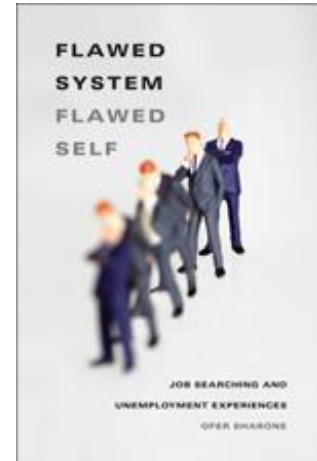


Ofer Sharone, *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*, Chicago, IL and London, UK: University of Chicago Press, 2014, 228 pp, \$22.36 (paperback), \$75.50 (hardcover).

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In the fall of 2011, The Atlantic published an anthology titled “Jobless in America,” a collection of testimonials which sought to chronicle the experiences of some persons who were unemployed. Amid stories describing the hardships of unemployment, a hiring manager offered the opinion that people had failed to get hired due to a lack of proper emotional display. “You HAVE to be positive, enthusiastic and high-energy in ANY interaction with a potential employer,” he emphasized (Thompson, 2011). This advice will sound hackneyed to most readers, but it achieves the effect of locating the blame for unemployment on the individual rather than on structural conditions. In the next installment of the series, a reader holding a graduate degree described remaining jobless despite possessing all the “right” criteria for hire. Given the ambiguity of the rejections she received, she increasingly saw her flawed self as the “hindrance” to her job-hunting efforts, feeling “like something is wrong with me internally” (Thompson, 2011).

This exchange captures what Ofer Sharone calls the “chemistry game” of American white-collar jobseeking, an institutional formation in which hiring decisions are based on an emotional connection between the hiring manager and the prospective employee. In this situation, the job seeker is encouraged to discover his or her passion, and to express it affectively, hoping to produce a strong “gut reaction” in the evaluator. But the premium placed on self-portrayals during this process also renders jobseekers more vulnerable to feelings of self-blame when they encounter rejection.

This book presents a timely discussion of the difficulties of long-term unemployment, a prospect faced by many since the Great Recession of 2008. Sharone adds insights into this issue by comparing ethnographic and interview data across national cultures and classes, demonstrating how such labor arrangements can vary. While American white-collar jobseekers grapple with “chemistry games,” Israeli white-collar jobseekers and blue-collar American jobseekers are faced, respectively, with “specs games” and “diligence games” (Sharone, 2011, p. 2). Each of these terms delineate a discourse which influences what job seekers understand as the criteria for hire, the plausible strategies they can adopt, the targets of blame when rejections pile up, and the effort they expend in their job search. Jointly, they address the uneven territory of what Eva Illouz terms “emotional capitalism,” the ways emotional discourses allow or inhibit economic relationships (Illouz, 2007, p. 5).

The book begins with the chemistry games of the American white-collar job search. These jobseekers are made to feel empowered, and told that while hard skills are important, an emotional

connection with the employer is a necessary supplement to cinch the job. Jobseekers thus undergo a process of "self-subjectification" (Sharone, 2014, p. 18), where they project themselves as subjects through the lens of an employer and consider the qualities in themselves that can help them quickly establish a strong interpersonal connection. The term *chemistry* (as it is associated with dating), captures the "deep acting" emotional labor jobseekers need to perform. *Deep acting* means "actually producing a feeling as opposed to just superficially exhibiting one" (Sharone, 2014, p. 56). Sharone explains how this discourse transforms the labor involved in preparing cover letters, résumés, interviews, and networking. Since each document must showcase the passion and interpersonal fit between the individual and the company, significant effort is often spent on their content, aesthetics, and delivery.

A very different "specs game" (Sharone, 2014, p. 18) exists in Israel. There, job searching emphasizes objective criteria and buzzwords, requiring job seekers to engage in "self-objectification" (ibid.) , a process whereby individuals translate themselves into keywords, suppressing personal information that might detract from that process. Applications are then put through a systematic process which analyzes for these keywords and weeds out those lacking the right terms. This standardized, objectified checklist approach contrasts starkly with the chemistry games, with the consequence that agency is experienced differently in the U.S. and Israel. In Israel the focus on keywords renders the aesthetics of résumés and cover letters unimportant, alleviating some of the anxiety involved in aestheticizing these documents. However, this also leads to the frustrating situation where options to separate oneself from the crowd are limited.

The frustration and diminished self-worth which accompany repeated rejections produce different attributions of blame. Told that they are captains of their economic destinies and encouraged to be personally invested in each job application, the American white-collar jobseeker also becomes more vulnerable to self-blame when rejection happens. Suppression of factors which pertain to structural constraints and the emphasis placed on skillful self-presentation add to the belief that failure must stem from a flawed self. Israeli job seekers, on the other hand, tend to identify structural causes to their unemployment, seeing it as a weakness of the state or as flaws in the hiring system.

Sharone closes by discussing how the experiences of blue-collar American jobseekers align more closely with the Israeli rather than American white-collar situation. Since managers tend not to identify themselves with the blue-collar workers they are hiring, these managers often seek out qualities of diligence rather than passion. While chemistry is less important, blue-collar jobseekers still must demonstrate the emotional labor of "surface acting" (Sharone, 2014, p. 148), exhibiting a constantly cheerful and positive attitude toward the various demands employers may impose on them, even if these demands are unfair or humiliating.

By examining the relationship between institutional labor arrangements and the burdens they place on job seekers, *Flawed System Flawed Self* engages directly with a growing literature on contemporary work culture. Despite being directed toward an audience of sociologists and anthropologists, the book shares some interesting affinities to work done on emotion and affect. The difficulty jobseekers have in relating the negative *affects* of unemployment to structural causes and social change, for instance, speaks to the work of theorists such as Sara Ahmed (2010) and Judith Butler (2004). In the American

instance, positive thinking and an emphasis on self-reliance distracts people from the institutional problems of the labor market. The proposed solution to unemployment, as such, ends up being a call for therapy rather than a demand for substantive social change. Although Sharone describes Israeli jobseekers as able to attribute failure to the system more readily than American jobseekers, his informants also express the difficulty of moving past criticisms of having "excessive pride" (2014, p. 136) when they feel reluctant to accept a job that is of lower status than the one they used to have. The "emotional labor" (p. 18) that Sharone speaks about, therefore, does not just constitute the emotional displays workers need to express to secure jobs. Labor, rather, is emotional because it is already tied to a discourse of emotions. Someone unwilling to be downwardly mobile in their career options, for instance, is interpreted as prideful or lazy, rather than conscious of the misfit between the skills he or she provides, and the pay the company is willing to offer. To express the private hardship of unemployment publicly, the speaker needs to navigate these spaces, and risk convenient punishing judgment. All things considered, this raises the question of how private frustrations about unemployment can tarry in the public sphere and build political consciousness, without it being dismissed as laziness, irresponsibility, or ineptitude.

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