

“Successful Resume Fraud: Conjectures on the
Origins of Amorality in the Workplace”

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Abstract

This study investigates the social accounts employed by 11 highly paid professionals and managers for neutralizing the moral stigma of losing their job due to résumé fraud. This ethnographic study based on 66 hours of interviews explores the retrospective sense making used by résumé fraudsters to justify, personally pardon and excuse behaviour seen as morally problematic by others. In this study the resume fraudsters sampled were selected because they all found high paying jobs after their public humiliation and each one morally disengaged. They put their transgressions behind them, not by seeing the light of day or asking for forgiveness, but by pointing to the ubiquity of information distortion in their companies, the victimless nature of their so-called transgression and, most interesting, a portrayal of themselves and their act of résumé fraud as the very type of risk taking required to instil capitalism with a passion and a will to succeed. The paper closes with a discussion of how moral disengagement enlarges the zone of indifference in populations and reinforces cultures in which the human pursuit of amorality thrives.

(Key words: moral disengagement, neutralization techniques, résumé fraud, workplace deception)

Introduction

By justifying or excusing their transgressions, 'respectable' lawbreakers can leave intact their view of themselves as decent citizens.

T. Gabor (1994:168)

In the America we live in, the willingness to lie on a résumé is an indication of how much you want the job.

G. Smith (2002:76)

One of the more interesting sidebars in the contemporary study of workplace deviance (Brief et al., 2001; Robinson and Kraatz, 1998; Peterson, 2000) is the ubiquity and escalating frequency of résumé doctoring (Bachelor, 1995; Kidwell, 2004; Robinson et al., 1998). Résumé doctoring or fraud is the intentional misleading of others in the process of presenting one's work-related identity to a prospective employer (Broussard and Brannen, 1986; McGarvey, 1993). Résumé fraud is a form of workplace lying that has become institutionalized. Two institutional forces collude making this a morally ambiguous fault line within the contemporary study of workplace ethics. On the one hand, a robust job placement résumé writing industry unabashedly counsels prospective employees to put their best foot forward. The prize goes to those who successfully capture the eye of employers (Greene, 2004; Wendleton, 2002). Jackson captures the tone of this industry in the title of his book *Guerilla Tactics in the New Job Market* (1993), and Bratton and Kacmar (2004:291), in making sense of this industry and other competitive forces in the job market, warn about "extreme careerism" as an ongoing but dark side of organizational behaviour. While lying is rarely overtly put on the menu, the job getting industry condones the tactics of impression management and the use of deceptive and/or strategic presentations of information in communicating one's workplace skills and identity (Kristof-Brown et al., 2002; Miller and Stiff, 1993; Rosenfeld et al., 1995).

On the other hand, to rein in and lower the cost of résumé fraud to employers, an industry of reference checkers, background searchers and often fact verifiers aided and abetted by the new communication technology has emerged (Andler, 2003; Keller, 2004; McConnell,

2000). Not only does this industry seek to make sure employees are who they say they are and have done what they say they have done, but they also present themselves as saving employers the risk of dealing with employees who are impostors or frauds (Eiben, 2005; Engelmann and Kleiner, 1998). The employee screening and reference checking industry portrays the résumé doctorer as far more toxic than ambitious. The fraud engaged in by the résumé fraudster is presented as merely the tip of the iceberg. Once the résumé fraudster takes root and is safely ensconced in the organization as a powerful figure, the organizational culture is in danger of becoming infected with those who think and act like the résumé fraudster. It is not merely that an organization can lose its integrity, but rather those who are willing to lie and distort information early in their career rarely lose the taste and as they rise within the power grid of the organization their opportunity to mess up big time does not lessen.

The purpose of this paper is to investigate the morally ambiguous territory occupied by résumé fraudsters. To this end, I review the literature on résumé doctoring and introduce my study of 11 very well-paid résumé fraudsters who have lost high-paying jobs and within a year found others that pay at least \$10,000 (Canadian) more. Then I turn to the technique they used to neutralize and explain away the moral stigma attached to their workplace fraud. The paper concludes with a discussion of why those who morally disengage and receive rewards create the conditions for an enlarged zone of indifference and a rise in amorality.

Résumé Doctoring

The Port Authority of New York and New Jersey began to explore the morally ambiguous territory of résumé doctoring in 1992. Under the direction of Ronald Pinnare, the company sought to get a baseline measure of employee résumé fraud (McGarvey, 1993). They ran career-sized job advertisements in local newspapers with prospects for very good pay and benefits for electricians with proven mastery of the Sontag Connector. Despite the fact that no Sontag Connector ever existed, they were swamped with 170 applicants. All claimed familiarity

with and even mastery of the Sontag Connector. Fifty-five applicants pushed the issue even further. They claimed to be certified or licensed Sontag experts. Of this bold fifty-five, more than half claimed to have had ten years or more expertise working on and with Sontag Connectors and, more often than not, provided a list of sites and projects chronicling their experience and adding realism to their fictitious résumé. The management at Port Authority was confirmed in its suspicion that résumé doctoring was no small matter. It was not engaged in by a few bad apples, but revealed itself as a mainstream phenomenon.

The literature on résumé doctoring indicates that the intentional fabrication of fact – job history, educational background, credentials, titles of position, timing of jobs, qualifications and the like – is on the rise, that those seeking executive and/or high paid professional positions are not immune and that online or electronic applications are on the leading of deceptive job-related communication (Bachelor, 1995; Kidwell, 2004; Shulman, 2000; Vitriello, 1999; Fletcher, 1992). Focusing upon job interviews Steen (1999) found that 90 percent of a sample of graduate students who saw themselves as soon to be on the job market indicated that they would be prepared to falsify facts in order to succeed in landing a job. Robinson et al. (1998:155) found that most university students in their sample seemed surprised at the idea that it was wrong to lie in a job application, while all did take a clear moral position with regard to lying to one's best friends. McShulskis (1996) reports that 95 percent of college students flooding the entry-level job market in the mid-1990's were willing to engage in at least one factually false statement in order to get a job and 41 percent had already done so.

While research on students thinking about how they would act when they entered the job market provides one with a reading of how students are being socialized, their views of job interviews, résumés and how entry jobs are filled, the data for people already in the workforce and seeking to either rise in rank or move laterally to new jobs and positions fares no better. The American Society for Personnel Administrators (ASPA) conducted a survey to assess the pervasiveness of résumé doctoring. Of the 100 organizations responding, many with an

international reach, 83 percent reported not only that they had encountered résumé fraud, but that executives and those higher up in the pay scale showed a stronger propensity to embellish on their résumé than did less well-paid employees (Broussard and Brannan, 1986). A study by Infocheck, a Canadian reference checking firm, focused on a sample of 1,000 short-listed applicants for very well-paid jobs and found that even after being vetted, 33 percent of the short-listed candidates falsified their résumés. Of this sample, 46 percent hid the fact that they had been fired or let go in their previous positions, 23 percent fudged their schooling and/or professional credentials, and 15 percent inflated job titles and rearranged employment dates (Hamilton, 2000).

Ekman (1985) argues that lies in instrumental contexts, like those in a résumé, flourish and become pervasive when people believe that a good number of those who engage in this sort of lie are rewarded, that some percentage of those with rank, status and power have and are engaging in this practice and, lastly, that some people who violate these norms are good and decent persons who work hard and contribute a great deal to society. As Kidwell (2004:3) notes, “evidence from anecdotes, newspaper accounts and survey research indicates that padding résumés with false or marginal accomplishments, presenting misleading information on résumés, while deviant, is not unusual”. It is clear that the motive in résumé embellishment whether portrayed as “padding”, “doctoring” or “fraud” is to employ fabricated or intentionally misleading information in order to get a leg up on others and thereby increase one’s probability of getting a valued job. The motive of misleading others regarding one’s identity is an attempt to better oneself through guile, duplicity, omission or hyperbole – all intentional misrepresentations (Bok, 1978; Keyes, 2004).

What interests me is how, much less than why, résumé fraudsters, even after being apprehended and punished, persist in their belief that they have done nothing wrong. They are, they insist, not only good and decent citizens, but some even imbue their résumé related activities with the very image of the passion and risk-taking propensities necessary to generate

a healthy form of capitalism. I will now turn to describe the means of locating my sample of 11 well-paid executives and/or professionals who not only lost their job due to résumé fraud, but within a year found new, higher paid positions while still doctoring their résumés.

Eleven Résumé Fraudsters

I became interested in résumé fraud when Allan (see Figure 1), a 47-year-old university administrator from a very good Canadian school, approached me as a possible connection to find new employment. Allan, in a rather indignant manner, let it be known that he had been asked to seek employment elsewhere after it had been discovered that he had worked in the registrar office in a clerical capacity in one of his previous university jobs rather than as a middle manager in the financial administration of the same university. Allan felt that this misrepresentation to his employer, done nine years ago, was no indication of character, his dedication to his employer or his capabilities as a university administrator. Allan clearly saw himself as a man to whom a wrong had been done. He did not feel contrite for the intentional distortion of information on his résumé. Moreover, Allan applied for and within 18 days of his job search received a higher paying job in a privately-run college in roughly the same geographical location as his former employer.

Allan's indignation toward those who, in his eyes, sided with his ex-employer piqued my interest in the social accounts (Benoit, 1995; Orbuch, 1997 and Shulman, 2000) or, from a deviance-oriented perspective, the neutralization techniques (Costello, 2000; Pershing, 2003; Sykes and Matza, 1957) employed by moral transgressors like résumé fraudsters in insisting that they have done nothing really wrong and that they are good, decent citizens. Those who offer social accounts or seek to neutralize the views of others regarding a moral transgression present a paradox. On the one hand they know they have done wrong; on the other hand, their verbal behaviour focuses on explaining why what they have done is acceptable and/or even

Figure 1

High Earning Résumé Fraudsters

<i>Name</i>	<i>Age</i>	<i>Industry Type (1)*</i>	<i>Primary Skill</i>	<i>Nature of Information Distortion</i>	<i>Time Until Next Position</i>	<i>Industry Type (2)**</i>	<i>Primary Skill</i>	<i>Conveyed Reason For Job Change</i>	<i>Continued or Stopped Resume Doctoring</i>
Allan	34	Tourism	Manager	Credentials	3 weeks	Retail	Sales Manager	No	Continued
Karla	28	Consulting	Project Mgr	Work experience	1 month	Advertising	Project Mgt	No	Continued
Milton	29	Government	Planning	Credentials	2 months	Consulting	Coordinator	No	Continued
Stephen	47	University	Administration	Job history	18 days	Private College	Administrator	No	Continued
Svend	60	Pharmaceutical	Sales	Credentials	11.5 months	Pharmaceuticals	Sales	Yes	Stopped
Richard	33	Manufacturing	Sales	References	7 months	Retail	Sales	No	Continued
Thomas	36	Transportation	Marketing	Job history	5 weeks	Tourism	Marketing	No	Continued
Renée	39	Government	Procurement	Work experience	1 month	Consulting	Financial	No	Continued
Selma	29	Retail	Store Mgr	Work experience	6 days	Retail	Store Mgr	No	Continued
Charles	31	Government	Financial	Job history	5.5 months	Retail	Outsourcing	No	Continued
Rodrigues	44	Mining	Engineering	Job history	2 weeks	Consulting	Liaison	No	Continued

* Industry Type (1) is the industry which the résumé fraudster left after being detected.

** Industry Type (2) is the industry to which the résumé fraudster gravitated.

required by showing how and why those who see this behaviour as morally stigmatized are wrong. The literature building on social accounts and neutralization techniques points out that, when justifying logic is employed by those who are explicitly penalized by the events following the transgression, their reasoning is seen as far from convincing – a mere and often feeble set of excuses (Benoit, 1995; Bies and Sitkin, 1992; Higgins and Snyder, 1989; McDowell, 2000). However, when done by those who are rewarded, the accounts and neutralization techniques can lead to a form of moral disengagement by the incumbent (Bandura, 1999, 2002; Beu and Buckley, 2004) whereby, in my study, the résumé fraudster not only goes on to repeat the morally ambiguous behaviour but acts as a model for others (Gabor, 1994; Miller and Stiff, 1993).

To this end I self-consciously set out to locate an articulate sample of well-paid, full-time employees who: (a) were making more than \$85,000 (Canadian) in 2003; (b) had been in their jobs at the same organization for at least four years; (c) had their employment terminated or were asked to resign due to résumé fraud; and (d) found another, better paying job (at least \$95,000) within a year of their departure for résumé fraud. I selected these four parameters consciously. I was seeking high-status, high-earning employees who had not only engaged in résumé fraud and left their firm, but who had, without too much trouble, found new, higher-paying positions relatively swiftly and therefore bore little of the overt economic or reputational costs of their résumé fraud.

Within three months of talking to Allan I had, via word of mouth, located 41 instances of résumé fraud leading to job losses that had occurred within the past twelve months in Canada. Thirty of the 41 failed to make the cut. Twenty-six earned less than \$85,000; of this group, 6 had not been with the firm more than four years. Three made more than \$85,000, were with their firms more than four years, lost or resigned from their job due to résumé fraud, found a job within a year but it paid less than \$95,000. One individual was interested in partaking in the

study but her lawyer advised her that getting involved with the study while taking her ex-employer to court for unjust dismissal was not a good idea.

Three two-hour interviews were conducted with each of the eleven high-earning résumé fraudsters. The first interview was conducted as soon as I learned of their leaving the job due to résumé fraud. The second was conducted within the first month of their new job and the last was conducted no later than eight months into their new job. In each, the discussion focused on how they felt about losing their job due to résumé fraud, their reasons for their behaviour, how they used language to establish the “normalcy” of their résumé doctoring, and why and how, despite their résumé fraud, they were good, decent and trustworthy persons.

Good, Decent and Trustworthy Persons

One of the most intriguing findings in the white collar crime literature is that individuals who have violated the law do not see themselves as corrupt, indecent or untrustworthy (Ashforth and Anand, 2003; Benson, 1985; Robinson and Kraatz, 1998). In the social accounts literature, those apprehended in a behavioural breach such as résumé fraud create an explanation for their purportedly “problematic behaviour” and seek to convince others and themselves that what they did was the act of a normal, decent and trustworthy person (Bies et al., 1988; Cobb and Wooten, 1998; Sitkin and Bies, 1993). In conducting my three sets of interviews with each of the eleven high-earning résumé fraudsters, I found that as they grew familiar and trusting they became more aggressive in the remedial and justificatory logic they used. In Figure 2, I outline the logic they used at each interview stage, no doubt supported by their success at attaining a higher paid job.

At the first interview the résumé fraudsters remained on safe ground. They had recently left a job due to résumé fraud, were in the job market for another, and were quite startled and angry for having been selected for, in their mind, special attention. All eleven résumé fraudsters felt that in the competitive context of a job application most applicants not only put their best

face on but carefully apply make-up. The résumé fraudsters framed theirs as an everyday white lie engaged in by most applicants. Language, more specifically its use in framing their stories,

Figure 2

Remedial and Justificatory Logic of High Earning Résumé Fraudsters

	<i>Rationalization</i>	<i>Framing</i>	<i>Example</i>
Interview 1	Ubiquity premise	All or many are doing it	“Résumé fraud is like speeding in a car, most do it and some get caught.”
	No victim	No one gets hurt	“Once in, I did the job exceedingly well. I received bonuses and praise for my efforts.”
	Embellishment not fraud	Language is important	“I am not, as you call it, a fraudster; I padded my résumé.”
Interview 2	Mitigating circumstances	In this case, exceptions must be made	“All I missed in order to complete my degree was a final exam in geology. I was ill and then went on to my first job.”
	Questioning the questioners	The pot is calling the kettle black	“It’s a farce. Peter, who required my resignation, continually over bills, drinks on the job and pads his expense account.”
	Pointing to more serious infractions	No real justice here	“Cassandra in production falsified quality control data, was caught and has kept her job.”
Interview 3	Economic weighting	I am a benefit, not a cost	“When it comes down to it, they are losing a good thing. I did far more good than harm in this firm.”
	Balancing the ledger	I lied. They lied. We’re even.	“I distorted my résumé when I applied and the company distorted their promise of benefits to me.”
	Heroic claim	To thrive, firms need bold risk takers	“I am precisely what the firm wants, needed and advertised for – a bold, risk-taking innovator who pushes the boundaries.”

was an area of contention. They were not liars, fraud artists or con-men or -women. They were, each insisted, résumé padders. They embellished the truth. Much like those in the advertising business, they deliberately set out to capture attention in a competitive context and did so by putting the best light possible upon their job histories, credentials and work experience. They did not break the law. They are, they insisted, highly successful people who, in their collective view, hurt no one. Not only did they do the job once aboard the firm, but did so with results that clearly benefited their employers and co-workers.

During the next interview, no doubt buoyed by their recent success in attaining a new, higher-paying position, respondents put themselves in an even more favourable light and overtly questioned and put down those who had accused them of résumé fraud. In these interview sessions it became crystal clear that the respondent thought that their padding was not serious. There were mitigating circumstances that had not surfaced. Selma (see Figure 1) pointed out that she had told the individual hiring her that her résumé overstated her work experience and she was flabbergasted when, two years after the departure of this individual, she was asked to leave her job due to résumé fraud. In a rather more aggressive or “condemn the condemners” tactic, the résumé fraudsters in the second interview session began to question those who had questioned their authority and honesty. Instance after instance was related wherein the individual or individuals who were responsible for their plight allegedly engaged in behaviour of far more questionable legal or moral status than résumé embellishment. Stephen (see Figure 1), with indignation in his voice, told me how his boss – the very man who had asked him to leave – had been apprehended for drunk driving, was notorious for his womanizing ways and known throughout the firm as a veteran expense account padder. The tactic of pointing toward the hypocrisy of authority was not confined solely to those seen as responsible for their departure but, as well, to others in the firm who had, in their eyes, not only engaged in more questionable behaviour and been apprehended, but kept their jobs. The shift in the respondents’ tone from the first to second interview was discernable. In the second, the respondents framed themselves as minor league transgressors and victims of hypocritical leaders who often acted on behalf of an unjust or even corrupt system.

In the third interview, conducted well into their first year on the new and better paying job, the résumé fraudsters began employing a primitive cost-benefit analysis. The résumé fraudsters weighed the cost of their avowed transgression against the benefits and concluded that those who asked them to leave their jobs would see “what a mistake they had made”. Their calculation focuses upon results not process. Theirs is a flexible form of utilitarianism that

licenses rule bending and information distortion as long as the results produce discernable bottom line benefits. The résumé fraudsters maintained a “balanced ledger” tactic pointing out that they did distort (albeit slightly) information in their résumé, but did so in the courtship or early meeting stage with the firm. Moreover, and this is where the “balance” in the balance ledger kicks in, the firm at this stage also presented itself in the best light. It, the résumé fraudsters noted, intentionally distorted information on employee benefits, the possibility of promotions and the degree of autonomy that was to have accompanied the successful job applicant. Lastly, and highlighting their full-blown rehabilitation from résumé fraudsters and employees lacking integrity, the sample, bar none, characterized themselves as heroes. This was not how the respondents started in the first interview. However, by the third and well into their higher paid positions, they characterized themselves as risk-takers, intelligent innovators and individuals who were and would continue to take the leadership role seriously by pushing the envelope and “finding a way”. If work or career were a journey, they were bold travelers. They got things done. They were not losers. Rather, in the great game of capitalism, they were embodiments of success – its passionate representatives who, without breaking the law or hurting others, overcame adversity. They were winners.

Where the Accounts Bend: Phase 1 Interview

In the flow from interviews one to three, as the confidence of the successful résumé fraudsters grew, so too did the questionable morality underlying their behaviour. In Figure 3, I outline within the phases of the interview process, the nine neutralization accounts and where within each the résumé fraudster bent their logic to suit their ends. In fact, one can argue that the successful shift from, “yes, we distorted information on our résumés and lost our jobs,” to “we are exactly the sort of person needed to enable capitalism to flourish,” is a gradual process that, when successful, facilitates moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002; 2004; Gabor, 1994; Zimbardo, 1995). Moral disengagement perspectives in the social sciences explores how, and

Figure 3

Resume Fraudsters' Bent Accounts: Toward Moral Disengagement

	<i>Rationalization</i>	<i>Bending the Account</i>	<i>Example of Moral Disengagement</i>
Interview 1	Ubiquity premise	A self-serving perception that many others or most others engage in this or similar behaviours.	"Résumé padding is like drinking during prohibition. Everyone gives lip service to the official view, but scramble to present themselves in the best light at the first opportunity."
	No victim	Very real people get hurt, but they do not appear at the scene since they were eliminated from that particular job hunt years ago.	"It's silly to hold me in a negative light when no one is complaining. The real reason I was asked to leave the firm is..."
	Embellishment is not fraud	Résumé fraud is a large territory and all 11 respondents claimed to fall into a benign or minor space in this territory.	"Now fraud means being an impostor. I am not. I exaggerate now and then in my résumé, but everyone knows who I really am."
Interview 2	Mitigating circumstances	The facts of the case do not speak for themselves. If you look closer, you will see that I am not a bad person.	"I am seen as a good, decent man by my coworkers. They know that I have all the skills I talked about in my résumé."
	Questioning the questioners	The character, integrity or behaviours of those who question the résumé fraudsters is not the focus of concern.	"Can be believe it? I got my dates wrong on a distant résumé and I get fired by an out-and-out crook."
	Pointing to more serious infractions	The transgression is not lessened when more serious ones exist. This focuses not on the crime, but the punishment.	"I feel like a just man in an unjust system. Others are stealing, padding expenses and raising Cain, but are not losing their jobs."
Interview 3	Economic weighting	It is not clear why the bottom line results claimed by the résumé fraudster are due to their resumes.	"Good people get results and create more benefits than costs. I am using this definition of a good person."
	Balancing the ledger	Firms that distort information to employees are as wrong as employees who distort information intended for the firm.	"I work my body to the bone for the firm, tell a little white lie and kaboom. All the while I learn that the firm tells much more than little white lies."
	Heroic claim	The assertion that they have the right stuff is accomplished by putting down those who do not pad their résumés.	"When push comes to shove and hard or important things must be done, the system turns to me."

to some extent why, basically good people who know they are doing wrong persist in so doing and over time convince themselves that they are good, decent, even exemplary citizens. This, of course, is pathological and delusionary when engaged in by serial killers who are wasting away behind bars. It seems less so when the transgression is apparently minor and engaged in by well-paid executives and professionals who, despite being caught, find themselves valued at an even higher rate of pay in the competitive labour market. With the study of human values in contemporary society it is vital not only to attend to what is said but what is visibly rewarded.

With the exception of Svend, who was 60 years old when apprehended for résumé fraud and was the only one in the sample to remain in the same industry in the transition from one job to another, all the respondents failed to convey the reason for their departure and either employed the same (problematic) résumé or doctored a new one to capture the attention of their more recent employer. All but Svend, who felt constrained by age, knew enough not to engage in their job search in the same industry where by word of mouth their stigmatization as a résumé cheat was circulating. These are self-serving, strategic thinkers. They see success as a game which, without too many scruples, they intend to win. They play the game by taking the roles of those who see their acts as morally problematic and building their case in a way which puts their best foot forward. Their case for decency, like their résumés, plays loose with the facts. They attend to others in order to learn how to most effectively make their case.

In the first phase of the interviews all the respondents, including Svend, rested a good deal of their justificatory logic upon a questionable series of premises. First they believed, as a baseline form of reasoning, that acts of résumé fraud or embellishment (as they strongly preferred) were ubiquitous. Their résumé fraud was not problematic in the doing, but in getting caught. Their reasoning was neither informed by an examination of the résumés of co-workers nor a thorough check of the literature on the topic of the prevalence of lying on workplace résumés, but upon their belief that others, especially the most successful, engage in behaviours similar to their own. The first step in moral disengagement is to create a story in which one's

actions are normal. Two interesting consequences ensue. First, as we shall discuss in the conclusion, this creates the condition for a self-fulfilling prophecy. Second, despite the “normalcy” of the story in its beginning, the tale concludes with a depiction of the transgressor as hero. This conclusion ranks the incumbent far above the norm. However, to establish that one’s behaviours are normal and thereby engaged in by run-of-the-mill good and decent people, it is vital for the account giver to insist that by their behaviour no one is knowingly harmed.

The suggestion that there is an absence of injury or victimage is highly problematic in these accounts. At three levels one can detect victimage and injury. I pursue the level from the most concrete and therefore “intended” by the résumé fraudster, to the most abstract and arguably the least intended. The résumé fraudster, like a chameleon on a Persian rug, changes his or her colours (altering the information in their résumés) to get a leg up, and not all that gently, upon the backs of those who do not doctor their résumés. The tactic of hiding the victims by claiming, “no victim, no foul,” sounds reasonable only if one insists that the victim must be located at the crime scene. The résumé fraudster’s very real victims do not get the job. At the time of the detection of the résumé fraud they are long gone, but certainly bearing the harm, both psychological and economic, of failing to get the job. No doubt the experience of this “harm” would not be made lighter if these victims knew the job went to someone who lied about their qualifications. The second level of harm speaks to an “escalation” of information distortion in competitive job markets. If some people lie and succeed in getting jobs by intentionally distorting information, others may feel compelled to join them. This does not reduce the responsibilities of résumé fraudsters. It creates a system wherein jobs are allocated with less than reliable information. At the third level and this is especially so in instances of “successful” résumé fraud, are those who not only model their behaviour after the successful fraudster, but over time generalize the pattern from résumé fraud to other forms of information distortion. Things go awry quickly when those in positions of power and authority in legitimate organizations feel comfortable lying in order to get results.

To contain the fallout which occurs when others move from a specific behaviour like résumé fraud to a generalized analysis of the character of the résumé fraudster (lacks integrity, liar, opportunist), the respondents in my sample made it clear that they were not impostors or frauds. They were, in their own eyes, merely résumé padders. Their act of information distortion is not out of hand. They are driven by competitive career aspirations. They believe that others are too but that, as in poker or other games which permit bluffing, information distortion and the strategic moves, the behaviour is amoral if it is relegated to the game. The game has boundaries. Résumé fraud is no indication, they insisted, of a character flaw or deep pathology; it is tied to the unwritten rules that one can fabricate in a job interview or a résumé as long as one can later prove within the very real context of the performance evaluation that accompanies the job that one can cut the mustard. Not one of the respondents thought they were an impostor. They always knew who they were and showed others their ability where it counted –not in the résumé, but in the job itself.

Where the Accounts Bend: Phase II Interviews

In the second series of interviews the respondents had just started in their new higher paying jobs and saw no reason to alter their views of themselves as good and decent persons. In fact, after establishing the mitigating circumstances in their particular case, they went on to neutralize their accusers by showing them in a bad light and, indeed, casting ominous suggestions regarding the work culture and their co-workers in the organization in which they were once employed. Moral disengagement is possible when, after the fact, history can be altered since the facts are difficult to clearly verify and assemble. As in the résumé fraudster's treatment of the nonexistent victim, so too, once the event is over it can be sanitized and, as historians might say, revised. The revision becomes possible when the one doing it locates a lower moral level than that engaged in by him or herself. Others, especially those who accused them in their moral transgression, do not have strong claims to the upper hand. In this moral

revision, résumé fraudsters admit to small embellishments, transgressions which were much more heavily punished than they ought to have been and by authority figures who themselves lacked integrity.

The account bending in “mitigating circumstances” (see Figure 3) grows in direct proportion to the time since the respondents’ apprehension for résumé fraud. Thus Allan who had a mere eighteen days between jobs (see Figure 1) focused on both the minor nature of his fabrication in his job history on his résumé and how this was never relevant for his job anyhow. Allan had, he agreed, actually been the assistant registrar in his earlier job and this was a largely clerical position. He had not tried to lie. He was the third in charge in a four person department. There was the registrar, the departmental assistant and he felt he was, although not in formal title, the assistant registrar. Richard (see Figure 7) who went seven months between jobs insisted that his allegedly false reference letter was not false at all, but that the individual who had written it claimed to be Vice-President of Marketing while only the head of sales in the firm. Nevertheless, as Richard put it, “all the people in the know at Oakdale Furniture knew that Mr. Ogilvy was in fact the key player in marketing in the firm.” The individual Richard referred to as Old Man Putnam was not taken seriously as Vice President of Marketing. “It was not a joke or a falsified letter,” insisted Richard, “we all referred to Ogilvy as the VP of Marketing and this was how he signed his letters.” The intentional misrepresentation present in all accounts in the Phase II interviews disappears. Mistaken identities, the failure of employees to check more fully into what really happened – all in essence mistakes not raised in Phase I interviews, begin to appear. Insider and somewhat idiosyncratic descriptions, illness and other signs of “innocence” begin, as time goes by, to insinuate themselves into the account.

The respondents’ tone in questioning the questioners during Phase II interviews reveals a concerted effort to cast themselves in a more favourable light by denigrating those who, in their eyes, had unfairly degraded them. Having established their mitigating circumstances, the résumé fraudsters turned their gaze on the behaviour, character and integrity of those who had

either fired them or asked them to leave. With the apparent proof of their worth in hand – a new higher-paying job – the résumé fraudsters elevated themselves by strategically pushing down on others. With no evidence other than their “say so”, the résumé fraudsters took on the role of whistleblowers. They pointed towards instances of expense padding, creative accounting, back stabbing, instances of bullying, harassment and blatant thievery, both by those who had fired them and others in the firm in which they had lost their job. Without saying it explicitly in the toxic workplace world that they had inhabited, their minor transgressions were in relative terms nothing at all. The résumé fraudsters are setting the stage – in the land of the blind, the one-eyed are kings and queens; or, in a toxic and morally bankrupt work environment, those who cope by résumé padding are merely adapting in the least injurious manner possible to the workplace climate.

In both questioning the questioners and the tactic of pointing toward more serious infractions (see Figure 3), the justifiable logic of the résumé fraudsters is on shaky ground. Two somewhat interrelated reasons for this stand out. First, the retrospective whistle-blowing of the résumé fraudsters on their former employers and co-workers lacks credibility. They do not point to facts, supporting data or those from whom a confirmation of their view is possible. The issues raised here were not raised in Phase I interviews and one must ask why. To add to their credibility problems, they are known fabricators now claiming to be victims of an injustice. Second, the résumé fraudsters can not have it both ways. Their claim to having injured no one while others have injured them does not easily fit the facts. They injured others and were, if we believe their versions of events in the Phase II interviews, injured by others. The call of foul seems misplaced. It is hard to hide one's victims then, as do the résumé fraudsters, claim under similar situations (no apparent harm) to be a victim. Aggressors, who after the fact claim to be victims of a corrupt justice system, sometimes do have a point. However, the claim requires far more than the résumé fraudsters could or would put on the record to be taken as compensating for their intentional fabrication(s) on their résumé.

Taking it Home: The Heroic Bend

In the third and last phase of the interviews, the magic happened. The résumé fraudsters' initial and central violation – that of intentionally falsifying information for self-interested benefits – while denied by no one as an occurrence was left behind and the sample unabashedly claimed not only that they were good and decent persons, but in fact the very epitome of the hero in the workplace. The sleight of hand involves framing the issue, not as one of character or trust, but one of workplace success. The metaphors used to accomplish the moral disengagement embrace the centrality of work as a game – an economic one where in practice the sample concluded that they were winners. The game metaphor here is not one that locates its central criteria in the “rules” of the game or even on the development of trust-based processes for playing the game. The emphasis is upon the results. The respondents were very clear – good persons get results, they are winners. They are kept in the game because they provide far more benefits than costs to the system. This restrictive view of the good person is not adopted randomly. It fits the case being made by my sample of highly successful résumé fraudsters. The individual is valuable when the individual increases his or her ability to produce wins for the collective.

This economic weighting and ledger balancing fails the test, not because these are false statements, although one should question the values of the statement makers, but rather because it is not at all clear that the instances of résumé fraud engaged in by the respondents benefited the collective or were intended to do so. The apparent utilitarian agreement beneath this justification of the “white lie” holds up if one readily acknowledges that individual acts of résumé fraud benefit the system. Clearly those who are making the argument are confusing several issues. First, at the time of the résumé fraud, those engaged in this practice had no intent of bettering their prospective employer, the work world or anybody other than themselves. Second, the fact that they, while certainly not all résumé fraudsters, turned out to be productive employees (at least as established by the market's willingness to increase their pay), has little if

anything to do with résumé fraud. Rather, it is clear that some résumé fraudsters are talented. Of the 41 that went into my initial sample, eleven (or roughly one in four) make this grade. The résumé fraudsters are glossing over some important facts: (a) it is not clear that their résumé fraud behaviour is an inherent part of their value as a producer; (b) it is not clear that if the firm had hired those with excellent but undoctored résumés whether firm performance would have been diminished; and (c) if the firm that once employed them and those in it are as bent and corrupt as the résumé fraudsters seem to say, it is far from clear that that the firm as a whole is adding to the net value of society at all.

The “winner as hero” reasoning in both the economic weighting and balancing the ledger tactics in Phase III interviews speak to the hero, not as the team captain, but assumes that the team captain is the high point getter or star. This is problematic. Many a team selects a captain whose proficiency rests less on the bottom line than upon the captain’s ability to focus upon reality, warts and all. Résumé fraud is not a heroic act. It is fuelled by a desire to please or trick authority figures in order to, in time, become one. It is other directed. but denigrates the other by seeking to con them. It is not at all clear why résumé fraudsters see and characterize themselves as innovators. It is clear that they break rules. It is not at all clear that they do so in an ingenious, novel or creative manner. If my sample of successful résumé fraudsters is indicative of the universe of people engaging in this behaviour, they engage in a highly predictable, patterned behaviour. Even their social accounts and neutralization techniques take on a clear, predictable pattern. It is not clear that these are the risk takers they would have us believe. Theirs are concealed behaviours which, once apprehended, are not defended in any direct manner but are bolstered by confident revision and a continuance of information distortion. It is this very boldness and confidence, met by a system which rewards them, that fuels their ability to morally disengage.

Conclusion

What seems worrying is that moral disengagement is not simply an instance of personal delusion – a bit of mental gymnastics in which the résumé fraudster convinces him or herself that they are good and decent persons. It is a collective effort. Moral disengagement is complete when people see their behaviour – behaviour viewed as morally problematic by others – as not only normal but laudatory and heroic. When moral disengagement is orchestrated by successful people in an organization, it is particularly dangerous. Three reasons prevail. First, and most importantly, successful moral disengagers are emulated by others. They serve as models. Those who emulate them are less interested in copying the behaviour of the moral disengagers than in achieving their success. Second, when moral disengagers become icons of success they unintentionally increase the “zone of indifference” within the population. Chester Barnard (1938) employed the idea of the zone of indifference to explain how those who manage organizations can get greater compliance and thus flexibility in their organizations. Barnard assumed that managers were moral and that increases in the range of acceptable behaviours would not cross over into the acceptance of morally questionable behaviour. Third and last, as successful moral disengagers are emulated and the zone of indifference grows within a population, the collective is increasingly willing to embrace a public position we can term amorality.

Amorality in a population can pass for rule adherence as long as the participants know in what game their rules originate. The game of poker permits bluffing and rewards strategic efforts at deceit. The game of North American football legitimates violent contact and highly rewards those who thrive in this milieu. The game at work, as is made clear in the reward pattern in this study, is to advance and earn more money. Amorality thrives not when immorality is licensed but, rather, when winning or succeeding in a specific context is highlighted. In this sense, résumé fraudsters are, as they say, heroes. They play a fast game of “put your best face forward” in a competitive context and win. They attract those whose

desire for success is high. As these come to the fore, amorality in populations increases. It is in the ambiguous moral fault lines like résumé fraud that we can see the power, almost banal in its everyday origins, of mounting amorality in the workplace.

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