business solution', something like commodification of human life as labour occurs. However, the form of confession here also draws our attention to how unemployment is avowed as a personal failing to be overcome through introspection and judgement; the 'internalisation of the gaze' of the market. The peculiar passive voice of CVs, 'works well in a team' or 'shows initiative', may express the adoption of the evaluation of the self in terms of market criteria.[82] Yet this is not simply a strategic theatrical display of whatever characteristics are supposedly valued by employers – from project-work to being a 'business solution'.[83] Such 'pristine' documents conceal the efforts of self-discipline as a jobseeker, never mention numerous failed applications and omit the struggle of forming life into a career. Discourse is never neutrally pragmatic, and the technique of putting the self into discourse is not straightforward and simple – presenting oneself via a CV involves either obedience to the JobCentre or becoming an abbot or spiritual director to

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[80] Martin Yates, *Ultimate CV: Over 100 Winning CVs to Help You Get the Interview and the Job* (2015), 1.

[81] Ibid., 78.

[82] Randall Popken, "The Pedagogical Dissemination of a Genre: The Resume in American Business Discourse Textbooks, 1914–1939," *Journal of Composition Theory* 19:1 (1999), 91–116.

[83] See Boltanski and Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* or Gershon, "Hailing the US jobseeker".

oneself, internalising a relentless scrutiny of the self; 'For the price of pardon is as infinite as the pardon itself'.[84] Repeated confessions, relentless CV work, limitless dedication to career and ambitions are required, even of the successful.

Moreover, these documents are expressions of desire for work and faith in oneself as a valuable worker, which are professed to the broad labour market. While job seeking and even crafting CVs occurs under pressure in WorkSearch Reviews, the ultimate auditor and judge of the worth of the individual is effectively the market, the invisible hand of providence.[85] Yet this is not passive faith but requires active job search, with 'self-belief' and engagement with difficulties; another theological inflection to the economy: 'Rather, every Christian will be called upon to regard life as nothing but a test'.[86] For those who have undergone redundancy or unemployment and had their CV re-written in the 'workshops' of the welfare office, the CV is also a form of confession, an admission of past suffering, but also an account of 'conversion'; how the individual has transformed themselves and renewed their faith in the labour market.[87] Tellingly, every job-application is sent 'in good faith' with 'hopes of success' in an indefinite process of self-testing, continuously submitting oneself to the judgement of the labour market as the only real veridiction of personal worth; a trial of truth-telling and self-transformation. While doubts assail those who are frequently turned down, every new CV is composed in hope, and jobseekers are required to persist indefinitely; actively and genuinely seeking work, exactly the ILO definition of unemployment.

CONCLUSION

Understanding contemporary governmentality can augment a recognition of how older practices – confession, involving avowal, profession and even penance – inflect more recent and supposedly secular processes; welfare activation, job seeking and CV writing.[88] Perhaps welfare activation reflects 'evidence-based' policy, yet its governmental model is at least partially inspired by pastoral power and assumes the possibility of transforming individuals by putting them to the test. While CVs may seem trivial or strategic, they approximate what Foucault describes as a spiritual exercise: 'It postulates that for the subject to have the right of access to the truth he must be changed, transformed, shifted, and become to some extent and up to a certain point, other than himself'.[89] The Jobseeker knows themselves through avowing their unemployment to welfare officers, writing about themselves, having that truth verified by employers via the labour market – often interminably.

Insofar as a job application or CV is more than just an advertisement for the self, especially where produced through interviews which avow unemployment, it contrib-

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[84] *Government of the Living*, 133.

[85] Agamben, *Kingdom and the Glory*, 277-285.

[86] *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 464.

[87] Purser and Hennigan, "Disciples and Dreamers".

[88] See Schwarzkopf, *The Routledge Handbook of Economic Theology*.

[89] *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, 15.

utes to governmentality 'understood in the larger sense as a means of forming, transforming and directing the conduct of individuals'.[90] Within this perspective, the subject is malleable and transformable, not just once, but constantly, interminably, and as market circumstances require. While scholars since Nietzsche have critiqued the idea of the essential self, the conception of the malleable self as conceived by governmentalizing and pastoral powers might equally be considered as discursively produced and entangled in power-relations. Shifting from the personalised CV to a mere list of skills and human capital[91] could help reduce this internalisation of protean selfhood in an effort to be 'governed less'.

Beyond diagnosis, what counter-conducts work against the governmentalising power of CVs? Abstention from the labour market? Informal networks? Resisting careerism through caring? Perhaps the idea of the world as a test might be problematised and resisted; rather than taking labour market outcomes as verifying truth or worth, they could be taken as random or socially structured. Yet, with what alternatives? And how could we know our worth or indeed ourselves without tests? Should social life be interpreted as the 'scene of a trial' in everlasting tests?[92] Even the capacity to critique and problematise is now a test of worth. The modern idea of tests and truth-telling as a mode of transforming individual lives could be approached through Foucault's suggestion that we should not discover but 'resist' who we are and the technologies which create us – like welfare interviews and CVs. Rather than evaluating ourselves through individualising tests, there might be social, collective tests of solidarity and reciprocity. One simple place to begin is by not putting jobseekers to the test but accepting unemployment as socially generated, reproduced by growth which is ecologically unsustainable, and therefore requiring generous support – unconditional welfare entitlements.

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[90] *Wrong-Doing, Truth Telling*, 23.

[91] Ofer Sharone, *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences* (2013).

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Author info
Tom Boland
tom.boland@ucc.ie
Senior Lecturer
Department of Sociology and Criminology
University College Cork
Ireland

Tom Boland is Senior Lecturer in the Department of Sociology, University College Cork. His interests span sociology, anthropology, history, philosophy and literary criticism, and he has published journal articles across these disciplines. His main empirical areas of research are the sociology of culture and critique, and the governmentality of welfare and unemployment. His recent monograph, *The Spectacle of Critique*, was published by Routledge in 2019. This article builds on the analysis of jobseeking and CVs begun in *The Reformation of Welfare: The New Faith of the Labour Market* co-authored with Ray Griffin, published by Policy Press in 2021.