

SOCIETY FOR LINGUISTIC ANTHROPOLOGY

A Rare Opportunity Never Knocks

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For the past seven months, I have studied hiring in the Silicon Valley. I interview job-seekers, recruiters, hiring managers, career counselors and human resource managers—everyone involved in this humdrum surreal ritual of selection. I began this research because I suspect that a neoliberal logic isn't easy to live by, that it presents challenges that earlier forms of capitalism did not. But I could not predict from an armchair when people preferred being a neoliberal self to another capitalist self, say, a Fordist self, and when they might be dismayed by the efforts required to be an ever-flexible, ever-enhancing neoliberal self. I rightly thought that asking people how they navigated the hiring process would reveal the perceived benefits or detriments of taking oneself to be a business—a bundle of skills, qualities, experiences, and alliances that must constantly be managed and enhanced. After all, if you are taking yourself to be a business, this implies that hiring creates a business-to-business relationship – a perspective that affects how one produces and evaluates the genre repertoire (Orlikowski and Yates, “Genre Repertoire”, *Administrative Science Quarterly* 1994) that job-seekers create to show that they are employable: the business cards, resumes, LinkedIn profiles, and job interviews. This metaphor has had a tacit influence on how people in the Silicon Valley discuss their strategies for using these genres to reveal their employability. In my research I set out to study the media ideologies to which job seekers subscribed when crafting their employable selves. Specifically, I began to investigate what insights into the problems of living as a neoliberal self I could glean by studying people's media ideologies and media practices in the hiring process.

Getting people to talk about this repertoire of genres isn't hard. Almost everyone either has strong opinions about how best to produce these genres and how to employ the media that accompany them or is very confused about what works, and are constantly evaluating advice about what to do. How people talk about the genres themselves turns out to reveal some of the concrete challenges of being a neoliberal self. For example, some people tell me that resumes have changed tremendously in the past ten years. How people think resumes have changed is revealing, reflecting this shift in how people think about hiring using an American neoliberal logic. Supposedly, before, resumes were a record of one's working history, listing chronologically where one had worked, and describing briefly the skills one used at each job. Now people frequently describe resumes as a “marketing tool,” in which one is supposed to present the business solutions that one has executed in the past. Under every job listed, the applicant should describe the ways he or she solved problems with as much quantified detail as possible to tout the results. In short, one has to interpret the business one is applying for as having a bundle of problems for which applicants as metaphorical businesses themselves can provide solutions. This allows the hiring manager and recruiter to evaluate whether the potential hire is in fact a businesslike self with which they want to ally. As a consequence, every resume is supposed to be tailored for the specific company that they are applying for, revealing the business potential of hiring that person.

Yet the marketing of the self-as-business business entails the use of other genres, such as LinkedIn profiles, that require a different presentation of the applicant. LinkedIn profiles are also marketing tools, and, in many ways, resemble resumes. The differences, however, are telling. If you are a job-seeker, the profile should be public so any potential employer can find the profile easily. And herein lies the problem. LinkedIn profiles, because of how public they are, must be written to be as general as possible – to allow one to connect potentially to as many jobs as possible. This can involve including details that the resumes don't contain, limited as they are to one or two emailed pages. If you have managed to become the flexible, ever-skill-enhancing self that a neoliberal logic requests, you risk seeming too incoherent, too scattered on your LinkedIn profile. If you genuinely are flexible as a job-seeker, and willing to take a range of different jobs, you risk seeming unfocused. And your profile might, worse yet, differ from your tailored resume. All the work a job-seeker has devoted to tailoring a potential relationship can be unraveled when the expert reader – the recruiter or hiring manager – compares LinkedIn with these tailored resumes. And they often will. Here is a moment in which the supposedly vaunted neoliberal value of flexibility comes into conflict with the exacting labor of representing employability through genres that are seen to conflict because they tug the employable self in opposing directions. The generality of the LinkedIn profile is all too often seen to be undercutting the specificity of the resume.

Contrasting people's media ideologies about paper resumes and LinkedIn reveals one of the ways in which people are stymied when they try to represent themselves as a neoliberal self in material-semiotic forms. Not all forms encourage the right mixture of flexibility and specificity for the complex social task of being employed, and not all forms do so when combined together. And, as importantly, the flexibility that may seem to be a neoliberal ideal when one reads American self-help books or academic critics of neoliberalism can be an obstacle in practice.

It is not only the neoliberal language of transparency, accountability, and flexibility that anthropologists can pay attention to in order to make more specific and rigorous an understanding of neoliberalism. It is also the ways that people infuse genres with a neoliberal logic—especially when these genres clash, revealing the

moments in which an American neoliberal logic fosters what people on the ground view as contradictions. While resumes as a genre present their own genre-specific challenges, it is only when one examines how people try to fashion all the genres in their repertoire that one begins to see the systematic fissures in trying to embody a neoliberal self.

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