

Beyond Self-Blame

Destigmatizing Unemployment

REVIEW BY AMY MAZUR

Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences

by Ofer Sharone

University of Chicago Press, 2013

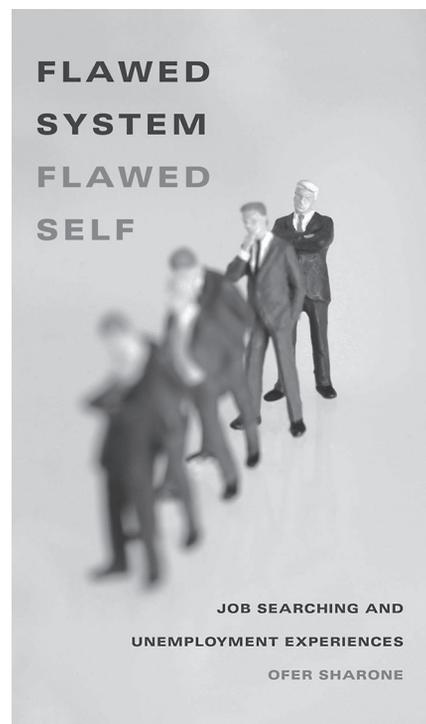
AS A CAREER-DEVELOPMENT specialist in the Boston area, I watch my clients translate who they are into what they do and then experience the satisfaction of meaningful employment. The process can be deeply fulfilling for both the job seeker and the career counselor. But I have recently come to realize that this work can also be damaging: I see now that for years I unknowingly perpetuated self-blame among those who, despite their best efforts, remain unemployed or underemployed.

Ofer Sharone's book *Flawed System/Flawed Self: Job Searching and Unemployment Experiences* gave me a new framework for understanding the damaging effects of a fundamental premise behind most job search assistance: the idea that unemployment is the result of remediable failings in an individual's job search strategy, rather than a systemic failure created by the structure of our economic system.

Sharone's book helped me realize that I have been repeating the messages that keep job seekers in a position of isolation and distress. How often have I focused primarily on an individual's "fit" for a job, minimizing the role that broader economic forces play in keeping many people unemployed for the long term? Using Sharone's book as a guide, I have come to

understand more clearly how the individual and the system are intimately connected, and I can work to interrupt the troubling patterns of self-blame I have been supporting in my role as a helping professional.

“Job seekers need a vehicle for safe expression of these feelings of shame and embarrassment.”



The Emotional Toll of Unemployment

Individuals who once thought that a college education, a solid record of work experience, and a positive work attitude would ensure economic security are finding this is no longer true. Those with limited educations or spotty work histories, meanwhile, are having an even harder time supporting themselves. Many hardworking individuals are struggling to support themselves and retire with any semblance of financial security.

While statistics indicate that the economy is improving, the long-term unemployed continue to experience the effects of being out of work for longer periods of time—effects that take a very serious toll on their emotional and physical health.

At first being out of work may feel like an opportunity, a time to take a break or explore new paths. But after about six months of constant rejection, with no positive responses from potential employers, individuals start to take it personally. They ask, “What is wrong with me that I am not getting a job?”

Sharone explores this move toward self-blame with a critical eye, showing how the career-management industry's focus on improving individual job seekers' strategies contributes to this problem of self-blame. He describes how the career industry conveys the idea that if only you rework your resume one more time, say this specific phrase with this tone in your interview, mention this when you follow up, and network, network, network, you will fix your

problem. This mentality leads job seekers to see their individual efforts as the only problem, rather than blaming the economic system.

When caught in the grip of self-blame, job seekers can feel so isolated and incapacitated that they fail to reach out to their communities of support. Our best solutions come to us when we are fully connected. At those times, we realize our whole selves, innovate, express our best creative ideas, and discover our vocational intentions. Self-blame shuts out this vital sense of connection and possibility.

The Trap of Self-Blame

How can a job seeker feel anything other than self-blame if they do not get a job?

Sharone describes how “the same discourses and practices that produced the initial sense of control . . . lead job seekers to blame themselves for their difficulties and make it hard to continue searching.”

In the United States, he writes, white-collar workers who are struggling with long-term unemployment contend with a chemistry game, or a “game of fit.” He compares this system to the very different system that exists

in Israel, where white-collar workers contend with a “specs game” (or a game requiring that specific qualifications be met). He argues that the game of fit in the United States is much more likely to produce patterns of self-blame than the specs game in Israel, where workers tend to see employment decisions as a result of supply and demand for specific objective skills.

The game of fit can be translated to mean that every time you apply for a job, you are not only having your relevant skills and experience evaluated, but you are also putting your whole identity out there to be evaluated. When you keep hearing, “You are not what we are looking for” in response, it is easy to start feeling like there’s something wrong with you as a person—that you are not a good person. Sharone captures this idea succinctly when he writes that “the increasing blame of one’s inner self—as opposed to one’s external *self-presentation*—reflects a direct hit to precisely the area of vulnerability created by the emotional labor of self-subjectification.”

Sharone also notes that in cases of long-term unemployment, all of the blame is placed on the job seeker. Stepping into the shadows of

self-blame, lone job seekers usually blame themselves rather than the systems that make long-term unemployment a chronic and necessary part of the U.S. economy. Employers, hiring managers, and our culture as a whole reinforce the idea that job seekers are to blame because they do not “fit” or they are not good enough.

“Unemployment continues to be understood as a matter that is private rather than public, and individual rather than structural,” Sharone writes. To the extent that workers focus blame on themselves, he adds, “American society escapes the consequences of its own contradictions. The social order is thus protected, however, only at the psychological expense of those who have failed.”

Disrupting the Culture of Shame

It is extremely difficult to reframe long-term unemployment in a way that disrupts job seekers’ patterns of self-blame. To do so, job seekers need a vehicle for safe expression of these feelings of shame and embarrassment, an acknowledgement that these feelings are normal given the rules of the game, and an acknowledgement that individual job seekers are not the only players in the game.

Sharone’s work has inspired the creation of one institution that is at the forefront of current efforts to disrupt the pervasive culture of self-blame and disconnection, reframe the job-seeking process, and provide connection and support: the Institute for Career Transitions (instituteforcareertransitions.org). In addition to gathering qualitative data on the plight of the long-term unemployed, the institute invites career-management professionals to provide free career coaching, career counseling, and group meetings for people facing long-term unemployment. In these meetings, the job seekers are not seen as at fault for their unemployment; rather, they

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are supported and encouraged to see themselves as engaged in a strategically played game in which other players make the rules and have a very large stake in how the game is played.

Many career professionals have stepped up to support the work of the Institute for Career Transitions because we do not want to perpetuate a game that is a constant uphill climb for the job seeker. Some of us are joining job seekers to argue that this game is not working, and some are pledging to change the system itself by fighting to increase the minimum wage, secure support for contingent workers, guarantee annual income for all workers, and build union power and

engagement. On the legislative front, we need to campaign for the passage and implementation of policies that increase the rights of workers at all levels. We must also support the enforcement of initiatives introduced by the Obama administration to punish employers for discriminatory hiring practices and restructure the hiring system. And we need to support the many social change activists who are working to build a new economic system based on worker-owned cooperatives, socially responsible firms, and the aim of shared prosperity and ecological health for all.

Sharone's book and the work of the Institute for Career Transitions play an

important role in these efforts because they rethink where the responsibility for chronic unemployment falls. Sharone's work may at first seem only to address the dynamics of the job search, but it actually extends much further in scope, encouraging us to rethink the profound effect that unchecked self-blame can have, both on those who experience it and on those who collude in exacting it. ■

AMY MAZUR is a career-development specialist and counselor educator in the Greater Boston area who helps individuals begin, renew, and advance their careers while reflecting on the meaning of work in their lives.

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