

# Inhabiting the Self-Work Romantic Utopia: Positive Psychology, Life Coaching, and the Challenge of Self-Fulfillment at Work

Work and Occupations

2021, Vol. 48(1) 40–69

© The Author(s) 2020

Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0730888420911683

[journals.sagepub.com/home/wox](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/wox)



Michal Pagis<sup>1</sup> 

## Abstract

Much has been said about the rise of work as a central identity marker in modern society. With the recent popularization of self-help and positive psychology, this identity marker broadened its signification to include new emotional needs such as love and passion, creating a new cultural imaginary: the “self-work romantic utopia.” Sociological studies have criticized this utopia as a myth that serves capitalist neoliberal structures, leading to frustration and self-blame. However, little is known about how workers themselves confront this myth and the strategies they employ when attempting to inhabit it in today’s precarious job market. Based on 60 in-depth interviews with upper-middle class Israeli workers who hired life coaches to

<sup>1</sup>Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar-Ilan University, Ramat Gan, Israel

## Corresponding Author:

Michal Pagis, Department of Sociology and Anthropology, Bar Ilan University, Ramat Gan 5290002, Israel.

Email: [Michal.pagis@biu.ac.il](mailto:Michal.pagis@biu.ac.il)

improve their work experience, the author identifies five strategies used to inhabit this romantic utopia: starting over, healing, idealization, polygamy, and vision. Through the analysis of these strategies, the author illustrates how even the relatively privileged workers need to adapt the self-work romantic utopia to their life circumstances, inhabiting the myth in partial degrees. Such flexible implementation turns the “myth” into a cultural tool that directs workers’ lives and actions even in a precarious, unstable job market, maintaining subjective experiences of agency in a sphere characterized by growing structural constraints. Yet paradoxically, these strategies eventually strengthen the precarious, noncommitted, and individual-oriented structure of the job market, yielding flexible, individualistic solutions that replace workplace responsibility.

### Keywords

positive psychology, precarious work, life coaching, self-fulfillment, emotions, passion

“Do what you love,” advises self-help guru John Parkin (2016). “Experience your work as a calling,” says positive psychologist Tal Ben-Shahar (2014). “The only way to do great work is to love what you do. If you haven’t found it yet, keep looking,” Steve Jobs informs us.<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary popular discourses on the place of work in our lives are based on a romantic imaginary of love, passion, and self-fulfillment. While the earlier, widely discussed imaginary of enterprise emphasized work ethics, self-discipline, and success (Du Gay, 1996; Lane, 2011; Miller & Rose, 1990), we are witnessing a shift toward a new imaginary, which I dub the “self-work romantic utopia.” This imaginary draws on humanistic and positive-psychology discourses that often stress personal meaning and happiness at the expense of success or status. More and more workers from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds believe that work is a central channel for fulfilling emotional needs and actualizing the self (A. Hochschild, 1997; Silva, 2013). This imaginary portrays ideal relations between the worker and his or her job infused with positive emotions, free of social constraints, and holding the promise for long-term life purpose.

Yet, in recent years, the job market has become a hostile, precarious space, making the fulfillment of the self-work romantic utopia a nearly impossible task. As workplaces reduce their commitments to workers,

individuals are being pushed to take responsibility for their own careers (Kalleberg, 2009; Smith, 2012). It is no longer the responsibility of the workplace to answer employees' emotional needs; rather, it is one's own responsibility to "fall in love" with one's job. Moreover, the call for flexibility challenges previous expectations for professional monogamy as people are pushed from one job to another, all the while being expected to produce new emotional ties to their latest position.

The disappointment and tensions that emerge from the clash between rising expectations and diminishing commitments have led to the critique that self-fulfillment at work is a myth that leads to experiences of failure (e.g., Fleming, 2015; Silva, 2013). While this critique is important, it conceptualizes the self-work romanticism as a monolithic ideal that either succeeds or fails (and frequently fails). In this article, I challenge this monolithic and dichotomic perspective by turning to relatively privileged upper-middle class white-collar Israeli workers who hired a life coach to improve their work experience. Examining their attempts to recouple myth and daily life (Hallett & Ventresca, 2006; Hallett, 2010), I ask: What strategies do these workers use when trying to inhabit the self-work romantic utopia? What adaptations and compromises appear when trying to turn this unreachable ideal into an experience that can be maintained in their daily lives?

Identifying five diverse strategies—starting over, healing, idealization, polygamy, and vision—this study reveals that even for the relatively privileged population, the self-work romantic imaginary is not a monolithic myth but instead is a fragmented, flexible cultural script employed in different degrees and adapted to work and life circumstances. It is this flexibility and partial fulfillment that turn the "myth" into a meaningful cultural tool that directs workers' lives and actions even in a precarious, unstable job market, maintaining subjective experiences of agency and choice in a sphere characterized by growing structural limitations and constraints. Yet, paradoxically, these strategies eventually strengthen the precarious, noncommitted, and individual-oriented structure of this market, resulting in flexible, individualistic solutions that replace workplace responsibility.

## Theoretical Background

### *Self-Identity and the Precarious Job Market*

The intense sociological interest in the relation between work and self can be traced back to classical theorists. For Weber (1905/2013),

Protestant sources transformed work from being a means of survival into a personal vocation and life ethic. Durkheim (1893/2014) saw in the division of labor the promise of new forms of solidarity that would provide social anchors and identities, while Marx recorded how capitalism deprives workers of their sense of self when it produces alienation from one's work products (Marx & Engels, 1847/2002). Continuing and developing this line of thought, sociologists argue that in late modernity, while other identity anchors, such as religion and community, have lost some of their grounding, work has become "a main center of identity" (Beck, 2001, p. 268). Moreover, in neoliberal societies, citizenship is being gradually narrowed down to its economic component alone, based on the ability of the individual to support herself financially (Cabanas, 2016; Kessler-Harris, 2003; Sa'ar, 2016), thus increasing the centrality of work as a marker of "character" (Sennett, 1998).

Alongside this growing dependence on work for the definition of identity, however, we are witnessing transformations in the structure of the labor market that threaten the constitution of work identities, and with it the constitution of who we are. In the past 30 years, corporations have downsized and instituted market-based restructurings of their professional employment practices (see, e.g., Kalleberg, 2003; Kunda & Ailon-Souday, 2005). As traditional career structures became insecure and fragile (Sennett, 1998), workers were pushed to develop a "protean" or "boundaryless" career (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Gubler et al., 2014; Hall, 2004), thus expected to be in charge of their job satisfaction by restructuring and navigating their working biography (Kalleberg, 2009; Smith, 2012). On one hand, people increasingly view work as "an essential element in the path to self-realization" (Miller & Rose, 1990, p. 27). On the other hand, work has become increasingly fluid, unstable, and at risk (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Newman, 1988).

While we might anticipate that these labor market shifts would weaken the cultural script of an identification between self and work, this is not the case. Despite these changes in the structure of the job market, the literature indicates that workers are looking for far more from their work than economic benefits and social status; they are seeking fulfillment, meaning, and purpose (Berg et al., 2010; Hochschild, 1997). These expectations are not limited to white-collar occupations but in fact cross socioeconomic boundaries (Silva, 2013). The belief that you can become whatever you dream, a belief advocated in popular culture and self-help scenarios, fosters these expectations (Twenge, 2006). In addition, ideological constructs such as

self-branding (Lair et al., 2005; Pagis & Ailon, 2017; Vallas & Christin, 2018) continue to produce what Fleming (2015) referred to as “I, Job,” blurring the distinctions between personal selves and work identities.

### *The Self-Work Romantic Utopia*

Sociologists who analyze contemporary relations between self-identity and work tend to use the imaginary of “enterprise” (Du Gay, 1996). Indeed, up until two decades ago, the main work-related popular discourse focused on self-discipline, work ethics, and success, using the metaphor of entrepreneur to describe each and every worker (McGee, 2005; Miller & Rose, 1990; Vallas & Cummins, 2015). In this culture, the relation between the worker and her job is characterized by ownership, management, and control. As Lane (2011) shows, in the spirit of the enterprise culture, every employee becomes a CEO of her own work, turning herself into “a company of one.”

I argue that in recent years, we are witnessing the emergence of a new imaginary that competes with the metaphor of entrepreneurship. This imaginary, which I title the “self-work romantic utopia,” does not stress self-discipline and success but instead is based on emotional and romantic discursive constructs captured in the popular slogan “do what you love.”<sup>2</sup> While the imaginary of enterprise is still very much alive, the growing use of emotional metaphors in relation to work exposes that the relation between an individual and his or her job is no longer based on managing and executing (i.e., the CEO metaphor) but instead “work becomes akin to a romantic relationship” (McRobbie, 2016, p. 18).

I define the self-work romantic utopia as a cultural imaginary in which paid work is portrayed as a continuous and central source of enjoyment, excitement, and life’s meaning. This imaginary includes three interrelated guiding principles: (a) Work is the sphere where one should strive for happiness and actualize the self; (b) love, passion, and chemistry should guide one’s choice of work (in contrast to pragmatic considerations); and (c) excitement and enthusiasm should accompany daily work activities.

The self-work romantic utopia is a part of a larger process of emotionalization of work. Modernity introduced strict separations between work and home, public and private, relegating rationality to the workplace and emotionality to the sphere of the home (Illouz, 2007). These strict separations have been challenged, as emotional labor and emotional intelligence have become central to work relations (Hardt,

1999; Hochschild, 1983/2012; Illouz, 2008). Workers are required to manage their emotions in the workplace and express positive emotions to the point that professional–client relationships are no longer viewed as financial transactions but as friendships (Pagis & Ailon, 2017). With the penetration of the psychological discourse into organizations, communicative and emotional “skills” became key in evaluating both workers and managers (Illouz, 2007). Moreover, recent ethnographies illustrate that chemistry and emotional energy are central expectations of relationships between employees and used as a “fit” criteria, as reflected in screening processes in job interviews (Rivera, 2015; Sharone, 2013).

The self-work romantic utopia extends the emotionalization of work to new territories. In addition to the emotional labor required when interacting with clients or other employees, workers are now expected to work on their emotional relationship with their job. Like romantic love, the job becomes a sphere where one expects (and is required) to find happiness, enthusiasm, and passion. Pop-psychological discourses that are based on positive psychology, and with them workshops and specialists such as life coaches, advocate this promise of happiness at work, producing new institutions and social circles that aim to help individuals inhabit this promise.

Silva (2013) offered the notion “mood economy” when writing: “Just as neoliberalism teaches people that they are solely responsible for their economic fortunes, the mood economy renders them responsible for their emotional fates” (p. 21). Yet, for Silva, the mood economy produces a distinction between the self and the sphere of work, as young adults withdraw from anchoring their self in their jobs and instead reconstruct an “inwardly directed” therapeutic narrative of the self (Silva, 2013, p. 115). In contrast, the self-work romantic utopia links back economic fortunes and emotional fates when reattaching the promise of happiness to the modern value of work. It is in the sphere of work that people expect to find enthusiasm and passion to be “paid to do what you love” (Duffy, 2017).

### *Inhabiting the Myth*

The obvious tensions between the cultural script of the self-work romantic relationship and the contemporary reality of a precarious labor market have led to claims that self-fulfillment through paid work is a “myth.” Indeed, surveys show that work satisfaction is only declining (Clark, 2005). Critics of neoliberalism complain that this myth

generates a new method of exploitation, prompting workers to work more hours for lower pay (e.g., Fleming, 2015; McGee, 2005). As workers develop their selves and seek personal growth in the sphere of work, they are producing profits for others (Miller & Rose, 1990). Because love and money are contradictory terms in contemporary culture, when you “love” your work, monetary compensations become less important (Duffy, 2017; Pagis & Ailon, 2017). In addition, even if this myth can become reality, it is mostly accessible to those who have the right socio-economic background and support to implement it (Chinoy, 1955/1992; Skeggs, 2004).

Such critiques are important and enrich our understanding of the complexities and tensions in the contemporary work sphere. Yet, because they mainly focus on discourse analysis of cultural scripts, scant attention has been paid to workers’ experiences on the ground and how they understand and relate to this utopia. A few recent studies attempt to amend this neglect, exploring the life of workers and how they experience the relation between self-fulfillment and work in contemporary society. These include, among others, Sharone’s (2013) study of unemployed high-tech professionals who turn to career coaching workshops and self-help advice, Silva’s (2013) study of working-class adults and their reliance on pop-psychological discourses, and Duffy’s (2017) book on female bloggers in the fashion industry who try to “get paid” to do what they love.

These ethnographic studies shed important light on the phenomenological reality of workers. However, they tend to conceptualize the self-work romantic utopia as a monolithic imaginary that either succeeds or fails, and frequently fails, thus stressing the inability to inhabit the myth. This focus most likely results from the selection of population (lower class or unemployed) who indeed do not have the privileged conditions to inhabit the myth. Hence, unemployed high-tech professionals find that the demand for “chemistry” in the workplace eventually leads them to self-blame, as the failure to find a job is understood as personal responsibility (Sharone, 2013); working-class young adults find that their striving for happiness clashes with the precarious job market, leading them to withdraw into a biographical-based therapeutic self-narrative (Silva, 2013); and female bloggers who try to get paid to do what they love spend time and money on inspirational work that often leads them nowhere (Duffy, 2017).

In this article, I challenge the monolithic, mythic perspective, uncovering how people make sense of the self-work romantic utopia in light of the structural limits they encounter and the creative ways they find to

put this cultural script into action and adapt it to their work and life circumstances. To do so, I turn to relatively privileged white-collar workers and examine the strategies they employ when pushed by the self-work romantic imaginary, shedding light on fragmentations, diverse implementations, and partial fulfillment that do not fall into categories of success and failure.

## Case Study and Methodology

### *Life Coaching*

Life coaching is a branch of the more general semiprofession called coaching that appeared in Britain and the United States around the 1980s (George, 2013a).<sup>3</sup> The International Coaching Federation (ICF) defines coaching as “partnering with clients in a thought-provoking and creative process that inspires them to maximize their personal and professional potential.” The umbrella term *coaching* covers a number of different areas, including organizational and business coaching. In 2015, the U.S. estimated market value for coaching was 1 billion dollars, and around half of this market involved life coaching (also termed personal coaching). In the same year, 17,500 coaches were listed in North America and 18,800 in Western Europe. According to coaching statistics, 90% were active coaches, who had on average 11 clients at any given time. Considering that the life-coaching process usually lasts 3 to 6 months, a reasonable estimation of the number of people who hire a life coach in North America would be more than 150,000 per year.<sup>4</sup>

As life coaching aims toward the production of selves and identities, it is a part of the larger, growing industry of “lifestyle work” (George, 2013b). The main guiding principle of life coaching is to help the client find answers without offering advice or diagnosing problems. In contrast to psychological treatment, life coaching is future-oriented; the biographical past is rarely an object of reflection (George, 2013a; Pagis, 2016). While business coaching was influenced heavily by management theories, life coaching has drawn its inspiration mainly from positive psychology. The field of positive psychology is a relatively new branch of psychology that emphasizes self-development, fulfillment, and the pursuit of happiness. Positive psychologists like Martin Seligman (2004) have popularized these ideas through books and workshops, which take a central place in the contemporary self-help industry. While positive psychology is not limited to the sphere of work,



more and more positive psychologists are studying the areas of work satisfaction and self-fulfillment (Turner et al., 2002). Likewise, although life-coaching goals vary, job-related goals rank high among those who hire a life coach (Mäkinen, 2016).

### *The Israeli Case*

While the present study was conducted in Israel, I view Israel as a model of westernized countries that are deeply influenced by American culture (Ram, 2008). The neoliberalism of Israel led to the importation of American work-related cultural discourses and job market structure (Helman, 2019; Shalev, 2018). The average annual hours worked in 2018 is one of the highest among Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2019a) countries (1,910 hours compared with 1,786 in the United States). The unemployment rate for 2018 is similar to that of the United States (4%), which is considered quite low (OECD, 2019b). In addition, as in other OECD countries, instability in the Israeli job market is growing (Sharabi & Harpaz, 2013).

As part of the transnational flow of popular psychology (Nehring et al., 2016), Israeli culture is highly influenced by the self-help industry. Popular self-help books, such as *Waking the Giant Within* and *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, have been translated into Hebrew and have starred on best-seller lists. Robin Sharma's books, for example, sold more than 400,000 copies in Israel (with a population of 5.8 million adults) and, according to Sharma's webpage, *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari* is the fifth best-selling book in the history of Israel.<sup>5</sup> American self-help gurus such as Anthony Robbins conduct seminars in Israel and have many Israeli followers. At the same time, there is a flourishing local book industry of Israeli self-help, coaching, and positive psychology (also peaking on best-seller lists) and local self-help gurus appearing in reality shows.

While there are no statistics on the number of Israelis who use coaching services, the Israeli Coaching Association lists around 1,000 certified coaches who actively pay membership fees. Compared with 17,500 coaches in North America, this is a relatively large industry in relation to population size. The coaching courses, books, and processes I observed strongly resemble the American and British models. The only adaptation to Israeli culture I found is that coaching processes tend to be shorter when compared with the United States (usually 10–12 meetings in Israel)

and that Israeli clients and coaches tend to be younger than those in America and Western Europe.

### *Interviews, Sample, and Analysis*

The following analysis is based on 60 in-depth interviews conducted in Israel with 60 individuals who had undergone a life-coaching process of 12 to 20 sessions sometime during the previous 3 years to improve their work experience and satisfaction. The interviews are a part of a larger project on life coaching in Israel which included an earlier stage of participant observation of life-coaching professional training and interviews with life coaches conducted in 2009. The interviews with individuals who hired coaches were conducted between 2010 and 2018 in Israel. All interviewees were located through a snowball sample with the help of research assistants who used their networks to find potential interviewees (including family members, friends, and Facebook).

The interviews followed a relatively open interview guide that included, among others, the following questions:

- Tell me about your work history.
- Why were you not satisfied with your work and what were your hopes?
- Tell me how you ended up hiring a life coach.
- Tell me about the process you went through with the coach.
- What was your emotional state before, during, and after the process?
- Do you feel your work experience has changed and how?
- How did your family react to the process and the changes you made in your work?

All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. Each interview took between 1 and 2 hours. All the quotes presented in the article are verbatim, and all the names are pseudonyms. All interviews with Israelis were conducted in Hebrew, and the selected quotes were translated into English.

Recruitment of men to the study was found to be more difficult than women, and the interview sample includes 22 men and 38 women. This accords with life-coaching statistics, which state that around 60% of coaches' clients are women.<sup>6</sup> The interviewees were between the ages of 25 and 60, lived in the central part of Israel, and belonged to the middle- and upper-middle class. Ninety percent held a university degree (65% with a BA, 20% with an MA, and 5% with a PhD). They

came from a variety of white-collar and service-oriented occupational backgrounds including, among others, teaching, marketing, real estate, the music industry, human relations, research, and high tech. The majority were married with children (67%), 5% were married without children, 3% were divorced with children, and 25% were single without children. In terms of age, 60% were younger than 40 years of age, which reflects a somewhat younger sample when compared with international coaching statistics, where 60% of clients were younger than 45 years of age (see Table 1).

I used the category "type of earner" (single, primary, equal, and secondary) to capture the relative contribution of interviewees' income to the household. "Single" wage earner refers to one-person households, that is, no spouse or children (25%, 10 women and 5 men). "Primary" wage earner refers to interviewees who reported that their income is larger than their spouse's income (27%, 4 women and 12 men). "Equal" wage earner refers to interviewees who reported that their income is equivalent to their spouse's income (28%, 14 women and 3 men). "Secondary" wage earner refers to interviewees whose income is lower than their spouse's income (20%, 10 women and 2 men). The sample did not include single-parent families. The two divorced interviewees in the sample were counted as "primary."

The sample's gender bias affected the distribution of "type of earner." Women in Israel tend to be secondary or equal earners in the household, while men are more likely to be primary or equal: 83% of the secondary earners in the sample were women, while 75% of the primary earners were men. Still, even though the sample is biased

**Table 1.** Characteristics of Interviewees (%) by Typology of Strategies.

	Total	Starting over	Healing	Idealization	Polygamy	Vision
Women	0.63	0.77	0.52	0.42	0.75	0.76
Type of earner						
Single <sup>a</sup>	0.25	0.22	0.10	0.28	0.25	0.50
Primary	0.27	0.11	0.47	0.58	0.08	0.15
Equal	0.28	0.33	0.31	0.29	0.33	0.15
Secondary	0.20	0.33	0.10	0.00	0.33	0.23
Age 40 and older	0.38	0.66	0.42	0.57	0.25	0.15
Number of interviewees	60	9	19	7	12	13

<sup>a</sup>One-person household.

toward women, only 20% of the sample were secondary earners; thus, most interviewees, men and women, served an important role in providing for the household.

In addition, there is a self-selection bias to the sample. First, these are people who approached a life coach in a deliberate attempt to implement the self-work romantic utopia in their lives. Thus, the sample is based on people who adopted this discourse and were willing (and able financially) to spend money and effort to inhabit it. Second, out of the 60 people interviewed, 57 reported being satisfied with the outcome of the life-coaching process. Hence, this sample is limited to individuals who feel that they succeeded, to different degrees, in implementing the self-work romantic utopia in their lives. Third, all of them were employed at the time they approached a coach; thus, unemployment was not the main catalyst for their actions.

While self-selection limits generalizations, the focus on people who were influenced by romantic ideals regarding work experience, and had the financial ability to attempt to inhabit these ideals, enabled me to expose their real-life strategies and the ways in which they need to adapt their preexisting ideals into daily reality. It also enabled me to shift the focus from the previous interest in disappointment and self-blame that is common, for example, in the unemployed population (see Sharone, 2013) to workers who are more privileged in terms of their possibilities, thus uncovering that even under these relatively privileged conditions, inhabiting the romantic utopia is a complex, nonmonolithic process.

The data were analyzed inductively, broadly following the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I coded the data with the core themes that emerged from the interviews. These included the emotional/existential state of workers, their expressions and metaphors regarding work, emotion-related terms and wording, strategies used to improve the work experience, and transformations enacted in work activity. This coding revealed five strategies around which interviewees centered: starting over, healing, idealization, polygamy, and vision. I used simple descriptive characteristics for each strategy including gender, type of earner (which also reflects familial status; see earlier), and age (Table 1). Other characteristics, such as type of occupation and education, were evenly spread across the strategies and thus were not included in the descriptive statistics. Because the sample is not a random sample, any correlations between these characteristics and choice of strategy are suggestive. Because the data are made up of stories and narratives, I chose to introduce two examples in every

section of the findings. However, each empirical example that appears in the article represents numerous similar cases and quotes that were omitted from the text due to space constraints.

## Findings

### *The Self-Work Romantic Imaginary*

The biographical job narratives that appeared in the interviews revealed a reliance on the love/romantic imaginary. Interviewees used this imaginary when recounting their dissatisfaction with previous jobs, when explaining why they decided to approach a life coach, and when describing their expectations of their current or future job. At the same time, notions such as entrepreneurship, success, and status were relatively absent from the interviews; hence, the interviewees expressed a trade-off between the “romantic” culture and “enterprise” culture. Those who followed the romantic utopia expressed a shift toward a more emotional understanding of self-work relations, frequently resisting the importance of success and status.

“I was in a job that was unfulfilling, a job I did not love,” said Mary, who worked in marketing. Another interviewee, Tali, returned from a long trip in India with high hopes of finding a new and interesting job, but “the only job I ended up finding was the same job in another tourist company and that generated a lot of frustration . . . I was looking to find something that fits my talents and my passions . . . something I love doing.” Judith put it aptly when saying:

I was a lawyer in a big firm with a good salary, I had good friends at work. But the job had no meaning to me. I felt that I was working for nothing. I won a big case for a client and I felt nothing, no satisfaction, nothing.

As these comments demonstrate, feelings for the job and self-fulfillment were central to interviewees’ stories. For example, Judith, quoted previously, emphasized the expectation to feel something in contrast to the “nothing” she felt. When asked what she would have liked to feel, Judith answered: “passion, enthusiasm, something that drives me forward.” She also stressed that having a “good salary” and “good friends at work” were not enough, pointing to the rising emotional expectations of work.

Time and again, the interviewees said that money and good working conditions did not suffice. Frequently, this was presented as a new notion, one that contrasts with the expectations of the previous generation. As Donna said: “My mother does not understand – you have a good job, a good salary, you even get a car from work – what else do you want?” Ben, a former banker, expressed an internal conflict between these two perspectives when saying:

[I wanted to do] something that I feel in my gut, that I get up to work with joy, that I am enthusiastic, that it interests me. And then I reminded myself – this is a job, a job cannot be interesting, exciting, and generate butterflies in the stomach 100% of the time. But I do want to feel an initial enthusiasm unlike what I have ever felt before.

### *Strategies for Inhabiting the Utopia*

For the interviewees, the self-work romantic utopia was not merely a discursive structure through which they made sense of current working conditions. Rather, it also served as a cultural structure that pushed them forward to act on their working conditions. Once the ideal met reality, however, it began to change and adapt. Thus, even though interviewees used a relatively monolithic romantic imaginary when describing their hopes when approaching a life coach, when examining the actual actions and paths they took, I found five diverse strategies that lead to partial inhabitation of the utopia, a partiality that challenges notions of success and failure: (a) *Starting over*: fully fulfilling the utopia when quitting one’s career and moving on to a new one, (b) *Healing*: compromising and staying in the same job while focusing on the more exciting parts of the work, (c) *Idealization*: inhabiting the utopia on the abstract level of self-conception while acknowledging the gaps between the utopia and daily work activity, (d) *Polygamy*: limiting the utopia to a partial job while keeping a more stable or profitable side job, and (e) *Vision*: preparing for the future inhabitation of the utopia through studying and training while currently staying in an unsatisfying job. Strategy choice was found to be influenced by interviewee’s gender, age, and the centrality of his or her income to the household (represented by “type of earner,” see Table 1).

*Starting Over: Moving on to a New Career.* Motivational and career coaches advocate that “you can be whatever you want” and that “the sky is the

limit.”<sup>6</sup> Such slogans encourage people to “start over,” to search for what they truly love doing and turn it into a profit-making activity. That being said, when examining the strategies employed by individuals who consume these slogans, starting over was one of the least popular. Only 15% of the interviewees not only resigned their job but chose to dramatically change their profession and move on to a new career. Two were single, and only one (a male) was a primary earner. The majority, thus, had the financial support of their partner in supporting the household. Because women are less likely to be the primary earners, we find more women in this category when compared with the larger sample. Those who chose this strategy were relatively older; 66% were older than 40 years of age (see Table 1).

Those who embarked on a new career followed the idealistic demands of the self-work romantic utopia. Interestingly, all of them chose therapy-related semiprofessions that require minimal training, such as holistic body therapy, baby-nursing counseling, life coaching, and being a doula. Rachel, 42, mother of two and equal earner, left her position as a corporate attorney before she secured a new job as “she could not stand it anymore.” With the support of her husband, she hired a life coach and at the end of the process decided to become a body/mind holistic therapist and open a clinic in her home. John, 57, father of three and primary earner, left his prestigious job in a government office and went on to become a successful life coach. Dina, 36, single, left her job in the human resources department of a high-tech company to become a doula.

Although interviewees who chose starting over enacted a radical career break, being relatively older and experienced, they leveraged their existing social capital and reputation to market themselves. Previous work-related networks were used to locate clients, and their websites proclaimed their self-work narratives. In these narratives, the previous prestigious job was an important marker. Take, for example, the following excerpt from the professional website of a former high-tech employee who became a coach:

After ten years in high-tech in which I worked in research, development, and management of systems that were at the forefront of the technology of leading companies, I embarked on a journey of personal and professional development. I searched for meaning and purpose in my life through work with and for people . . . and ended specializing in coaching.

Such narratives in themselves serve as marketing strategies, performing the commitment, passion, and enthusiasm of the former lawyer or

former high-tech employee who left a well-paying job to find self-fulfillment.

The interviewees in this category chose a relatively risky strategy, yet their background and social conditions reduced that risk. The majority had a supportive partner, and they all had a relatively stable economic background and capital from their previous work experience that could be leveraged to the new career. Interestingly, women, who usually inhabit the less privileged positions in the job market, find themselves in a better relational position on their path to self-fulfillment when compared with men. Being secondary or equal earners, they can choose this relatively risky strategy as the household is less dependent on their income.

*Healing: Working on Self-Work Relations.* The second strategy, and the one most frequently employed by workers, was mending current self-work relations (37%). Many of those who chose this strategy dreamed of leaving their jobs but were afraid that such a move might end up being too costly. Instead of replacing their jobs, they decided to “work” on their self-work relations. This strategy was particularly common among men and primary earners, while secondary earners and singles were less likely to choose this strategy. Those who chose this strategy were a bit older when compared with the general distribution in the full sample (see Table 1).

The attempt to mend self-work relations included two dimensions. The first concerned restructuring and changing the actual work activity, either by changing position within the same organization or by redefining the current position. The second dimension involved self-work that included changing one’s attitudes and focusing on the more positive aspects of the same work activity.

Let us consider Tony, a 54-year-old professor of chemistry in a top Israeli university, married with three children and a primary earner. Two years ago, he took a 1-year sabbatical. When the year was over, he felt that he could not return to work. He was tired of writing grants and running after publications. He hired a life coach with the purpose of starting a new career and asked the university for a year of leave.

Tony had dreams of opening his own business and promoting innovations. During the life-coaching process, however, he realized that such a career transformation would require leaving behind all that he had accomplished and confronting the demanding job market that exists outside of academia. This encounter with reality, difficult as it was, led him in a new direction. He decided to rediscover his meaning



and calling in his current job. His next life-coaching sessions were devoted to returning in his mind to the years in which his scientific work still excited him, recalling what had attracted him to the job in the first place. He focused on the parts of his work that he enjoyed. In his words, “Before I felt that I was stuck in a place I did not want to be. Now I know it is a choice – I chose to be here, and the coaching helped me to remember why.”

This sketch of the coaching process recalls marriage counseling. As “divorce” seemed too risky, and after years of investment in the same job, Tony decided to “work” on his emotional attitude trying to “remember why” he committed to this relation in the first place. The option of leaving, and then the decision to stay, created an experience of choice—“I chose to be here”—even though the decision to stay was heavily influenced by the structural conditions of the job market. Alongside this emotional work, Tony also restructured his working activity. He decided to spend less time on applying for grants and dedicated 2 days a week to laboratory work. These 2 days of having “more fun,” as he termed it, enabled him to continue and execute the less likable parts of his job.

Now we turn to Rachel, 37, married with two children and an equal earner, who worked as a medical representative of a pharmacological company that produces medical instruments. As she said, “The job was really convenient. The hours, the social conditions . . . a normal salary.” Yet after working in this company for 8 years, she felt work fatigue: “I wanted something that fits me better, that I am more passionate about. Something that would be more than a convenient job.” After her second son was born, she decided not return to work but changed her mind in the face of the job market:

When it came to the moment of truth I could not leave. I went back after four months of maternity leave. Because – how will I pay the bills? I looked for another job, but nothing offered the same conditions. I mean, once you live your life at a certain level you cannot go down . . . So, I went back with a lot of frustration and disappointment. And this is when I started the coaching.

During the life-coaching sessions, Rachel came up with different ideas of a future job that would fulfill her expectations better, including, for example, opening a business that sells baby products. But she was concerned about leaving the security of her current job. So instead, she started searching for ways to improve her work experience in the same

organization. A more senior position had just opened up in her company. Rachel had previously made unsuccessful attempts to advance to more senior positions. This time, the coach and Rachel worked on what Rachel called a “mental and emotional approach,” and she ended up getting promoted.

Rachel did not plan to become a supervisor, but she found that this new position suited her: “There is so much fun in this responsibility. . . . The success of the product is dependent on me. . . .” The kind of self-fulfillment that Rachel eventually found differed dramatically from the one she originally envisioned. Her life circumstances led her to adapt her dream to reality, yet this adaptation still fulfills the search for “fun” and passion.

Most interviewees who used this strategy of healing originally sought to leave their work organizations. However, they had to adapt their dreams to the reality of a precarious job market. Being primary or equal earners in their households and troubled by the question “how will I pay the bills?”, they had to find paths for experiences of self-fulfillment in the very limited sphere of their current work. They had to actively work on their emotional attitudes to enact agency for restructuring their jobs and to reignite passion.

*Idealization: Decoupling From Daily Work Activity.* The third strategy identified in the interviews was to recouple the self-work romantic utopia on the level of identity and ideal self-presentation while decoupling it from daily activity.<sup>7</sup> This strategy involved attaching an idealistic and mythic dimension to the job which made it more glamorous or fulfilling on a relatively abstract level. This strategy was common among interviewees who moved from one organization to another or became self-employed but stayed on familiar grounds in terms of their professional work. It was exercised by 11% of the interviewees and was mainly attractive to primary and equal earners (see Table 1).

Roi, 37 years old, married with one child, and an equal earner, is a good example. After working for 7 years as a product manager in two cellular companies, Roi realized that “I was stuck in my work. I knew I wasn’t happy. . . . I did not love my job.” Roi was not sure if he wanted to remain in the organization or leave and find a new job. After a few life-coaching sessions, he wrote down the criteria for his future career. These included challenging and interesting work and a good salary, but most important for Roi was “I wanted my work to be personally meaningful – to have a larger positive impact.” In the next sessions with the coach, Roi dealt with the question of meaning and

what kind of job could fulfill this criterion. Being an environmentalist, Roi focused on possible venues connected to the green industry, with the thought of opening his own business and becoming self-employed. The vision he developed during the life-coaching sessions, thus, involved a striking change from his previous job. In addition, he was advised by his life coach to share his dreams for self-fulfillment with everyone he met. One evening, out at a bar with friends, he spoke with an acquaintance who told him about an opening in the global marketing department of a company that produces electric cars in which he worked. Roi landed that job.

Roi's new position was rather remote from the "vision" he had developed in the life-coaching process, yet he described it as a "dream job." When I asked Roi about the environmentalist part of his work, he responded:

In my daily work I don't really deal with it. I mean, on the macro level it is important, but in my daily work I don't decrease our dependency on oil. I think it is important in terms of being proud of what I do. Working in a company that is helping the world. It sounds pretentious, but this is what I was looking for.

In terms of daily activity, Roi did not make a drastic switch. On the personal, identity level, however—of being proud of what he does, of feeling connected in terms of values—he executed a complete about-face. Thus, even though there is a level of decoupling between his daily activities and the glamour of "helping the world," Roi did not see this as a problematic compromise.

Roi's story exemplifies how what counts as self-fulfillment is dependent on the work context and that the self-work romantic utopia can be adapted to reality. While the vision he developed in the life-coaching sessions required a commitment to a calling, the actual implementation was much more flexible.

Then, we have Tom, 42, married with three children and primary earner, a real-estate agent who decided to open his own business. Tom called this business "my baby" and spoke about his passion for nurturing it, thus using a romantic imaginary. Yet, when asked about his daily work activity, Tom readily acknowledged the nonromantic aspects of his work: "The job is not easy – another difficult day, another conversation . . . the vision and goal give you energy to keep going. A dream that you want to fulfill. I have it in my mind all the time." Again, Tom acknowledges the gap between the daily grind and the glamorous

vision. The romantic vision supplies the motivation while staying in the abstract, ideal realm.

*Professional Polygamy: Diverging to a Few Jobs.* The previous strategies included adaptations and compromises while retaining the monogamous structure of one self/one job. The fourth strategy challenges the ideal of professional monogamy and introduces an in-between solution, one that reduces the commitment to the current, undesired job but at the same time does not involve leaving that position. This strategy was chosen by 20% of the interviewees and was less common among primary earners (1 interviewee only). Those who chose this strategy were a bit younger when compared with the larger sample, as all were younger than 42 years of age, and only 25% were older than 40 years of age (see Table 1).

Ron, married with one child, exemplifies this strategy: “I teach workshops on leadership in schools and colleges, I do group and personal coaching, and I do music productions as a soundman.” For years, Ron moved from one type of work to another, searching for the “right job”—as he puts it. He tried his hand at being a stay-at-home dad when his son was born, but 4 months into the job, he began to see a need to make money by returning to work outside the home: “I started looking for the secure jobs I am familiar with, so I went back to being a soundman.” He also decided to hire a life coach. The process led Ron to realize that he wanted to keep his work life dynamic and free: “I realized that being in one organization does not work for me.” Ron ended up crafting for himself a polygamous work life. He works as a freelancer in three different areas—as a soundman in music performances, giving workshops on leadership and on sexual assault in schools and colleges, and as a life coach for groups and individuals.

While his steadiest source of income is his work as a soundman, the “real passion,” as he puts it, is in the other two jobs. By keeping his more solid and stable occupation along with developing two other venues, Ron was able to introduce variety into his work experience. Such variety also influenced his attitude toward the previously less attractive job, especially because, as he told me, his life is more balanced; his work as a soundman takes up half as much time as it used to.

Michele, married with three children, worked as a financial consultant in a large firm for more than 15 years. She then became fascinated with psychology and decided that her true passion is to help people. When she hired a coach, she was planning to leave her job and become a full-time therapist. Yet, as she realized that this change would include

a dramatic drop in her income, she changed the plan. When I interviewed her, she had reduced her job as a consultant to 80% and started working as a therapist, explaining: “My vision five years from now is to allot 60% of my worktime to consulting in a firm, and 40% of it to therapeutic work.” When I asked her about her consulting work, she said: “It is easier when it does not take over your life, and that I know that I am still promoting my passion, that I am fulfilling my dream.”

Michele’s story shows us that when individuals chose work polygamy over monogamy, they actively decouple the self-work romantic utopia from their daily work activity in the less satisfying job. When they reduce their expectations of the undesirable job, they find that their work experience becomes “easier”: It is decoupled from the self. In this sense, accepting the job as a mere job and not as a romantic partner, while at the same time promoting passion and calling in the other job, enabled them to maintain their romantic utopia.

In some cases, like Michele, interviewees were able to keep the same working hours as before even when working in more than one job, either because they worked as freelancers and thus controlled the amount of work they took in, or they were highly valued in the organization and thus were allowed to reduce their workload. In other cases, such as that of Ron, professional polygamy meant increasing working hours and juggling the work positions. The strategy of polygamy, thus, while offering a more secure and stable solution, could exact a significant cost in terms of energy devotion and work–family balance.

*Vision: Deferring to the Future.* The last strategy encountered in the interviews was one in which individuals remained in their jobs but maintained a vision and a goal of leaving those jobs in the future. In addition to working, these interviewees were studying, preparing for, and developing what they believed would be the fulfillment of the self-work romantic utopia. They engaged in what Duffy (2017) has called “inspirational work,” which sustained their romantic hopes. At the same time, they decoupled the self-work romantic utopia from the actual work activity in which they engaged, as they no longer expected their current work to fulfill emotional needs. Their current job turned into a step, a necessary stage in the journey toward true love.

Interviewees who chose this strategy (22%) were relatively young, and many were single (see Table 1). Interestingly, in terms of age, the 15% who were “age 40 and older” were actually older than 50, indicating that this strategy may characterize individuals either before or after the stress and difficulties of the midlife period.

Take, for example, Rona, a single, 27-year-old project manager in a governmental office. Describing her work as “boring” and “unfulfilling,” she hired a life coach to identify a new career orientation. During the life-coaching session, she decided that she wanted to fulfill a childhood dream of working as a flight attendant for a year, after which she would embark on a career as a teacher. She also decided to finance her studies and training by continuing in her present job for the time being. These decisions led to a change of attitude toward her current job:

I was disappointed by my career, and now I am not. I am still in the same place, and I still want to leave, but now I know my direction. I don't feel frustrated like before because I have a schedule and a process that I defined for myself and that reduces my anxiety and calms me down . . .

Likewise, Shai, 32, married with one child, who worked in a high-tech company for 8 years, hired a life coach to find “what I want to do with my career.” When asked what he meant he added:

I need to fulfill myself. Most people, because work takes the majority of the day, search for fulfillment at work. I mean, for me for sure, [in theory] I could make a lot of money without having meaning at work, but I cannot do that. I have to feel that I am doing something substantial, that I am developing myself, doing something I love.

During the life-coaching sessions, Shai realized that his life dream is to become a psychologist, but “as the primary earner in the household I did not think my wife would agree.” After discussing options with his wife, he decided to start an undergraduate course in psychology “while working in high-tech, since I need to earn [money].” During the life-coaching process, he also moved to a new high-tech company with more flexible work hours. When asked whether he thinks that he will become a psychologist in the future, he responded: “I don't know if it is feasible. I hope it is. For now, I enjoy my studies; they give me a lot.”

One interviewee (woman, 32, single) offered a razor-sharp romantic image: “I live a double life . . . I have my loves and my passions, and I have what I do to bring in money.” It bears mention, however, that all of the interviewees who employed this strategy maintained a hope that this would change in the future and that they would manage to turn their passions into a real job. While their actual work activity did not change, the emotional expectations shifted to the training and preparation work, such as taking courses at a university, building a website

with their vision, or writing a blog. The vision, in this case, provided hope, a sense of purpose and meaning, even when completely decoupled from the everyday work experience.

## **Discussion**

The growing gap between increasing emotional expectations of work and the actual work experience has led to the rise of different institutions, life coaching being one of them, to which people turn in an attempt to inhabit the myth of self-work romantic utopia. The findings presented illustrate that on the discursive level, people who turn to life coaching hold a relatively unified imaginary of self-work romantic relations. This is not surprising, as life coaching and similar institutions promote such imaginaries, catering to an expanding audience that encounters discrepancies between the cultural ideal and their everyday experience.

Yet, in the actual implementation of this utopia, the picture that emerged is more complex and fluid. Findings illustrate that people employ the ideal of self-work passion in different degrees, adapting it to their life stories and circumstances. Only a minority of the interviewees, those who had relatively strong familial support and were not primary earners, were able to entirely redirect their career path and follow what they believed was their vocation or calling, choosing the starting-over strategy. The others found ways to adapt to the structure of a precarious job market and accord more flexible and open interpretations to what counts as self-fulfillment.

In the four strategies—*healing, idealization, polygamy, and vision*—we see efforts to inhabit the utopia while acknowledging that full materialization of the myth is impossible. *Healing* entailed changing attitudes toward the same work activity and searching for a sense of purpose, all the while allocating increased attention to the more exciting parts of the job to tolerate the less exciting ones. *Idealization* involved inhabiting the utopia on the identity level of self-presentation and self-conception while acknowledging the gaps between the utopia and daily work activity. *Polygamy* required people to limit the self-work romantic utopia to a partial job while decoupling it from the other, more stable or profitable job. Finally, the strategy of *vision* implied living a double life—one in the current unsatisfying job, the other in the preparation for the future fulfillment of the vision.

Even for those who are relatively well-off and privileged, then, fully inhabiting the myth is a problematic task. In light of the limitations



created by structural and relational positions, people devised achievable solutions. Primary earners (predominantly men) were less likely to choose risky strategies that would reduce their income and thus preferred healing and idealization. In contrast, secondary providers (who are frequently women) were more likely to choose risky strategies, such as starting over and polygamy, which involved either leaving or reducing the more stable employment. Singles, who were younger and did not have children to support, were less likely to choose healing and more likely to choose vision, as they had time and faith in the future, and could plan and progress toward a career shift. These findings indicate that even for the upper-middle class, we are witnessing variation in how comfortable workers feel about taking risks and changing jobs. Based on these findings, I cautiously suggest that workers with lower socioeconomic status, who experience less financial security, will be pushed to use the less risky strategies—healing, idealization, and vision while avoiding the risks involved in starting over and polygamy.

Those who attempted to preserve the monogamous ideal of “I, job” disclosed a new kind of emotional work that centers on the self-work relationship. Not unlike going to marriage counseling, the life-coaching process serves as a space where one reignites passion, recounts the early days of enthusiasm, and focuses on the more positive aspects of the job. In addition, interviewees attempted to restructure their everyday work activity, either by changing positions in the same organization or by adding tasks that are experienced as “fun” or “exciting.” In this way, they tried to cultivate passion for a job that was experienced as boring or unmeaningful.

Yet, the findings also illustrate cracks in the monogamous idea of one person/one job. Given an unstable job market, the ability to fulfill the self-work romantic utopia may require diverging into multiple territories, thus holding onto money and stability along with passion and love. Such divergence can be costly, as it may increase the number of hours devoted to work. At the same time, it may offer a flexible solution in a difficult job market.

What is the role of life coaches in turning the myth into a more flexible, inhabitable social script? The strategies identified in this study were not a part of a life-coaching model or advice and were devised by workers in action. Yet, life coaching provides an action-driven process through which dreams meet reality and thus forces the client to pragmatically adapt desires to possibilities, fantasies to life circumstance. In this sense, I propose that life coaching serves two somewhat contradictory roles. On one hand, it encourages individuals to bite into the myth by encouraging them that they can do what they



love. On the other hand, it serves as a catalyst of adaptation and partial fulfilment when pushing people to produce a reasonable action plan that they feel comfortable with and can work on the ground.

From the workers' perspective, the findings illustrate that even a partial inhabitation of the self-work romantic utopia fulfills emotional needs, reduces work fatigue, and provides a sense of purpose. We are living in a paradoxical society that celebrates choice and agency while simultaneously depriving workers, even the more privileged ones, of this very agency. As a response, workers need to find ways to conserve a sense of agency in light of narrowing possibilities. I suggest that turning the myth into a more flexible notion enables it to remain meaningful and action-related in their lives.

Such a process of partial inhabitation has unintended problematic consequences, though. Paradoxically, while trying to improve their work conditions, workers use strategies that end up supporting the reduction in workplaces' responsibility for employee satisfaction, as they yield flexible, individualistic solutions that are external to one specific job or organization. From this perspective, this study strengthens the growing critique on the synergic affect between self-help culture and neoliberal economic structures (e.g., Sharone, 2013; Silva, 2013). The more precarious the job market, the more workers are pushed toward individualistic solutions to improve their work satisfaction, thus accelerating the ongoing process of precarity.

## Conclusion

In recent years, the relations between self and work have become infused with emotional metaphors, pointing to a shift from enterprise culture to a romantic imaginary of love and passion. The rising emotional expectations of work, conjoined with a steep decline in the commitments of workplaces to supply these emotional needs, induce workers to take personal responsibility for inhabiting the self-work romantic utopia. They thus invest a great deal of time and money to heighten their job satisfaction, find meaning, ignite passion, and cultivate enthusiasm. At the same time, they use different levels of decoupling to maintain the ideal of the self-work romantic utopia despite disappointments, compromises, and costs.

Through the use of different institutions that arose as a response to the rising expectations of work (such as life coaching), individuals employ a variety of solutions—from healing to professional polygamy—to maintain their self-work relationships. While these solutions do not necessary

conform to the monogamous ideal of “I, job,” they do supply the emotional experience that individuals seek in the contemporary work sphere, helping them recouple myth and reality. The diversity in these solutions challenges monolithic and dichotomic views regarding self-fulfillment at work. Even for the relatively privileged workers, inhabiting the self-work romantic utopia is often partial and limited, and yet this partial fulfilment still supplies a sense of purpose and agency.

This study raises questions regarding the kinds of social, cultural, and economic capital that are required to inhabit this self-work utopia. First, the different institutions that push people to reconcile expectations and reality, including life coaching and career motivational workshops, are costly in terms of both time and money. Second, social and financial support is crucial for changing or structuring jobs, influencing the choice between more risky versus less risky strategies. Further research is required to extend these findings to those with lower socioeconomic status, asking which strategies are open for these groups and what level of adaption and partial inhabitation can be found.

The ability to partly fulfill the self-work romantic utopia, even when limited to a specific social class, explains the lingering power of the myth and the relative lack of pushback to the idealistic demand to “love your work.” Instead of resisting the structure of the job market, workers employ complex strategies to partly inhabit the self-work romantic utopia, strategies that eventually strengthen the precarious, noncommitted, and individual-oriented structure of this market.

### **Declaration of Conflicting Interests**

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **Funding**

The author received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### **ORCID iD**

Michal Pagis  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5192-4719>

### **Notes**

1. See <https://www.forbes.com/sites/timworstall/2011/10/08/steve-jobs-and-the-dont-settle-speech/#70b771847437>.

2. Illouz's (1997) work on the "Romantic Utopia" in love relationships served as inspiration for using the notion "self-work romantic utopia."
3. The largest international coaching organizations (i.e., the ICF and the International Association of Coaching) originally appeared in the United States, Britain, and Australia. Today, these organizations count thousands of members throughout the world.
4. Coaching statistics is based on the *2016 ICF Global Coaching Study*. The study was commissioned in 2015 by the ICF and undertaken by PricewaterhouseCoopers. See <https://coachfederation.org/research/global-coaching-study>.
5. See <https://www.robinsharma.com/about-robin>.
6. Such slogans appeared quite often in the life-coaching training I observed and on the websites of life coaches.
7. As Meyer and Rowan (1977) have shown, decoupling from daily activities is a common strategy used by organizations when dealing with institutional myths.

## References

- Arthur, M. B., & Rousseau, D. M. (1996). *The boundaryless career: A new employment principle for a new organizational era*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Beck, U. (2001). Interview with Ulrich Beck. *Journal of Consumer Culture*, 1, 261–277.
- Beck, U., & Beck-Gernsheim, E. (2002). *Individualization: Institutionalized individualism and its social and political consequences*. London: Sage.
- Ben-Shahar, T. (2014). *Choose the life you want: The mindful way to happiness*. The Experiment.
- Berg, J. M., Grant, A. M., & Johnson, V. (2010). When callings are calling: Crafting work and leisure in pursuit of unanswered occupational callings. *Organization Science*, 21, 973–994.
- Cabanas, E. (2016). Rekindling individualism, consuming emotions: Constructing "psytizens" in the age of happiness. *Culture & Psychology*, 22, 467–480.
- Chinoy, E. (1992). *Automobile workers and the American dream*. University of Illinois Press. (Original work published 1955).
- Clark, A. E. (2005). Your money or your life: Changing job quality in OECD countries. *British Journal of Industrial Relations*, 43(3), 377–400.
- Duffy, B. E. (2017). *(Not) getting paid to do what you love: Gender, social media, and aspirational work*. Yale University Press.
- Du Gay, P. (1996). *Consumption and identity at work*. Sage.
- Durkheim, E. (2014). *The division of labor in society*. Simon and Schuster. (Original work published 1893).
- Fleming, P. (2015). *The mythology of work*. Pluto Press.
- George, M. (2013a). Seeking legitimacy: The professionalization of life coaching. *Sociological Inquiry*, 83(2), 179–208.

- George, M. (2013b). Lifestyle work. In V. Smith (Ed.), *Sociology of work: An encyclopedia* (pp. 539–541). Sage.
- Gubler, M., Arnold, J., & Coombs, C. (2014). Reassessing the protean career concept: Empirical findings, conceptual components, and measurement. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(1), 23–40.
- Hall, D. T. (2004). The protean career: A quarter-century journey. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 65(1), 1–13.
- Hallett, T. (2010). The myth incarnate: Recoupling processes, turmoil, and inhabited institutions in an urban elementary school. *American Sociological Review*, 75, 52–74.
- Hallett, T., & Ventresca, M. J. (2006). Inhabited institutions: Social interactions and organizational forms in Gouldner's Patterns of Industrial Bureaucracy. *Theory and Society*, 35, 213–236.
- Hardt, M. (1999). Affective labor. *Boundary*, 2, 89–100.
- Helman, S. (2019). Turning welfare-reliant women into entrepreneurs: Employment readiness workshops and the constitution of the entrepreneurial self in Israel. *Social Politics: International Studies in Gender, State & Society*, 26, 116–138.
- Hochschild, A. (1997). *The time bind*. Holt Paperbacks.
- Hochschild, A. (2012). *The managed heart: Commercialization of human feeling*. University of California Press. (Original work published 1983)
- Illouz, E. (1997). *Consuming the romantic utopia: Love and the cultural contradictions of capitalism*. University of California Press.
- Illouz, E. (2007). *Cold intimacies: The making of emotional capitalism*. Polity Press.
- Illouz, E. (2008). *Saving the modern soul. Therapy, emotions, and the culture of self-help*. University of California Press.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2003). Flexible firms and labor market segmentation effects of workplace restructuring on jobs and workers. *Work and Occupations*, 30, 154–175.
- Kalleberg, A. L. (2009). Precarious work, insecure workers: Employment relations in transition. *American Sociological Review*, 74(1), 1–22.
- Kessler-Harris, A. (2003). *In pursuit of equity: Women, men, and the quest for economic citizenship in 20th century America*. Oxford University Press.
- Kunda, G., & Ailon-Souday, G. (2005). Managers, markets, and ideologies: Design and devotion revisited. In S. Ackroyd, R. Batt, P. Thompson, & P. S. Tolbert (Eds.), *The Oxford handbook of work and organizations* (pp. 200–219). Oxford University Press.
- Lair, D. J., Sullivan, K., & Cheney, G. (2005). Marketization and the recasting of the professional self: The rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. *Management Communication Quarterly*, 18, 307–343.
- Lane, C. M. (2011). *A company of one: Insecurity, independence, and the new world of white-collar unemployment*. Cornell University Press.
- Mäkinen, K. (2016). Valuable selves: Potentiality and temporality in work-related coaching. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 19(1), 69–84.

- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2002). *The communist manifesto*. Penguin. (Original work published 1847)
- McGee, M. (2005). *Self-help, Inc.: Makeover culture in America*. Oxford University Press.
- McRobbie, A. (2016). *Be creative: Making a living in the new culture industries*. Polity.
- Meyer, J. W., & Rowan, B. (1977). Institutionalized organizations: Formal structure as myth and ceremony. *American Journal of Sociology*, 83, 340–363.
- Miller, P., & Rose, N. (1990). Governing economic life. *Economy and Society*, 19(1), 1–31.
- Nehring, D., Alvarado, E., Hendriks, E. C., & Kerrigan, D. (2016). *Transnational popular psychology and the global self-help industry*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Newman, K. S. (1988). *Falling from grace: The experience of downward mobility in the American middle class*. The Free Press.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019a). *Hours worked (indicator)*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/91c78e61-en>
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2019b). *Unemployment rate (indicator)*. <https://doi.org/10.1787/91c78e61-en>
- Pagis, M. (2016). Fashioning futures: Life coaching and the self-made identity paradox. *Sociological Forum*, 31, 1083–1103.
- Pagis, M., & Ailon, G. (2017). The paradoxes of self-branding: An analysis of consultants' professional web pages. *Work and Occupations*, 44(3), 243–267.
- Parkin, J. C. (2016). *F\*\*k it – Do what you love*. Hay House Publishing.
- Ram, U. (2008). *The globalization of Israel: McWorld in Tel Aviv, jihad in Jerusalem*. Routledge.
- Rivera, L. A. (2015). Go with your gut: Emotion and evaluation in job interviews. *American Journal of Sociology*, 120, 1339–1389.
- Sa'ar, A. (2016). *Economic citizenship: Neoliberal paradoxes of empowerment*. Berghahn Books.
- Seligman, M. E. (2004). *Authentic happiness: Using the new positive psychology to realize your potential for lasting fulfillment*. Simon and Schuster.
- Sennett, R. (1998). *The corrosion of character: The personal consequences of work in the new capitalism*. Norton & Co.
- Shalev, M. (2018). Liberalization and the Transformation of the Political Economy. In G. Shafir, & Y. Peled (Eds), *The New Israel: Peacemaking and Liberalization* (pp. 129–159). Taylor & Francis.
- Sharabi, M., & Harpaz, I. (2013). Changes of work values in changing economy: Perspectives of men and women. *International Journal of Social Economics*, 40(8), 692–706.
- Sharone, O. (2013). *Flawed system/flawed self: Job searching and unemployment experiences*. University of Chicago Press.
- Silva, J. M. (2013). *Coming up short: Working-class adulthood in an age of uncertainty*. Oxford University Press.

- Skeggs, B. (2004). Exchange, value and affect: Bourdieu and 'the self'. *The Sociological Review*, 52(2), 75–95.
- Smith, V. (2012). "You get the economy you choose": The political and social construction of the new economy. *Work and Occupations*, 39, 148–156.
- Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1998). *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and procedures for developing grounded theory*. Sage Publications.
- Turner, N., Barling, J., & Zacharatos, A. (2002). Positive psychology at work. In C. R. Snyder & S. J. Lopez (Eds.), *Handbook of positive psychology* (pp. 715–728). Oxford University Press.
- Twenge, J. M. (2006). *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled—and more miserable than ever before*. Free Press.
- Vallas, S. P., & Christin, A. (2018). Work and identity in an era of precarious employment: How workers respond to "personal branding" discourse. *Work and Occupations*, 45, 3–37.
- Vallas, S. P., & Cummins, E. R. (2015). Personal branding and identity norms in the popular business press: Enterprise culture in an age of precarity. *Organization Studies*, 36(3), 293–319.
- Weber, M. (2013). *The Protestant ethic and the spirit of capitalism*. Routledge. (Original work published 1905).

### Author Biography

**Michal Pagis** is an associate professor of sociology at Bar Ilan University, Israel. She studies the transformations in self and identity in contemporary postindustrial culture. She is the author of *Inward: Vipassana Meditation and the Embodiment of the Self*, published by the University of Chicago Press.

Copyright of Work & Occupations is the property of Sage Publications Inc. and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.