



## The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare

Volume 42  
Issue 2 June - Special Issue on Institutional  
Ethnography

Article 13

2015

### Review of *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*. Ofer Sharone. Reviewed by Randall P. Wilson

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#### Recommended Citation

Wilson, Randall (2015) "Review of *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*. Ofer Sharone. Reviewed by Randall P. Wilson," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 42 : Iss. 2 , Article 13.  
Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol42/iss2/13>

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Ofer Sharone, *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences*. (2013). University of Chicago Press. \$85 (hardcover), \$27.50 (paperback), 240 pages.

The U.S. unemployment rate today stands at 5.5%—the lowest in six years and a little over half the jobless rate five years ago at the Great Recession’s height. The good news is qualified by meager wage growth (0.1%) and by the persistence of long-term unemployment—six months or more—for more than one-third of the labor force. And these figures mask the hidden unemployment of those who have given up searching and dropped out of the labor force.

The challenge of job-hunting in difficult times is this book’s subject. The author, a sociologist and professor of work and employment research at MIT’s Sloan School of Management, goes beneath dry statistics to recover the lived experience of unemployment in the U.S. and Israel, and the ways that labor market institutions inform these experiences. In his subtle and incisive analysis, neither social class nor national culture is sufficient to explain individual reactions to joblessness. Instead, jobseekers in the two nations engage in distinct job search “games,”—or, in Sharone’s terms, “sets of discourses, practices, and strategies”—that are the product of specific institutional arrangements. By comparing laid off technology professionals in the two countries, he finds that workers with similar skill sets and economic circumstances respond to joblessness differently. White-collar American workers come to blame themselves for their predicament, while their Israeli counterparts blame the system.

Sharone’s American job-hunters engage in the “chemistry” game, so called because landing a job is a matter of demonstrating the right interpersonal fit with an employer. This game is a product of our extensive career self-help industry. Players craft highly personalized resumes, cover letters and “elevator speeches” that project an upbeat attitude and authentic passion about their career goals. Because these players invest so much of themselves in job searching and assume a high degree of control over the outcome, they conclude that inability to find work—to find the right “fit” with corporate cultures—is a negative judgment on themselves. This view is reinforced by the career industry’s focus on positivity and personal effort,

diverting attention from labor market or structural obstacles to finding work.

By contrast, Israel's white-collar tech workers play the "specs" game. Job searching is tightly controlled by staffing agencies used by employers to test and screen candidates' specific skills and credentials. In the same measure that Americans' job search is personalized, the Israeli specs game requires depersonalization—reducing the job seeker to keywords (or "buzzwords") on her resume. The latter is subject to cursory review by entry-level staff, who quickly dismiss candidates deemed "questionable"—including, in some cases, women or older workers. If the chemistry game is akin to chess—high control of strategies, and thus dependent on players' abilities—the specs game is more like playing the lottery, with little player control and lower emotional risk. The emotional consequences for applicants is not self-blame but anger at the system—job intermediaries and the Israeli state—which has adopted strict standards that require that applicants must accept any job offered, even if at a considerable pay cut.

Sharone strengthens his argument by examining another jobless group, blue-collar Americans whose job search revolves around the "diligence game"—demonstrating their work ethic to potential employers. This job search game is fostered by the American public employment system and its "one-stop career centers," which are funded on a performance basis, and limit retraining assistance to those who are most persistent in jumping through bureaucratic hoops. It also responds to employers of less skilled workers, who look for generic skills—"hard worker," "positive attitude," dependability—rather than the interpersonal fit of the chemistry game. But the typical blue collar workers' job search methods, efforts to meet hiring managers in person to present one's work ethic, run up against more recent, impersonal hiring methods, notably submission of resumes online. Their experience of unemployment more closely resembles that of Israeli white collar workers: frustration with a system that depersonalizes them, makes them feel invisible, and characterizes them as lazy if they won't accept a position that is a major step down.

Sharone's lucid and penetrating work is a welcome addition to studies of labor market policy and practices. Using cross-national and cross-class comparisons, enriched by

ethnographic interviewing and participant observation, he makes a compelling case that cultural narratives, such as American individualism, or class differences, explain less about unemployment experiences than the games people play and the institutions that set the rules. In the tradition of sociologist C. Wright Mills, he urges us to link private troubles to public issues and to pursue collective action to change labor market institutions. And he reminds us that "looking for work may be the hardest work of all" (p. 180).

*Randall P. Wilson, Jobs for the Future*

Zachary W. Oberfield, *Becoming Bureaucrats: Socialization at the Front Lines of Government Service*. (2014). University of Pennsylvania Press. \$59.95 (hardcover), 236 pages.

Published at a time of fiscal austerity and cynical attitudes towards government, *Becoming Bureaucrats* will not threaten any bestseller lists. Zachary W. Oberfield takes an interesting if unfashionable look about how front-line public service workers think about their roles and responsibilities. In particular, he explores the socialization process of new recruits in two areas of government service: police officers and welfare caseworkers. In conducting his research, Oberfield employed surveys, participant observation, and in-depth interviews with police officers and TANF/welfare caseworkers over a two year period in an urban setting in the United States.

The central theoretical question the author wants to address is the degree to which bureaucrats' motivations, identities, and attitudes change over time, and whether personal disposition or organizational culture is more influential in driving that process. This research contributes to debates in the academic literature as to how organizations shape the behaviors and attitudes of their workers. On the one side, William Whyte's *The Organization Man* is a classic example of organizational culture as a dominant influence. On the other side, personality characteristics and Bourdieu's concept of habitus ("internalized and forgotten socialization" quoting Desmond, 2007) that individuals bring to the workplace may ultimately prove more important in determining how workers think and behave on the job. Finally, a better understanding of the ways in which