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From Hire to Liar: The Role of Deception in the Workplace

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Keywords

deception in the workplace

a living wage. To address the middle-class wage squeeze requires recreating job ladders that allow and encourage upward mobility, investing in workers' skills, providing flexibility in work schedules and number of hours, and designing family-friendly programs.

The final mismatch Kalleberg considers is that between work roles and family roles. His basic argument is that jobs do not provide family members the time and flexibility of scheduling to fulfill the obligations of both roles. More than just temporal constraints, work-family mismatch is exacerbated by the interaction among several macro-economic and societal trends. Particularly important among these are increased female labor force participation, increased low-wage work (often disproportionately female), and the persistence in organizations of sex role expectations based on breadwinner-homemaker models of employment. These pressures are intensified by the dislocations industrial restructuring and global competitive pressures create for business and their employees. For policy suggestions, Kalleberg looks to Western European nations, where institutions to support a healthy work-family balance are more the norm.

Throughout the book, Kalleberg draws on illustrative real-world cases to underscore his arguments. Likewise, in each chapter he outlines basic measurement issues, sometimes pointing to difficulties in using extant data to measure a particular concept. He points to typical negative consequences for employees of each mismatch (stress, job switching, inefficiency, political disaffection, and so forth), as well as possible policy responses and comparative examples. We learn, for instance, that the United States would have to spend only roughly 1.0–1.5% of GNP, comparable to what France and Sweden spend, in order to implement family-friendly policies that would eliminate most work-family mismatches (p. 250). We also learn that a number of companies, such as the SAS Institute in Cary, North Carolina, have instituted a family-friendly 35-hour work week with no apparent harm to their bottom line. Rather than the more typical pie-in-the-sky policy discussions, Kalleberg answers skeptics with exciting and persuasive empirical examples of how successful businesses have responded to mismatches with forward-thinking, profitable solutions to these problems. One only wishes the book contained more quantitative information on how widespread (or otherwise) such solutions are.

There is much to recommend *The Mismatched Worker*. Certainly impressive is the wide range of material that Kalleberg has pulled together into a single, coherent, readable book. He has drawn

on an enormous body of research, his own and others', across a variety of social science disciplines to produce a clear, accessible description of the mismatches that complicate work for so many people. Also impressive is the clear and forceful way the author links macro-level phenomena with micro-level consequences, which brings to mind Mills's insight that personal troubles are also, often, public issues. Such analyses are indeed so numerous in the book that they constitute one of its major organizing themes.

Stylistically, the essay form is hard to pull off. At its best, it is enlivened by rhetorical flourish and grace; at its worst, it can come across as overly ideological. *The Mismatched Worker* fits neither description. Its prose is workmanlike, its perspective pragmatic.

As for content, the broad scope of the material covered may weaken the value of the book for specialists. Instead, it would best serve those who want an introduction to this area of scholarship. Given the book's essay form that draws on and integrates considerable research that specialists would recognize, the specific citations are relatively limited, so it would not provide a comprehensive bibliography to the neophyte reader. Furthermore, as a trade-off for the author's choice not to present new research (but instead to summarize existing studies), I would have liked to see more pages devoted to the policy responses to mismatches and fewer to the descriptions of the problems.

These minor complaints notwithstanding, *The Mismatched Worker* is a clear, cohesive presentation of some of the most challenging problems characterizing work in today's economy. Even if it is ideally adapted to the needs of only a few, it can be of value to many.

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We have all known someone who feigns illness to skip work on a glorious sunny day. And many of us have found ourselves nodding in response

to a superior's statements with which we disagree. These acts are examples of the understudied phenomenon of organizational deception that David Shulman explores in *From Hire to Liar*.

The book begins with a literature review and a discussion of key concepts that have been integral to prior work on deception. The psychology literature, Schulman observes, has mainly examined why people lie and the ways lies can be detected, whereas philosophers have focused on hypothetical lies. While these approaches may shed light on why an individual lies, he argues, among their limitations is an inability to explain why entire groups may lie.

Shulman also questions prior researchers' definition of deception as the willful delivery of false information: *willful*, he notes, rules out deceptions that involve unwitting participants, such as cases in which diplomats who are kept in the dark about a government's true intentions repeat misinformation that they believe to be accurate; and *delivery of false information* rules out deceptions perpetrated by hiding pertinent information rather than by disseminating falsehoods. Shulman suggests, instead, an adaptation of Erving Goffman's definition of a fabrication (*Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience*, 1974). According to Goffman, a fabrication occurs when one or more persons manage a situation with the intent of instating a false belief in the mind(s) of the deception target(s).

The first two chapters concern deceptions practiced by private detectives. In Chapter 1, Shulman talks about detectives' three main investigative techniques: enactment, reconstructing, and surfacing. Enactment refers both to covert investigative practices, like shadowing of targets, and to more active deceptive practices, such as pretending to be a student collecting project data. Reconstructing strategies, aimed at figuring out what happened, involve activities such as mining trash and interviewing neighbors. Examples of surfacing, the most complex of all three methods, are scrutiny of recovered records (for example, bank statements) and pretending: the process of masquerading as the victim and calling, for instance, the telephone company to obtain key information (a process made famous by former HP Chairperson Patricia Dunn). Chapter 2 focuses on the specific actions taken by detectives while constructing their deceptions. These two fascinating chapters provide an in-depth understanding of organizationally and professionally mandated deception. One wishes, however, for some additional details. For instance, how exactly did Shulman go about classifying the investigative

techniques? Did he rely on gut feeling after seeing interview data, for example, or did he employ a grounded theory-building approach? Also useful would have been a discussion of how these findings might apply to other, less idiosyncratic industries.

Chapter 3 examines rationalizations. Drawing on literature from psychology and sociology, Shulman explores individuals' accounts of their deceptions. He identifies three categories of rationalization: means-end (my noble objective legitimizes my deception), technical-legal (it is legal for me to wear a UPS uniform, and therefore OK, as long as I do not verbally claim to be a UPS delivery person), and ethics-of-neutrality (my deceptions in the name of investigating suspected spousal infidelity are acceptable because I am a completely disinterested observer).

Chapters 4–5 look at day-to-day deception in organizational life. Using several examples, Shulman points out that many deceptions enacted in organizations have administrative functionality, being needed for the routine and effective operation of the organization. Many such deceptions are forced on employees by the social contradictions of their jobs. For instance, newcomers who are tacitly informed that bothering their supervisors with excessive questions will be seen as a sign of incompetence may pretend to know more than they actually do (the first deception), and then start employing deceptive methods to obtain the information they need (further forms of deception). Using the concept of *vranyo*, Shulman also makes a compelling case that deceptions can be collectively implemented. *Vranyo* originally referred to a benign mutual understanding between inspectors and project managers in the former Soviet Union: asked if pre-assigned targets would be met, a project manager, for a variety of reasons, would untruthfully say yes, and the inspector, for his or her own reasons, would readily assent, even when it was obvious to both parties that the target was unattainable. Many parallel examples exist in organizations. The boss who goes along with an employee's inflated self-evaluation, whether out of prejudice or to avoid conflict, is one of the several examples cited.

In Chapter 5 Shulman focuses on the special case of deception employees use for "subterranean education," to obtain and act on accurate information. Shulman argues that while organizational systems determine (at least officially) who gets what information in an organization, individuals often use deceptive acts to obtain information needed for various purposes, such as enhancing their performance or their feelings of self-worth. The arguments in this chapter seem stretched a bit.

For instance, it is unclear how seeking information from subordinates is a form of deception. It may not be the recommended way to learn about one's job, but it could be considered deceptive only if the information were sought for a dishonest purpose, as, for example, to cover up an inflated resume. Despite some unresolved elements, however, the chapter is an interesting and insightful exploration of strategies organizational members use to deceptively acquire information they are not privy to, and of the potential blowback to such behavior. For instance, Shulman cites the case of supervisors whose covert acquisition of key task information from their subordinates resulted in a diminution of their authority in their supervisory relationships and, eventually, a spate of requests from the subordinates for special favors.

Chapter 6, "Deception as a Social Currency," focuses on the ends toward which employees use deception. Once again, the author draws vivid, rich illustrations from his numerous interviews to identify a range of possibilities, from image enhancement, to concealment of irrational decisions, to the appropriation of undeserved credit. Shulman identifies the productivity contradiction that exists in many organizations—needed work cannot be accomplished by following organizationally mandated rules and procedures—as a key cause for many deceptive practices. This in turn raises issues about the ethics of organizational deception, which is a topic dealt with later in the book.

Chapter 7 deals with the part played by deceptive practices in malingering. While the examples and description are rich and interesting, it is not very clear why this specific set of deceptive practices merits such detailed attention. Since a strong explanation is not provided by the author, one assumes that in the course of his interviews he found that a very large number of deceptions in organizations were enacted to facilitate goofing off.

Chapter 8 focuses on the ethics of workplace deception. Shulman argues that organizations have structural and cultural blind spots in their social control apparatus that allow, and often facilitate, the use of workplace deception. Descriptions and examples in preceding chapters clearly establish the grey, versus black-and-white, nature of organizational deception. Shulman argues that good people participate in deceptive practices because they become ethically disengaged, which is the consequence of three features of organizations: *authorization*, whereby workers are ordered to perform tasks by a supervisor, thus reducing their ownership of the consequences of what they do;

routinization, which breaks deception into discrete activities, allowing workers to focus on the specifics of their task rather than its implications; and *dehumanization*, which allows employees to view the targets of their deception as less than human and deserving little consideration.

The final chapter succinctly summarizes the book's key points and discusses how existing organizational theories—models of emotional labor, negotiated organizational order, and networks, for example—could be used to develop an integrated understanding of workplace deception. I find two areas of study especially intriguing: "counter-ethics," and deception used for defense or retaliation. Shulman's discussion of counter-ethics, which is his term for routine deceptions that are encouraged in the workplace, caused me to wonder whether organizations might *characteristically* have dual, correlated systems of official and covert procedures, the latter designed to circumvent the former, much like the fabled understanding between inspectors and project managers in the former USSR. The interplay between such associated routines, and the role they may have in shaping organizational practices, could be interesting subjects for future research. Another promising subject is deception deployed to counter a supervisor or organization (or its sub-unit) that the worker perceives to be uncaring.

Overall, despite what seems to me a lack of academic rigor in places, *From Hire to Liar* is a richly detailed and thought-provoking treatment of an important and understudied phenomenon in organizations. It can serve as a springboard for stronger theory building and more systematic explorations of deception and unethical processes in organizations. Given the exploratory nature of the work in this book, many of its arguments should be used to guide the development of testable hypotheses rather than accepted at face value. Shulman's focus on a specific, unique industry is productive as a theory generation approach, but it also limits the generalizability of his conclusions. (His interviews with employees in other organizations, which might have broadened the applicability of the findings, were restricted to lower-level employees, many of whom were interns.) Shulman's classificatory schemes and conclusions should therefore be viewed as starting points that are worthy of additional rigorous testing to establish internal and external validity.

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