

# Flawed System/Flawed Self

by Ofer Sharone

**A**mong the problems following the Great Recession that ended in 2009 is lingering long-term unemployment. Unlike other recessions in which both unemployment and long-term unemployment were specifically problems for blue-collar workers or those lacking in skills in an otherwise changing economy, the Great Recession affected a large cross-section of the American labor force. In this interesting new book, Ofer Sharone looks at the job search experiences of white-collar workers both in the United States and Israel.

He begins with the observation that little is known about the day-to-day experience of white-collar unemployment. By comparing the experiences in two different countries that share many similarities but are also in many respects culturally different, Sharone is underscoring an argument that institutional economists have known for years—that is, culture and the institutional underpinnings of a society's culture matter. One's unemployment experience is shaped largely by the structure of the labor market institutions where the job search occurs.



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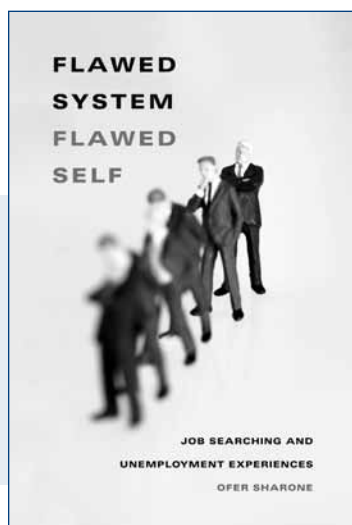
Sharone specifically compares the “chemistry” game, which is characteristic of job

searches in the United States, to the “specs” game, which is characteristic of job searches in Israel. In the United States, job seekers have skills that are understood to be important for getting one's foot in the door, but they are not ultimately determinative. Rather, the key issue is establishing one's fit with a particular employer.

In Israel, by contrast, job seekers are selected on the basis of their objective credentials (“specs”), but they usually have to go through outside screening and testing companies before they even get to the interview stage.

Because the chemistry game appears to emphasize the individual self, it becomes a question of the individual job seeker's character. If the job seeker fails to obtain a job, it must be that job seeker's fault, that there is something wrong with him or her, which means that, over time, the American job seeker is highly vulnerable to self-blame. The job seeker now has a diminished sense of self-efficacy. Each failed attempt to gain new employment is internalized as a personal rejection, and, in the end, objective skills and qualifications become almost irrelevant. More important than skills are personality and a positive attitude.

In Israel, great emphasis is placed on writing a good résumé and incorporating the right set of buzzwords. Whereas pre-



*Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences.* By Ofer Sharone. University of Chicago Press, 2013. 240 pp. \$85 (cloth), \$27.50 (paperback). Also available as an e-book.

For more information on and an excerpt from *Flawed System/Flawed Self*, go to the Members Only section of the LERA website at <http://bit.ly/SharoneFlawedSystemFlawedSelf>.

employment tests are universal for American white-collar job applicants, most Israeli employers have begun using them only in recent years to screen new applicants. Personality tests are now used to delve into the job seeker's "inner" self. For Israeli job seekers, tests create a second layer of rigid filtering unlike any in the American context.

But the difference between the specs game and the chemistry game also means that networking, which is core to American white-collar job search strategies of attempting to expand one's network to obtain a referral, is ineffective in Israel.

Sharone's main point is that different unemployment experiences are the consequence of different job search games. The chemistry game is characterized by high player prominence, with the job seeker perceiving his or her actions to be highly determinative of the search outcome. The specs game is characterized by low player prominence, with forces largely outside the job seeker's control being more determinative of the process.

Consequently, in Israel, failure to obtain employment results in a tendency to blame the system rather than the self. As a result, those job seekers tend to express anger about the seemingly arbitrary filtering practices of staffing agencies and testing institutions. But they also direct much anger at employers. Yet, on a deeper level, much of the anger is directed toward the state because the state is seen as standing behind both the dominant labor market institutions—the "system"—and current market conditions. Job seekers, then, frequently go beyond blaming the state and express feelings of betrayal.

After comparing and contrasting the American and Israeli search experiences for white-collar jobs, Sharone then discusses a little bit about the American blue-collar job search, which doesn't focus on interpersonal connections, as in the chemistry game, or on the job seeker's list of objective skills, as in the specs game. The focus instead is on whether job seekers are eager, compliant, and hard working.

The issue here is diligence. In the specs game, soft skills are understood as necessary to carry out certain tasks, such as the leadership skills to manage a group of employers. But creating chemistry and exhibiting diligence are often conflated because

both depend on the job seeker's self-presentation. Chemistry, however, isn't nearly as important in the low-wage labor market because employers aren't necessarily looking to hire people like themselves. Social similarity, which is central in the white-collar context, is actually a liability in the working-class context.

While the book suggests that American job seekers might gladly trade in the chemistry game for the specs game, it doesn't make clear whether Israelis would be happier with the chemistry game. To a certain extent, the chemistry game already subsumes the specs game on the assumption that one wouldn't even get an interview without the minimal skills requirements. However, one wonders if, in the end, it really matters. Whether it is chemistry or specs, it is simply a rationalization of job scarcity and other forces at work.

One of the questions that Sharone might have asked is whether either game isn't simply a convenient way to obscure more-blatant forms of discrimination based on gender or age. Still, the attempt to explain the different types of experiences based on cultural traditions is a welcome addition to the literature.

As Sharone seems to acknowledge toward the end of his book, the specs game may partly be a holdover from Israel's earlier corporatist political economy, while the chemistry game is deeply rooted in the American culture of individualism.

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**Oren M. Levin-Waldman**

*Oren Levin-Waldman specializes in public policy and political economy, with strong interest in political philosophy, and has written extensively on policy issues ranging from welfare reform and workforce development to labor market issues including unemployment insurance, the minimum wage, and other issues relating to income security. His most recent book is *Wage Policy, Income Distribution, and Democratic Theory* (Routledge, 2013). He also just completed writing an online*

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