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Portrait of authority: a critical interrogation of the ideology of job and career coaching

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ABSTRACT
This article focuses on job and career coaching provided by a multinational company, as a means of learning how to become employable. On the basis of a critical discourse analysis informed by Fairclough, we interrogate tips and advice in blog posts written by job and career coaches on the company’s website. The aim of the article is to examine the power relationships between the coaches, the coachees and the employers in these tips and advice. The analytical focus is directed at descriptions of three subject positions – the coach, the coachee, and the employer. We explore the ways in which their relationships to each other are legitimised. The tips and advice shape a particular understanding of the contemporary conditions and challenges on the labour market producing an ideology of job and career coaching, where existing power relationships in working life are legitimised by portraying coaches as neutral authorities and coachees as commodities.

INTRODUCTION
The portrait of authority
You tell me that’s what I’m supposed to be,
It embodies what he cannot be,
The portrait of authority
Bad Religion, Portrait of authority

During the last decades, and in common with practices in other countries, job and career coaching have become prominent phenomena, in Sweden and the Swedish labour market. The following article explores job and career coaching as a means of learning how to become employable. It focuses on the practices of one large multinational company which has ambitions to become one of the biggest in the global job searching industry. More specifically, we explored the tips and advice in blog posts written by job and career coaches, published on the Swedish website of the company Careerbuilder. The blog posts target job seekers as well as employees seeking to improve their professional careers.

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The aim of this article is to interrogate the power relationships between the coaches, the coachees and the employers in tips and advice provided on the Careerbuilder website. On the basis of a critical discourse analysis (CDA) informed by the work of Norman Fairclough, the analytical focus is directed at three subject positions – namely the coach, the coachee, i.e., the job seeker/the employee, and the employer, and how their relationships to each other are described and legitimised in blog posts published on the Careerbuilder website.

How are job and career coaching and the authority of the coaches legitimised in the tips and advice? How are the successful job seeker and employee described? How is the coachee encouraged to be, think and act in order to learn how to become successful in working life?

Background

Coaching appears in relation to a range of different settings, such as executive coaching, life coaching, health coaching, but they all share the common understanding that humans are ultimately rational and capable of determining their own fate (see Aspelin 2008; Bachkirova, Cox, and Clutterbuck 2010; Gjerde 2012). This means that people are seen as a certain kind of learning subject, capable of self-governing and self-improvement by being in command of their own emotions, thoughts and attitudes (cf. Ecclestone and Brunila 2015; Irisdotter Aldenmyr and Olson 2016). Thus, coaching targets the individuals and their selves. The task for the coach is to facilitate the coachees in setting free their own potential to achieve change in their lives; it is a people changing activity.

In recent years, and in common with many other countries, the labour market in Sweden has become more deregulated, privatised, flexible and shaped by neoliberal policies. Here, labour-market policies have been directed at strengthening the employability of the population in order to create a better match between potential employees and the needs and demands of the employers (Fejes 2010). Accordingly, the political focus has gradually shifted from being concerned with the lack of employment opportunities to a lack of employability among the citizenry (see Dahlstedt 2009; Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Hörnqvist 2010).

In Sweden, the state (in the form of the Public employment office), lost its monopoly as employment agency in 1993. This in turn led to the rapid expansion of a new market for staffing businesses as well as job and career coaching companies (Bergström 2007). Since then, this particular market has expanded even further, not least as job and career coaching – in Sweden as elsewhere – has become a widespread political labour market tool targeting the unemployed (Engstrand and Vesterberg 2011).

This means that today there are a range of actors involved in employment and job seeking businesses. This development propelled in part by large-scale public investment in job and career coaching initiated in Sweden, between 2009 and 2011. Over this period, labour market measures provided by the Public employment office were complemented with a range of services provided by publically funded, private actors (Larsson 2015; Wikberg 2010). This has made job and career coaching and its merits in the context of the Swedish labour market an interesting case for further analysis.
Research context

There has been a wide range of studies focusing on employability in Sweden as well as in Europe and elsewhere (cf. Chertkovskaya et al. 2013; McQuaid and Lindsay 2005; Sparrhoff and Fejes 2016). Several of these studies have been inspired by Foucault (1980, 1991) and his thoughts on power, governing and the construction of subjects. Studies have shown that one of the key features in current discourses on employability is the individual’s self-improvement or self-development work directed at learning how to become employable. In this, individuals are constructed as responsible for strengthening their own employability (Garsten and Jacobsson 2004) and both the state and the employer are construed as enabling the individual to take on this responsibility (Fejes 2010). In Sweden and elsewhere the construction of employable subjects has also been related to wider political changes to labour market policies, (cf. Henman and Fenger 2006; Larsson, Letell, and Thörn 2012).

On the basis of a Foucauldian approach, studies have investigated specific practices for the strengthening of individuals’ employability, including career counselling (Stead and Bakker 2010) and career guidance (Bengtsson 2016). Among such practices, studies have scrutinised practices of job and career coaching as a means of governing. These studies have highlighted the relationships between power and knowledge and the formation of particular subjectivities in such practices. For instance, Darmon and Perez (2011, 79) have discussed ‘adult guidance as an instrument of liberal governmental rationality’. Furthermore, Fogde (2009) has studied the job and career coaching provided by white collar unions showing how particular skills and competencies are constructed as necessary in order to become competitive in the labour market. Other studies have focused on coaching targeting specific groups including migrants (Engstrand and Vesterberg 2011) and young working-class women (Rantakeisu, Kuusela, and Karlsson 2015); groups problematised as at risk of being excluded from the labour market.

To sum up: studies on employability and specifically on job and career coaching as a means of strengthening employability have provided knowledge about the construction of the employable subject. Here, the analytical focus has primarily been directed at productive aspects in the exercise of power, highlighting not least the formation and governing of subjects through ‘freedom’ (cf. Fogde, 2009). However, job and career coaching as exercises of power also contain other dimensions including discipline and domination. In this article, the analysis conducted is informed by CDA, as developed by Norman Fairclough (1992, 2000, 2003). Such an analysis opens up other ways of interpreting the exercise of power providing knowledge about how power relationships and authority are legitimised through particular ideologies in society as well as in the labour market. The ideals produced and distributed through job and career coaching are wide-spread and normalised as ‘common sense’. Thus, the critical approach provided by CDA is particularly useful in rendering visible the ways in which ‘natural’ notions of job and career coaching may articulate and legitimise particular interests in the labour market. However, there is still a lack of studies focusing particularly on job and career coaching from a CDA perspective. An exception is Zulkifli (2015) who analysed the construction of the ‘career woman’ in popular culture and specifically in the Malaysian edition of the Women’s magazine Cleo. In this context the ideal ‘career woman’ was portrayed according to dominant global management discourses, where women are described as in need of being ‘empowered’ in terms of developing particular job skills, knowledge, actions and personalities.
Analytical approach

The analysis is informed by CDA (Fairclough 1992, 2000, 2003). Fairclough developed his analytical approach elaborating on traditions of critical theory and ideology critique as well as the tradition of discourse analysis developed from the works of Michel Foucault. We make use of Fairclough’s CDA as an analytical tool-kit to explore the ways in which power is exercised through the uses of language, here specifically the language of job and career coaching.

We direct our attention to the ways in which ideology operates in job and career coaching. Here, ideology is understood as ‘representations of the world which contribute to maintaining relations of power, domination and exploitation’ (Fairclough 2003, 218). Following Fairclough (2000, 30), we conceptualise coaching as a particular ‘discourse type’ among others (such as advertising, scientific or bureaucratic discourse types). Coaching, as a discourse type, ‘embodies ideologies which legitimise existing social relations’. Each discourse type has its own participants involved in the activities represented, i.e., a particular ‘set of subject positions, which are socially constituted and recognised’ (Fairclough 1992, 126) in the discourse type. In this article, the relationships between the subject positions of the coach, the coachee (i.e., job seeker and employee) and the employer are scrutinised.

In order to further analyse the ways in which ideologies operate by legitimising existing social relations, Fairclough (2003, 219) offers a range of analytical tools revealing certain ‘strategies of legitimation’. In this article, the following strategies of legitimation are analysed: modalization, naturalisation, and metaphorization. Modalization, refers to the usage of modality as a strategy of legitimation, in terms of ‘the varying degrees of commitment to truth or necessity’ (Fairclough 2003, 219). Naturalisation refers to the ways in which particular discourse types ‘achieve the status of “common sense”’ (Fairclough 1992, 87), i.e., appear as neutral and universal and thus as lying beyond power relations and domination. Metaphorization refers to the use of metaphors to represent ‘one aspect of experience in terms of another’ (Fairclough 2000, 99).

Empirical material and conducting the analysis

The empirical material analysed here consists of blog posts retrieved from the Swedish website of the multi-national company Careerbuilder. This company is engaged in providing employment services as well as career and job coaching – or, as described on the Swedish website, ‘Internet based recruitment’ – including services such as the provision of ‘overall solutions’ in job advertising, attracting potential job seekers and tools for recruitment. The website explains that the company operates in more than 60 countries throughout the world, employing more than 3 000 people. This makes Careerbuilder a key actor in the job and career coaching market and suggests it is important to critically interrogate their practices.

In Sweden, the company market itself as ‘the most visited job site in Sweden’. The website targets employers as well as employees and job seekers. For a fee, employers can use the Internet-based recruitment services provided by the company. Employees and job seekers can use a range of free services including the opportunity to upload a CV onto Careerbuilders’ website. They are also invited to take advantage of a large number of tips and advice provided by various career and job coaches.
The empirical material analysed consisted of 13 blog posts retrieved from the so-called Career blog on the Swedish website of Careerbuilder. At the time of writing there were a total of 137 posts uploaded to this blog. The blog posts are mostly made up of tips and advice aimed at job seekers but also employees seeking to advance their careers. The blog posts are most often written by coaches, under headings such as ‘The beauty and the beast – who will survive?’, ‘Ten steps for improving your job chances’, ‘Too naked: Ten clothing taboos in the workplace’.

The sample of blog posts analysed was made after an initial reading of all posts on the Career blog. In the tips and advice given in the blog posts analysed in this article, we direct our analytical focus at regularities in the descriptions of three subject positions: the coach, the coachee, i.e., the job seeker/the employee, and the employer, and their relationships to each other. Guided by the three ‘strategies of legitimation’ outlined above, modalization, naturalisation and metaphorization, the relationships between these subject positions were analysed as power relations, with a particular focus on the various ways in which these were legitimised. These analytical concepts were deployed accordingly: The concept of modalization was used to highlight the ways in which coaches made claims to truth and authority and thus legitimised the very discourse type of job and career coaching. The concept of naturalisation rendered visible how this particular discourse type appeared as seemingly ‘natural’, as ‘common sense’. The concept of metaphorization revealed the usage of metaphors as a crucial strategy in legitimating job and career coaching as discourse types.

The analysis is presented in three sections, each interrogating the relationships between the coach, the coachee (i.e., the job seeker and the employee) and the employer. However, in each section, there is a specific focus on one of these subject positions. The focus of the first section is on the legitimation and claims to legitimacy of the job and career coaches. The focus of the second section is on descriptions of the successful job seeker. The third section is primarily concerned with the coaches’ descriptions of relationships between the employer and the employee, in the dynamics of the workplace.

**Analyzing job and career coaching ideologies**

*I am an expert* – legitimising the authority of the job and career coach

In the following section, we direct our attention towards the ways in which the subject position of the job and career coach was legitimated in the tips and advice posted on the Careerbuilder website. We particularly focus on how the job and career coaches in various ways made claims to authority thus legitimating their position as objective experts. A crucial ground for legitimising the authority of the job and career coaches as well as the practice of job and career coaching was by portraying the position of the job and career coach as a neutral guide. In relation to the neutral coach, the job seeker was portrayed as someone in need of coaching to learn how to navigate in the changing terrain of working life. Hence, it was crucial that the job seeker knew what they wanted to work with, what skills and competencies they had and was able and willing to learn. By positioning themselves as able to provide such knowledge and facilitate adequate learning among job seekers, the job and career coaches legitimised their position as authoritative and neutral guides.

Such legitimation of authority appears in the following blog post, based on an interview with a famous Swedish career coach. She presents herself in the following way:
I am an expert in career- and leadership and in how to build one's personal brand [...]. In my every day, I meet many people who are in need of support, development and a little bit of guts in their career or in their role as executives. I frequently give lectures all over Sweden and I write books for all those who wants the right job, not just a job! (blog post 5)

In this particular self-description, modalization is used as a strategy of legitimation, making it possible for the speaker to stress and legitimate her subject position as a coach through claims to truth and authority (see Fairclough 2003). Here, we see how the coach portrays herself as being an expert in how individuals should build their 'personal brand' thus positioning the job seekers as a particular kind of subject, i.e., a commodity on the labour market (further elaborated below in 'Sell yourself'). In addition, the coach emphasises that she gives lectures all over Sweden and writes books. In this way, she further stresses her position as an authority through her particular expertise in the market of job seeking. In the quote above, the coach also legitimises coaching as useful by pointing out that many people need what the coach can offer: 'support, development and a little bit of guts'. In this way the description of the coaching activities and the relationship between the coach and the job seeker becomes self-legitimising.

Another important way of legitimising the authority of the job and career coach is by emphasising the objectivity of the coaches. In the blog posts, claims to objectivity were repeatedly made through the characterisation of tips and advice as neutral. One such way of legitimising the authority of the coach was found in the following advice from a coach in one blog post:

Talk to your boss or an objective coach. They can help you to structure your thoughts and formulate an action plan that will make it more fun to go to work. Today, values are an important parameter when companies are recruiting employees. Are your values aligned with the company's culture and its values? Ask questions about this in your future interviews. (blog post 9)

In the first sentence of the quote, coaching is explicitly described as a neutral activity: 'an objective coach'. In such claim to objectivity there is an implicit ideological dimension, describing the coach as being somehow located beyond the power relations and hierarchies of working life. Such a description can be seen as a strategy of legitimation of a particular kind: naturalisation. By means of naturalisation, the coach appears to be neutral while the activity of coaching is portrayed as universal, i.e., available and useful for everyone. Furthermore, the quote illustrates how the coach colludes with the employer by explicitly encouraging the job seekers to confirm and conform to the values and culture of the company. In the quote, the coach appears as a neutral mediator of the employers' perspectives and wishes, while actually encouraging the job seekers to adapt to the values and culture of the company by asking themselves whether their values are 'aligned with the company's culture and its values'.

One means of legitimising the authority of job and career coaches was by making claims to scientific knowledge and objectivity. In the following, we will illustrate such claims to scientific knowledge by analysing a specific technical tool provided among the job and career coaches' tips and advice. This technical tool, named Motivation Factor, provided support through an online 'motivation-test'. This particular test was presented as an objective mapping, providing neutral advice to individual job seekers. The objectivity of the test was legitimised by its description as 'based on several years of research'. In the motivation-test, job seekers were encouraged to define their most basic needs and strengths by answering a range of questions concerning themes such as recognition, honesty, order and control, in/
dependency, leadership, performance, life-balance, knowledge about the company and its strategy, influence, communication, motivation, competition, cooperation, responsibility and satisfaction. In the test, job seekers were encouraged to evaluate themselves on a scale ranging from one to five in relation to numerous statements, such as:

- I have influence over my work tasks and areas of responsibility.
- I consciously use my strengths to solve work tasks.
- I want to be the expert.
- I love to win.
- I am aware of how I contribute to my work place.
- The organisations’ strategy motivates me.
- I get energy from inventing new things.
- I always strive to be excellent in my area.

By encouraging the individual ‘test person’ to investigate and scrutinise their inner selves they are provided with ‘objective knowledge’ about strengths and weaknesses as well as abilities and ambitions (see Dahlstedt and Fejes 2014; Johansson 2006). The result of this investigation of the self is provided in the form of a neutral compilation of the test taker’s individual job seeking profile, which may be used in future search for jobs. As presented, the results appear to provide a neutral basis for continued self-reflection and may thus be seen as an example of how coaching is legitimised as being rational, objective and neutral, through means of modalization.

However, the job seeker’s self-reflection does not end with the motivation test as the ‘test person’ is furthermore encouraged to share their test results on various social media: ‘Remember that you can share your Need- and Talent-Cloud on Facebook, Twitter and LinkedIn.’ In this way, the job seeker is provided with opportunities to create and disseminate a seemingly ‘neutral’ and ‘objective’ image of their employability. At the same time, both the motivation test and the Careerbuilder brand are marketed and distributed. By distributing the ‘neutral’ test results, the test in itself contributes to further legitimising the authority of job and career coaching as an objective activity.

In the following section, we further elaborate our analysis of the ways in which the job seeker is encouraged to be, think and act in order to be successful on the labour market.

‘Sell yourself’ – characterising the successful job seeker

The tips and advice portray the successful job seeker in line with an explicit market-oriented vocabulary. Repeated use is made of ‘metaphorization’ to legitimise the activities of job and career coaching, by describing the job seeker in terms of a brand. By using the metaphor of the personal brand, a range of phenomena were conceptualised in line with a market-oriented vocabulary, drawing the imagination of the job seeker in particular directions. Accordingly, in the tips and advice there is repeated emphasis on the importance of writing a ‘selling’ CV. Here, the CV is metaphorically described as a storefront for the personal brand. For the job seeker to become successful, they are thus encouraged to constantly think strategically about their performance and the ways in which they are perceived in their surroundings.
To seek a job is a full-time job. You shall monitor vacancies, find interesting companies, write CV and personal letter. At the same time, you shall keep your network warm, eat lunches and keep in shape for upcoming interviews. (blog post 7)

Here, metaphors are used provide a particular understanding of relationships in working life. The successful job seeker is portrayed as active, alert, and always ready to take initiative and to seize opportunities offered. In the tips and advice, the responsibility for both success and failure is individualised. As suggested, it is the responsibility of the job seeker to keep in shape and to keep their network warm. The metaphor of ‘keeping in shape’ relates the job seeking activity to the world of sports and provides a particular way of understanding the labour market and what is required to become successful in seeking a job. Such ‘metaphorization’ is further illustrated in the following tips and advice:

If you did not get the job, do as the equestrian that was thrown off. Get back in the saddle immediately and do not get scared! After you received a no, you need to avoid ending up in a dip. Start with accepting that you did not get the job. Behind the employers’ curtains, there might have been things that you could not influence. The searching criteria might have been changed. Maybe they recruited internally instead. Maybe the work group had a need for a different personality type than yours. Do not be too hard on yourself and do not end up asking yourself ‘why?’ too much. It might sound easier said than done. Therefore, it is good to have a strategy to get quickly back on track. (blog post 7, our italics)

In the quote, a range of metaphors are used drawing attention to the world of sports – equestrian, saddle, dip and back on track – with a clear moral directed towards the individual job seeker: Never give up! Never stand still! Through such metaphorization job seeking is characterised by competition and rivalry, thus drawing attention away from other possible understandings of work and labour, with a focus on values such as collaboration and community. According to the metaphorical language used in the quote, agency and responsibility are attributed to the individual job seeker, while the role of employers is hidden. The job seeker who is not successful in finding a job should not question the order of things, but instead, look forward determinedly and try again without giving up.

In another piece of advice, the employer, represented by the recruiter, was given a more explicit and authoritarian position, as someone whose decision should not be questioned.

Try to get feedback from the recruiter and ask what you did not have compared to the one who got the job. Listen and learn! What can you do differently next time? Use your social network. Ask them for feedback on your CV and how best you can apply for a job that fits your personality and competence. Think for a while. Have you ever been in a situation in life where you have had high expectations that were not fulfilled? How did you recover from that? What exactly did you do? How can you use that experience now in order to get back on track and continue to search for jobs? (blog post 11)

In this quote, the job seeker is described as accepting the recruiters’ decision. At the same time, they are described as willing to continuously learn and improve themselves to become employable. Here, existing power relationships in working life are legitimised. The focus is on the individual job seeker and their responsibility to constantly improve, while there is no emphasis on the employers’ responsibility. Thus, the job seeker is encouraged to naturalise, to support and reproduce, existing relationships of power. When experiencing setbacks, the job seeker is encouraged to actively seek feedback, to use social networks to get input, to compare self with others, to reflect on prior experiences and to learn from previous failures. The job seeker is expected to ‘listen and learn.’ Thus, the successful job seeker is described as a certain kind of active learning subject (see Fogde, 2009). Here, learning is understood
as an ability and a willingness to change and to adapt oneself to the demands of employers mediated by coaches.

Finding a job and succeed while you are on place is not a matter of coincidence. You may influence the process from the beginning by spending time on evaluating your skills and wills. To investigate yourself, you may ask yourself the questions below. Write down the answers as these may be useful for future application letters:

• What are my interests?
• What knowledge and qualifications do I have?
• What areas do I have experience of?
• How much responsibility do I want to take?
• How flexible am I in terms of overtime and travel?
• What kind of position would I prefer?
• What kind of organisation would I prefer to work in? (blog post 6)

According to this list, success requires continuously asking a range of questions concerning improvement of employability. Improvement is described as requiring rational, well-grounded choices, based on thorough knowledge of the self. The responsibility for gaining such knowledge is the job seeker’s own. However, this responsibility can be facilitated by the coach who has knowledge about the questions that need to be asked and answered in order to improve the job seeker’s employability. In this way, the authority of the job and career coach is once more legitimised by claims to authority by means of modalization. In the following quote, we see advice specifically addressing the job seeker who is in need of both knowledge about their self and themselves as a product.

Do a proper self-evaluation so you have a good ground to stand on, based on who you are, what you want and what you can do. Searching for a job just at random is quite fruitless. The better the ‘product knowledge’, the greater the likelihood that you will be able to find the dream job. (blog post 5)

Once more, the job seeker is invited to undertake self-assessment as a means of gaining self-knowledge. In the quote, such self-knowledge is described in terms of ‘product knowledge’, an explicit market-oriented metaphor encouraging the job seeker to actively engage in a commodification of the self, to understand herself as a product, competing on the labour market, thus becoming an ‘enterprising person’ through ‘self-promotion’ (Fairclough 1995, 125, 151)

Among the tips and advice provided, market-oriented metaphors are repeatedly used. For instance, as one coach told job seekers: ‘It is important to be able to sell yourself and your ideas’ (blog post 1). According to such metaphorization, the job seeker, in their search for a job, needs to both understand and sell themselves – as a trademark. In order to be successful, a well-thought-out strategy is required for how the self as a product is packaged:

Build your image: Clothes do not help you to perform but have a positive impact on how others perceive your performance. [...] Highlight your features: Be confident in your appearance and build a strong image. [...] Have a brand: Imagine Bono’s sunglasses, Sir Robin Day’s bow-ties. (blog post 1)

According to such market-metaphorization, the self needs to be reflected in the job seeker’s exterior, as a particular image. As in the following two blog posts, the job interview is described as one of the moments when such marketing-skills are required.
Your appearance is an external reflection of your inner self and allows people to create an idea of your personality and your ideas. Successful dressing (or not) can be crucial at the interview. (blog post 2)

Your CV is designed for one thing only: to make sure you have an interview. The average recruiter does not spend more than 20–30 seconds reviewing a CV, which means you have to impress quickly and be able to sell yourself. (blog post 10)

In the blog posts, the job and career coaches provide a wide range of tips and advice on how the job seeker should think and act during the job interview, in terms of behaviour, dress and appearance.

As illustrated in the following two quotes, the tips and advice at times legitimise particular gendered norms and relationships. Not least when tips and advice are specifically directed at men and women respectively. For example, among the tips and advice directed at men we find, among other things: ‘Exposing a hairy chest became outdated at the same time as the cosy dress, so button up the shirt guys’ (blog post 3). On the other hand, women are advised to ‘stay away from tight dresses, low cut shirts, short skirts and too tight pants’ (blog post 4). In such tips and advice, norms concerning clothing, sexuality and appearance have a strong modality, as they appear undisputable. The dividing line between men and women is here naturalised, appearing as a given fact. Once again, the tips and advice are legitimised by strong claims to authority. At the same time, power relationships in the labour market are hidden as the focus placed on the style and clothing of the individual as a potential key to success, or reasons for failure.

‘Being moderate is the best’ – legitimising the authority of the employer

So far, we have focused on the ways in which the job and career coaches legitimised their activities by making claims to authority and providing seemingly neutral tips and advice on how to become a successful job seeker. We now specifically draw attention to the ways in which the job and career coaches portrayed workplace dynamics and power relationships. The tips and advice did not stop at the job interview; even when a job seeker has had a successful job, learning is apparently still needed to successfully navigate the social landscape of the workplace. How then, are workplace relationships portrayed? And what does the employee need to learn in order to become successful as an employee? In the blog post ‘20 ways to impress the boss’, the employee is addressed with the following advice, formulated as imperatives:

• Make your boss’s priorities your own priorities.
• Be reliable. Do what you say you should do.
• Do not be a person who complains or criticises the boss.
• Make the boss appear good.
• Follow the trends.
• Be polite. Show respect and loyalty to your boss and talk well about him/her in front of others.
• Be flexible. Changes are inevitable. Companies need people who can adapt and be compliant.
• Do more than what the duty requires. (blog post 13)
These demands are straightforward and capture the predominant description of the workplace in the coaches’ tips and advice. Here, success in working life was portrayed as requiring certain employee characteristics and abilities. Among these was a strong emphasis on adaptation and obedience, i.e., a willingness among the employees to become one with the company. Accordingly, the successful employee was advised to embody the demands and expectations of the employer. In the quote above, a relationship of domination between employers and employees appearing.

As described, this relationship was based on the premise that the employers are the ones giving the orders and that the workers are expected to obey and adapt to these. In the tips and advice provided, this explicitly unequal relationship is presented as seemingly natural and inevitable, that is, it is legitimised by means of naturalisation. In the relationship between employers and employees, the job and career coach appear to be positioned in between, i.e., as an objective broker and neutral adviser, helping and guiding the employee to become successful in the workplace. As before, claims to objectivity legitimise existing power relationships in the workplace, as well as the authority of the job and career coach. However, as the quote suggests, the tips and advice provided by the coach were not at all neutral. Rather, they convey the interests of the employer unambiguously. In other words, the coach takes an active part of the existing power relationships in the labour market while simultaneously making claims to neutrality. Thus, the successful employee was described as responsive and adaptable. In the tips and advice, such a description of the successful employee was made in relation to its opposite; failure and the risk or getting fired. Accordingly, among the tips and advice, there is a particular dramaturgy where failure is constantly present. The risk of getting fired requires the employee to listen to and learn from the coach:

After spending weeks – or months – of persistent searching for the perfect job, the last thing you want is to be forced back into the hunt. But just a few mistakes can get you fired before you’ve seen the glimpse of your first payment. If you want a guaranteed place in the waiting room at the employment office, try one of the following. (blog post 9)

In the quote, the job search is described metaphorically as a hunt. This particular metaphorization provides the description of labour market relationships with a strong dramaturgy. The rationale of the advice provided to the employee was as follows: You need to adapt to the norms and standards of the workplace. Otherwise you risk getting fired. The failure, which is to be avoided, is illustrated metaphorically by the image of a ‘waiting room at the employment office’ – that is, getting fired. In order for this scenario not to occur, a list of behaviours that are said to lead to dismissal was provided. Among these undesirable behaviours we found the following:

Do not worry about learning what is expected of you! Sit down with your boss and make sure you understand exactly what is included in your job, your deadlines and all the important principles of the workplace. It reduces ambiguities, and you know if your performance is up to date.

Practice the sentence ‘It’s not included in my duties’ and use it often! Everyone has to set limits, but if you just do that, you must clearly signal that the only thing you are interested in is that your salary comes in time. Sooner or later your boss will start looking for someone willing to take more initiatives.

Complain about your job to anyone who wants to listen! Whether your salary is too low, your job is toilsome, or you think your boss is an idiot, you should be careful who you complain about. If your boss finds out, she may well be able to end your suffering.

Always work ‘shortened’ working days!
Do you want to show the boss how much you care about your job or career? Always come late and go early! If your boss cannot trust you to come in time, how can she trust you to take responsibility for something else? (blog post 9)

The rationale for these tips and advice is clear: obedience; obey the tips and advice of the coach as well as the will of the employer. Consequently, the ideal is conformity – the employee shall adapt to the advice provided by the coach as well as the will of the employer. Here, conformity appears as a seemingly natural state of being as an employee. However, such naturalisation is not one-dimensional. Rather, the conformity presupposes an active employee, constantly navigating among the various workplace norms and adapting to changing circumstances. As the following quote demonstrates, conformity is about not standing out, not being too much or too little, in any respect: 'Counter arguments may make others feel uncomfortable and repressed. Keeping up with everything, however, can be perceived as meshed and colourless. Being moderate is the best' (blog post 8). Learning how to become moderate and thus navigating in the social dynamics of the workplace are portrayed as the norm for successful employees.

Concluding reflections

In this article, we have focused on job and career coaching as a means of learning how to become employable and successful in working life. More specifically, we interrogated the power relationships between job and career coaches, job seekers/employees and employers, as they appeared in tips and advice provided by Careerbuilder, a large multinational company in the global job searching industry. Among these tips and advice, we have examined the ways in which the relationships between these three subject positions were described and legitimised. Informed by a CDA approach, we focused our analysis on three main ‘strategies of legitimation’, modalization, naturalisation and metaphorization.

Our analysis identified regularities in the descriptions such that the coach was repeatedly legitimised as an expert and a neutral advisor. The activity of coaching was portrayed as objective, and through such modalization strong claims were made to expert knowledge and truth, further legitimising the authority of the coach. However, as illustrated in the analysis, coaches are not neutral. Rather, they actively collude with the employer explicitly encouraging job seekers to adapt to the will of the employer. Thus, through a process of naturalisation, the existing power relationships between the coach, the jobseeker and the employer were legitimised, and made to appear ‘natural’.

Furthermore, regularities in the descriptions of successful jobseeker were identified. In order for job seekers to become successful in the labour market they need to be active and continuously willing to learn and undertake self-improvement (cf. Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Vesterberg 2016). Through the use of market-oriented metaphors, job seekers were encouraged to see themselves, and behave as commodities – brands – in a competitive labour market. According to such metaphorization, the individual job seeker is both responsible for, and the potential solution to the challenges of contemporary working life.

However, tips and advice were also specifically directed to employees, providing guidance concerning how to relate to the conditions and expectations in the workplace. In relation to the workplace, the successful employee is described as able to adapt to the expectations of, and obedient to the demands of the employer. Here, the ideal was conformity: not to stand out – neither to be too much nor too little. Once again, focus was placed on the
individual as both problem and opportunity, while the workplace appeared as a neutral, conflict-free arena. In this arena there seems to be no opportunities for collective action, only individual competition. Thus, existing power relationships in the workplace are presented as natural and inevitable, i.e., they are legitimised by means of naturalisation.

Overall, the tips and advice provided by job and career coaches help to shape a particular understanding not only of the activities of coaching, the relationships between the subject positions involved, but also – in a broader sense – of the conditions and challenges of the labour market at large. We could refer to this understanding as an ideology of job and career coaching. According to this ideology, working life is described – and legitimised – as taking place in a competitive market. This is done through the use of metaphors that position the jobseeker and the employee as commodities. Furthermore, work is individualised and described as a matter of the individual’s own competitiveness, qualifications and characteristics, ambitions and abilities. Such descriptions are in line with the changes in labour market policy that have occurred over the last two decades in Sweden and elsewhere. With these changes, a strong focus has been placed on the responsibility of job seekers to become employable (cf. Dahlstedt 2009; Garsten and Jacobsson 2004; Hörnqvist 2010).

Our analysis provides knowledge about the ways in which job and career coaching legitimise existing power relationships in contemporary working life, making them appear natural, universal and self-evident. In this way, our analysis contributes to research on prevailing discourses of employability more broadly as well as on job and career coaching more specifically, informed by the work of Foucault (cf. Darmon and Perez 2011; Fejes 2010; Fogde, 2009; Potrac and Jones 2009). While Foucauldian analyses have provided knowledge about the construction of subjectivities such as the employable subject through the productive uses of power, an analytical approach informed by CDA opens up other ways of interpreting power and power relationships. Such an analytical approach can provide knowledge about how power relationships in the labour market are legitimised through particular ideologies, with a focus on how relationships are portrayed as seemingly neutral, while actually serving specific interests.

The ideology of job and career coaching is symptomatic. It illustrates not only prevailing notions of contemporary working life, but also a political era in which society has been gradually transformed into a marketplace in which ‘the capitalist economic domain has been progressively enlarged to take in aspects of life which were previously seen as quite separate from production’ (Fairclough 2000, 29). The description of successful job seekers and employees as commodities, as in constant motion and as contestants, captures the ethics of contemporary capitalism: commodification, mobility and competition. There currently seem to be no clear political lines of conflict and political alternatives to guide a future beyond a market-oriented contemporary, with a focus on the individual as both cause and solution to the main challenges in society. Here, change is primarily directed at the self, encouraging individuals to change themselves, to update their employability, to evaluate and brand themselves – the change must be at an individual rather than society level.

Note
1. We use the company’s real name throughout this paper since all the quotes are publicly available online. We analyse the picture that the company has chosen to present. We believe that using a pseudonym for the company name would be a contradiction in relation to our
critical approach, as the point of such approach is to critically analyse the uses of power and targeting those actively involved in it.

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