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## Why do Unemployed Americans Blame Themselves while Israelis Blame the System?

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This article provides a new account of American job seekers' individualized understandings of their labor-market difficulties, and more broadly, of how structural conditions shape subjective responses. Unemployed white-collar workers in the U.S. tend to interpret their labor market difficulties as reflecting flaws in themselves whereas Israelis tend to perceive flaws in the hiring system. These different responses have profound individual and societal implications. Drawing on in-depth interviews with unemployed job seekers and participant observations at support groups in the U.S. and Israel, this article shows how different labor market institutions give rise to distinct job search games, which I call the *chemistry game* in the U.S. and the *specs game* in Israel. Challenging the broad cultural explanations of the unemployment experience in the existing literature, this article shows how subjective responses to unemployment are generated by the search experiences associated with institutionally rooted job search games.

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When asked to reflect on their difficulties in finding work, unemployed American white-collar workers tend to draw on individualistic narratives and blame themselves (Newman 1999; Smith 2001; Cottle 2001; Uchitelle 2006). Even during a period of unusually high unemployment, a majority of unemployed survey respondents recently reported feeling embarrassment or shame (Zukin, Van Horn, and Stone 2011).

What explains this self-blame? Newman's (1999) seminal and often-cited study of unemployed managers points to the American culture of individualism. Yet, Newman's (1999) findings and those of other studies of white-collar unemployed (Smith 2001; Cottle 2001) show that the American cultural "toolkit" (Swidler 1986) contains *both* individualistic and structural narratives that can be drawn on to explain career hardships. Newman (1999, p. 69) finds that, although unemployed managers are aware of structural explanations for their plight, internalized "meritocratic individualism" ultimately "exerts a *pull* toward individualistic analyses of failure." But, given the availability of multiple ways of making sense of unemployment, what explains the observed "pull" of the individual over the structural? Newman's (1999) cultural argument does not provide a sufficient explanation.

This article offers a new approach to explaining self-blame. It shows how subjective responses to unemployment are products of job-search experiences rooted in labor-market institutions. These institutional foundations are revealed through a comparison of the experiences of white-collar job seekers in the U.S. and in Israel, a country in which white-collar unemployment has been found not to affect self-esteem (Shamir 1986).

Drawing on the work-games literature (Burawoy 1979) and the institutional logics literature (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012), this article

shows how different labor-market institutions can generate different job-search strategies and experiences, which in turn explain the tendency of unemployed American white-collar job seekers to blame themselves and the tendency of unemployed Israeli white-collar job seekers to blame the system. Beyond the context of unemployment, this article offers a framework for analyzing the links between (a) patterns of subjective responses to life outcomes and (b) institutional structures and logics that focus agents' attention on the effects of their individual actions in determining such outcomes.

### **I. American White-Collar Unemployment and Self-Blame**

Over the past 30 years, American white-collar employment has grown increasingly precarious (Kalleberg 2011; 2009; Farber 2008). Once unemployed white-collar workers are as likely to become long-term unemployed as their blue-collar or non-college-educated counterparts (Mishel, Bernstein, and Allegretto 2007). A vast literature associates long-term unemployment with a deterioration of psychological and physical well-being (e.g., Sullivan and von Wachter 2009).

Existing qualitative studies identify self-blame—the tendency to interpret labor-market difficulties as a reflection of individual shortcomings—as one of the most difficult elements of the American white-collar unemployment experience (Newman 1999; Smith 2001; Cottle 2001; Uchitelle 2006). The implications of self-blame are profound. It is linked to depression (e.g., Peterson, Schwartz, and Seligman 1981), exacerbates job-search discouragement (e.g., Kanfer, Wanberg, and Kantrowitz 2001), and renders collective action extremely unlikely (Sharone 2007).

Despite the prevalence and consequences of self-blame, the existing literature does not adequately explain it. Some scholars point to the role of ideology and the American

culture of individualism (Newman 1999; Schlozman and Verba 1979). While individualism is indisputably an important part of American culture, it is not the only lens through which American white-collar workers see labor market difficulties. The American cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986) contains both individual and structural narratives of labor-market difficulties. Structural narratives are not only abundant in the American media—which frequently discuss the effects of outsourcing, offshoring, downsizing, and corporate reorganization (Amiti and Wei 2005)—but also in the discourses of unemployed white-collar American workers themselves (Smith 2001; Cottle 2001; Newman 1999). [Endnote 1] Newman (1999, p. 69) recognizes these competing narratives but claims that, in the internal battle of structural and individual narratives, “self-criticism often triumph[s].” Yet, the question remains: Why? The cultural argument leaves an explanatory gap by failing to theorize the conditions that lead job seekers to *choose* the individualistic narratives of self-blame.

In examining unemployed job seekers’ use of structural and individual narratives, Smith (2001) observed a striking pattern: Job seekers typically discuss their *job loss* as determined by structural factors but their inability to find *new work* as determined by individual factors. This pattern suggests that the context of American white-collar job searching individualizes the unemployment experience. Following Smith (2001), this article explores the relationship between self-blame and the institutional context that structures job-search and unemployment experiences (Swidler 2001).

With the notable exception of Smith’s (2001) single-site case study, the question of how labor-market institutional contexts shape unemployment experiences has not been explored. I draw on the institutional logics literature to theorize the connection between

labor-market institutions and specific job-search strategies (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012) and on the work-games literature (Burawoy 1979) to theorize the connection between engagement in particular strategies and subjective responses. Ultimately, I offer a novel theory linking labor-market institutions, day-to-day experiences of job searching, and subjective responses to unemployment.

## **II. The Cross-National Comparison**

To explore the roots of subjective responses to unemployment, I compare the experiences of white-collar job seekers in the San Francisco area of the U.S. and the Tel Aviv area of Israel. Although these areas have significant differences, such as their respective economic sizes, cultures and political-economic histories—differences that will be explored in Section V—the comparison is motivated by notable similarities in the conditions of white-collar unemployment at the time of this study (2005-2006). In recent decades both countries have experienced a sharp rise in white-collar job insecurity (Kalleberg 2011; 2009; Osterman 1999; Ram 2008; Samuel and Harpaz 2004) and, at the time of this research, unemployment insurance in both cases provided only six months of benefits, a rather short duration when compared to other advanced economies (Gangl 2004; Gal 2005; Hipp 2011). Additionally, and of particular relevance to this study, the two regions from which the sample of job seekers are drawn have the world's highest concentrations of high-tech firms (Rosenburg and Vainuniska 2007), meaning that job seekers in these sites are often applying to work in similar companies. Finally, the data for this article was collected following the large layoffs that accompanied the bursting of

the dot-com bubble in the early 2000s, when in both sites the supply of white-collar workers exceeded demand (Mishel et al. 2007; Samuel and Harpaz 2004).

While in light of these similarities in objective conditions one might also expect to find similar subjective unemployment experiences, this is not the case. In the American white-collar context numerous studies have found self-blame (Newman 1999; Smith 2001; Cottle 2001; Uchitelle 2006). By contrast, an older study of white-collar workers in Israel found that unemployment had no effect on self-esteem (Shamir 1986), and my findings (described below) confirm that instead of self-blame Israeli workers are more likely to focus on external factors and blame the system. This article seeks to explain these different subjective responses.

### **III. Methods**

To compare the experiences of American and Israeli white-collar job seekers, I primarily use in-depth interviews of job seekers and participant observations in job-search support groups. I conducted initial interviews with 57 American job seekers from the San Francisco Bay area in 2005 and 48 Israeli job seekers from the Tel Aviv area in 2006. [Endnote 2] Each interview lasted approximately two hours. I then tracked the interview subjects over time with multiple shorter follow-up interviews. In both sites, I limited my interviews to unemployed white-collar job seekers in the middle years of their working lives, between the ages of 30 and 60, who are looking for work in the private sector. General occupational categories were also comparable, with similar proportions of managers, technical workers, and other white-collar workers. [Endnote 3] Table 1 summarizes the basic demographic characteristics of the interviewees and compares these to the general population of unemployed job seekers in each site.

[Insert Table 1: Sample Demographics]

Approximately half the interviewees were recruited at support groups for white-collar job seekers. Another 40 percent of the interviewees were recruited by randomly approaching individuals at government unemployment offices and job fairs. Finally, 10 percent were recruited by snowballing. The interviews used open-ended questions probing, among other things, the job seekers' practices, strategies, and day-to-day experiences of looking for work and their understandings of and responses to difficulties in finding work. The interviews were transcribed and coded.

The bulk of my observations were at support groups for white-collar job seekers; one in the San Francisco Bay area, which I will refer to as "AmeriSupport," and one in the Tel Aviv area, which I will refer to as "IsraSupport." The practices of AmeriSupport comport with descriptions of similar support groups around the U.S. (Smith 2001; Ehrenreich 2005; Garret-Peters 2009).

#### **IV. Subjective Responses to Unemployment**

Following the loss of a job, the subjective responses of workers in Israel and the U.S. are similar. Workers in both sites discuss their job loss in structural terms, with a focus on external factors such as outsourcing or an economic downturn. However, upon encountering difficulties in their search for a new job, a striking divergence in subjective responses appears.

Almost every Israeli job seeker in my sample attributed their difficulties in finding a job to external factors—most typically the hiring "system" which largely consists of staffing agencies and testing institutes as will be described in the following section—and focused on how this system mechanistically and blindly weeds them out. The



overwhelming sense among Israeli job seekers who experience difficulties is that the hiring system does not look past highly rigid requirements of credentials and specific skills, or proxies thereof such as age, to consider candidates' actual underlying abilities. As Elda, a 38-year-old marketer, explained: "They don't care who the person is, only that you know X, Y, and Z. They don't look you in the eye to see who you are." These feelings were echoed by Dorit, a job seeker in her forties looking for work as an administrative assistant, who reported, like many others, that the hiring system makes her feel "invisible." Oren, a 35 year old engineer described a similar experience: "No matter what I do ... no one is really checking *me* out for real." Another way Israeli job seekers convey the sense of not being truly seen or "checked out" is by comparing the job market to a "meat market," in which only superficial characteristics are considered.

As unemployment drags on, the feelings that they are not seen, not checked out for real, and only viewed as a piece of meat, are intensified, and Israeli job seekers increasingly report feeling "at a loss" with regard to how they might get past the obstacles of posed by the system. Some develop a fatalistic attitude. As Hadas put it, "it is not up to you... *Your fate is not in your hands.*"

Unlike Israeli job seekers, and consistent with the findings of prior qualitative studies in the U.S. (Smith 2001; Newman 1999; Cottle 2001; Uchitelle 2006), American job seekers tend to attribute their job loss to external factors but attribute their difficulties in finding new work to individuals factors. Alan, a 39-year-old research scientist, exemplifies this shifting frame: "I don't have any control over the economy or being unemployed; I didn't ask to be unemployed. I feel it's out of my hands, yeah. But, I mean, finding a job is in my hands. I've just got to make contacts."

Difficulties in finding work lead a majority of American white-collar job seekers in my sample to feel that there is something wrong with them. While acknowledging external factors such as outsourcing or age discrimination, they often see internal factors as among the primary reasons for their difficulties—and more often than not, it is these internal factors that dominate their emotional experience.

Difficulties at the start of the search are commonly attributed to a lack of job-search skills, such as not being “good at interviews” or not being a “good networker.” After several months of job searching, job seekers look further inward and discuss fears that—as several job seekers described it—that they are somehow deeply “flawed.” Or, as Steven expressed it: “I know that many are out there without jobs because of the bad economy, but I still can’t help myself feeling, what’s wrong with me?”

Gnawing self-doubts were rarely publicly shared during group meetings at AmeriSupport but came out during my in-depth interviews, most typically at the later stages of the interview when interviewees were more open. Self-blame is an inner discourse—not part of the job seeker’s presentation-of-self repertoire—and one that job seekers often attempt to suppress from daily consciousness through efforts to stay positive. These efforts notwithstanding, self-blame was often described as the most difficult aspect of the unemployment experience. For example, Erica, a manager, explained: “The hardest thing is feeling that there is something wrong with me that I am not finding a job.” Chris, a marketer, explained that, after four months of unsuccessful searching, “the hardest thing is esteem, confidence. It’s killed. I have turned into an introvert. I feel like I’ve gotten older.” In one case, the emotional toll of self-blame led to attempted suicide.

## V. Explaining Self-Blame and System-Blame

What explains self-blame in the American case and system-blame in the Israeli case? Before exploring and theorizing the role of specific labor market institutions, I consider the plausibility of broader contextual and cultural explanations.

One salient difference between the two sites is their respective sizes. The San Francisco metropolitan area, home to over seven million people, is more than double the size of the Tel Aviv metropolitan area with its approximately three million residents (Bay Area Census 2012; Central Bureau of Statistics of Israel 2009). Perhaps the larger size of the San Francisco area economy contributes to self-blame because job seekers perceive more *possible* opportunities and therefore are more likely to focus on internal reasons for not seizing them? While size may play some role in job seekers' perceptions of opportunities, self-blame among white-collar Americans has been found in locations smaller than the Tel Aviv metropolitan area—such as the Sacramento metropolitan area in California (Smith 2001)—suggesting that the size of the local economy is not sufficient to explain self-blame.

Another significant difference between the two sites is that they are embedded in national economies with very different political-economic histories. Over recent decades the role of the state and of unions in the labor market has declined in both countries, but this decline was more precipitous in the case of Israel (Kalleberg 2011; Osterman 1999; Farber 2008; Ram 2008; Samuel and Harpaz 2004). In the period following World War II through the 1970s, Israel was a relatively egalitarian society with one of the most highly unionized workforces in the world and corporatist institutions that extended collective agreements to most nonunionized workers (Shalev 1992). During the same period, the

U.S. was far less unionized, comparatively less regulated, and much less equal (Osterman 1999). Since the 1970s, both countries have moved in a direction of economic deregulation (Kalleberg 2011; 2009; Kristal and Cohen 2007; Dagan–Buzaglo 2007) and now exhibit comparable levels of economic inequality. It may be argued that these different histories explain the diverging subjective responses to unemployment, with Israel’s deeper political-economic transformation leading to more discontent in the form of the observed system-blame. Though generally plausible, this argument is difficult to maintain in the particular case of white-collar workers, the focus of this article, because for this group of workers the broad historical change from security to precariousness is shared. In both cases during the post-World War II era and until the 1970s, white-collar workers enjoyed job security—though the source of this security was different [Endnote 4]—and since that time, in both sites, workers have been adjusting to the loss of this security (Smith 2001; Ram 2008).

Another difference between the two sites is the unemployment rate. While in the wake of the “dot com” bubble white-collar job seekers in these two high-tech dominated regions faced challenging labor-market conditions, the U.S. had a lower overall unemployment rate. It may be argued that a lower unemployment rate suggests the availability of employment opportunities, and thus leads to greater self-blame. However, a closer look at unemployment rates for specific occupations shows that the cross-national differences in subjective responses persist even for workers in occupations with the same unemployment rates. [Endnote 5]

Turning from economic conditions to culture, it may alternatively be argued that it is broad cultural differences that explain the pattern of blame attribution. A vast literature

has documented the endurance of individualism in American culture (e.g., Bellah et al, 1985), while some studies have shown, at least through the 1980s, distinctly collectivist elements in Israeli culture (Katriel 1986b; Azaryahu 2000). These differences by themselves, however, do not appear to offer a sufficient explanation for the distinct patterns of subjective responses to unemployment. (The next section will discuss the role of culture in forming institutions.) In fact, both national cultures are multifaceted. As previously discussed, the American cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986) contains both individual and structural narratives that can be drawn on to explain career outcomes and, depending on context, unemployed Americans draw on both (Smith 2001; Newman 1999). Likewise, studies of Israeli culture find a mixture of narratives and even a shift over time toward more individualistic orientations (Harpaz 1990; 1999; Azaryahu 2000). At the time of this research, speeches of top Israeli government officials made highly salient a public discourse about “individual responsibility” with respect to unemployment. As an official at the Israeli Ministry of Labor explained: “We here are not responsible for creating jobs ... in the *modern* economy, it is about individual responsibility.” This individualistic discourse was even echoed by Israeli unemployed job seekers themselves when discussing *other* job seekers. For example, Nir, who had just found a job after five months of searching, offered: “Those who are unemployed are a little spoiled. There is always something. A person with initiative will find work, even if just as a temporary thing.” Both the Israeli and American cultures contain some narratives that explain career hardships by focusing on the role of individuals and others that focus on the roles of external structural conditions. Given the availability of both

kinds of narratives, broad cultural differences alone do not appear sufficient to explain the diverging patterns of blame attribution.

Looking beyond broad economic conditions and national cultures, this paper more closely examines differences in labor-market institutions. I will show that these institutions lead to specific job-search strategies and experiences and, ultimately, to different interpretations of search outcomes. The argument will proceed in three steps. Section A describes and compares the labor-market institutions and the most salient determinants of hiring decisions in each site. Section B compares the concrete job-search practices and, underlying these practices, the different strategic logics giving rise to what I will call the *chemistry game* in the U.S. and the *specs game* in Israel. Section C shows how the experiences of playing these different games account for the diverging subjective responses to unemployment. My analytical strategy is summarized in Figure 1.

[Insert Figure 1: Analytical Framework]

### **A. Comparing Labor Market Institutions: The Salience of Specs versus Chemistry**

At first glance, the American and Israeli white-collar job-search processes appear much alike. In both sites, employers post openings and job seekers browse and respond. Yet, beneath these surface similarities, the labor-market institutions used to filter job seekers in each site operate with different logics and generate different understandings of what it takes to get a job. By labor-market institutions, I refer to the interrelated sets of discourses and practices (Friedland and Alford 1991) that comprise the patterned ways in which employers and workers find each other.

Israeli job seekers consistently discuss getting a job as the process of finding an employer looking for their precise mix of skills, experiences and credentials, or as several

put it, their “specs.” As Chanan, an Israeli software engineer, explains: “You have to be able to look good on paper [and] fit the keywords” that the employer is looking for. By contrast, white-collar American job seekers view skills and credentials as only one—and not necessarily the most important—factor in hiring. Jason, an American software engineer, succinctly expressed the widely held American view: “The most important thing is fit, not skill. People want to work with people that they like.”

These different job seeker understandings of what it takes to find a job—which for the sake of brevity I will refer to as a focus on “specs” in Israel and on “chemistry” in the U.S.—reflect how hiring institutions in each site render different dimensions of the applicant filtering process more *salient* to each group of job seekers. [Endnote 6]

Israeli white-collar job seekers link their focus on specs to the practices of the two labor market institutions which they report most frequently encountering—and which my interview data suggest—most profoundly shape their subjective experience of job searching: private staffing agencies and pre-employment testing institutes. *Every* Israeli job seeker I interviewed applied to jobs through staffing agencies. Since the late 1980s, Israeli employers have increasingly used private staffing agencies to conduct the initial filtering—and in some cases the actual hiring—of permanent employees on behalf of employers (Ram 2008, Nadiv 2005). [Endnote 7] The growth of staffing agencies has been attributed to Israeli employers seeking flexibility in terminating workers and avoiding severance payment requirements (Ram 2008).

Staffing agencies are typically used by Israeli employers to post ads, receive and review applicant résumés, and most significantly, conduct initial screening interviews with job seekers (Nadiv 2005). When Israeli job seekers discuss their job search

experiences, they typically focus on these screening interviews, which they describe as extremely rigid in their adherence to a specs filter (Sharone, forthcoming). One reason for this rigidity is that staffing agency screeners conduct interviews using a checklist of credentials, skills, and experiences provided by the client-employer. Screening for a staffing agency is a low-paying job that is almost universally filled by young women with limited training and experience, who cannot evaluate whether a job seeker possesses skills or underlying qualities that are more important than those specified on the employer's checklist.

Israeli job seekers who make it through the initial filtering by the staffing agencies are then typically sent for daylong pre-employment tests as a second screening mechanism. Most medium and large Israeli firms use pre-employment testing institutes to screen new applicants (Fizer 2003). Of the 48 Israeli job seekers whom I interviewed, 44 reported taking such tests. [Endnote 8] Job seekers described the day long tests as including sections on writing, math, and logic, but focusing on exercises that purport to measure their ability to cooperate, communicate, and lead (Sharone, forthcoming). As will be discussed in Section C, most job seekers find these questions and exercises frustratingly vague and highly arbitrary.

Only job seekers who survive both filters—the staffing agencies and the tests—proceed to the final stage in the hiring process, an interview with a hiring manager. Israeli job seekers describe such interviews as requiring them to exhibit professional expertise, and often to express their willingness to work long hours. While being the final steps of the hiring process, in Israeli job seekers' *overall* descriptions of their search experiences, these interviews receive far less attention than the vivid descriptions of



repeated and frustrating encounters with rigid staffing agency screenings and arbitrary pre-employment tests.

Whereas Israel job seekers' most salient experiences are their encounters with staffing agencies and testing institutes, in the U.S., it is interviews with hiring managers. American job seekers are not only much more focused than their Israeli counterparts on their experiences at these interviews, they also typically hone in on an issue that no Israeli job seeker raised: the centrality of interpersonal *chemistry*. The focus on interviews was common even among American job seekers who had very few of them. Ben explained that he has "learned" that in the interview process what can "make or break" getting hired is "not just what you know and what your experience is, but it's also chemistry with the people." As Ann put it: "There has to be a rapport. Body language is important. Dress is important. . . . If somebody's very good with people, they may not have the same qualifications, but if they can sell themselves to the interviewer, they'll get the job." In addition to interviews, as will be discussed in the next section, American job seekers also focus on the importance of networking to the outcome of their search, which like interviewing, is perceived to depend on their ability to interpersonally connect with others.

This focus on interviews and interpersonal chemistry is not surprising given findings in the existing literature on American white-collar hiring. In this labor market the filtering by specs occurs behind-the-scenes by human resources personnel, increasingly aided by computerized applicant tracking systems (Cappelli 2012), which examine credentials and experiences to whittle down the applicant pool at the pre-interview stage (Finlay and Coverdill 2002). Yet, at interviews, a rich literature shows

that American hiring managers typically possess wide discretion and give much weight to personality and interpersonal fit (e.g., Huo et al. 2002; Finlay and Coverdill 2002).

Interviews not only assess the soft skills that are the focus of Israeli pre-employment tests but also a sense of interpersonal connection (Rivera 2012). In addition to their experiences at interviews with hiring managers, American job seekers' attention to rapport and chemistry is also strongly reinforced by bestselling self-help advice books and a coaching industry focused on presentation-of-self strategies (Sharone forthcoming).

These cross-national differences in how labor market institutions structure and sequence the job search experience, and the kind of filters which these institutions make salient to job seekers, provide the most straightforward explanation for the consistent differences in how job seekers discuss the process of finding work, with Israeli job seekers most frequently focusing on their encounters with staffing agencies and testing institutes and American job seekers most often focused on rapport at interviews with hiring managers. [Endnote 9]

Before considering the implications of these cross-national differences, I briefly revisit the role of culture. While I previously argued that cultural differences do not in themselves explain the patterns of subjective responses, it may be pointed out that institutions are partly constituted by discourses made available by the wider culture. For example, American hiring institutions draw on shared ideas of individual uniqueness and interpersonal fit, while Israeli institutions draw on shared notions of objectivity. While institutions do draw on culturally available discourses, it is important to emphasize that the labor market institutions I previously described are not *simply* reflective of cultures. The American culture of individualism is consistent with a whole array of possible hiring

institutions. The nature of labor-market institutions is not a cultural inevitability, but driven, at least in part, by political-economic and legal considerations. For example, the comparatively dominant role of staffing agencies and testing institutes in Israel relative to the U.S. is not due to any inherent incompatibility of these institutions with the American culture of individualism. Staffing agencies are more dominant in Israel due to legal and political-economic context, which make staffing agencies particularly useful to employers in Israel to avoid legislation protecting employees from layoffs, and in some cases collective bargaining agreements that do not apply to those hired by staffing agencies (Nadiv 2005, Ram 2008, Dagan-Buzaglo 2007). Likewise, the widespread use of pre-employment testing in Israel is not easily attributable to cultural differences. In the American white-collar context, testing was widely used in the 1950s (Cappelli 2008) and became rare not due to cultural incompatibility but to legal challenges focusing on discriminatory “disparate impact” (Stryker 2008). Furthermore, it would be equally difficult to claim that the rigid and impersonal workings of staffing agencies and testing institutes are inherent to Israeli culture, which is often distinguished for its casual and direct style of interaction (Katriel 1986a).

Returning to the central argument, in this section I showed that in both sites job seekers’ sense of what it takes to get a job—focusing on chemistry in the U.S. and specs in Israel—correspond to the structure and nature of the dominant labor market institutions and the hiring practices that these institutions make salient. Next, Section B will compare the concrete job-search strategies that arise in these different institutional contexts.

Section C will then show how the experiences of engaging in these strategies account for

the divergent subjective responses to unemployment. The analytical framework presented in Figure 2 previews the argument.

[Insert Figure 2: Summary of Argument]

## **B. Comparing Job Search Games**

For job seekers, the labor-market institutions described in the prior section generate particular strategic “logics” or “rules of the game” (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999; Burawoy 1979). These logics define which “issues, strategic contingencies, or problems become important” (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999, p. 806; Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012) and correspond to distinct sets of job-search practices.

In the specs game, Israeli job seekers focus on maximizing the volume of applications. To Israeli job seekers facing the staffing agencies’ rigid filters and the testing institutes’ vague criteria, the success of any particular application is perceived as largely outside their immediate control. What job seekers can control is the sheer volume of applications. Israeli job seekers’ central strategic focus, then, is to find all potentially relevant job postings. A counselor at IsraSupport explained that in finding relevant ads “job seekers do have some control,” and therefore “methodically and systematically finding all available want ads is the most important thing” job seekers can do to maximize their chances to find a job.

In contrast to the Israeli strategic focus on volume and the external job market, the American game focuses strategic attention on the self. As Bolles (2013, 44), the bestselling self-help author explains, the key to finding work is not focusing on the job

market but “doing extensive homework on yourself.” Job seekers must look inward and then develop stories and interaction styles required for a good fit with a given employer. These two distinct strategic logics underlie each of the most common job-search practices: creating résumés, constructing cover letters, networking, and interviewing.

Comparing the approaches to résumés makes clear some of the differences between the games. In the Israeli specs game a resume is understood to be a list of skills and credentials. The only generally recognized rule of résumé construction is to be “straight and to the point.” As Guy, a 48-year-old manager, put it:

It’s not like the tablets from Mount Sinai. It’s the product specs. How the résumé is written does not matter. What matters are the skills. Either you have them or you don’t.

By contrast, American job seekers view the résumé as an advertisement and its construction involves strategic editing and customization to convey fit to the targeted audience. As Jeff, a 52-year-old accountant, explained: “This requires switching language, transforming the code for different jobs . . . You try to indicate that you are aware they have a certain culture and that this is your culture.”

American job seekers pay great attention to the aesthetic quality of the résumé. Much time is spent at AmeriSupport and other American job-search support groups reviewing and editing résumés (Garrett-Peters 2009; Sharone 2007; Smith 2001; Newman 1999; Ehrenreich 2005), and résumé format, fonts, and margins are widely understood to be important elements of one’s self-presentation. In the chemistry game, *how* a résumé is written matters; in the specs game, it does not.

A similar pattern appears with cover letters. In the specs game, a cover letter is usually a two-sentence formality and is considered to have “no weight.” The minimal

importance of cover letters is linked by both job seekers and IsraSupport counselors to the rigid screening of staffing agencies. Oren, a 35-year-old engineer, emphasized: “Agencies don’t care about letters. They don’t even read them. They just want the buzzwords.” In the chemistry game, however, cover letters—even more than résumés—provide an opportunity for job seekers to reveal the self behind the credentials. The ideal cover letter reveals unique aspects of the self that make the job seeker a particularly good fit. Kevin, a 50-year-old project manager, explains that each cover letter “must be unique and especially crafted for each position applied for at each firm.”

The differences between the games can also be seen by comparing the approaches to social networks. Most American job seekers focus on cultivating new ties at professional association meetings or social gatherings. Building relationships is perceived as even more important than sending well-crafted résumés or cover letters because only by connecting interpersonally can one directly convey one’s fit. The focus on chemistry in American white-collar networking is revealed by job seekers’ focus on developing customized and well-rehearsed “elevator speeches” or self-presentation sound bites (Smith 2001), which aim to create connection by careful attention to wording, tone, and body language.

In Israel, strong personal ties can be very important to getting a job and are, in fact, the only way to bypass the rigid specs filters. Yet, the use of ties is overwhelmingly understood as a deviation from—if not a corruption of—the legitimate path to employment (Sharone forthcoming). While many Israelis job seekers come to feel that they have no choice but to use contacts, they do so with some embarrassment or with a wink suggesting they are “beating the system.” In the context of the chemistry game,

personal referrals are generally viewed as effective means to convey one's fit; in the specs game, personal referrals are viewed as a deviation from the professed objectivity of the hiring processes.

Finally, for American job seekers, the focus on interpersonal fit is strongest at the interview stage, and many discuss their strategies for creating connection. Brian, for example, reports assessing "the style of the interviewer" and adapting to it: "It's a bit like *going to the prom*. You both are dressed up and trying to present yourself." Many American job seekers compared interviews to first dates. In Israel, instead of preparing to create a personal connection, job seekers attempt to learn about the typical expectations and technical demands of the particular job. As Meir explained: "When I go to an interview, I am focused on what they might ask me and how I can show that I know my stuff. It's like going to an exam." Table 2 summarizes important differences in the two job-search games.

[Insert Table 2 here: Summary of Different Job-Search Games ]

### **C. Explaining Subjective Responses to Unemployment**

The distinct strategic logics and search practices that arise in the chemistry and specs institutional contexts generate different subjective responses to unemployment. To theorize the link between institutions, practices, and subjective responses, I turn to the work-games literature (Burawoy 1979; Sherman 2007; Sharone 2004, forthcoming), which sensitizes us to how particular features of institutional contexts may individualize subjective responses by focusing agents' attention toward particular strategies and away from the broader structural contexts. This individualizing focus is most likely in institutional contexts that involve uncertainty about the likelihood of a desired outcome,

and which grant agents some degree of strategic discretion to take actions to affect the likelihood of that outcome (Burawoy 1979; Sharone 2004). [Endnote 10]

Job seekers playing the specs and chemistry games experience similar levels of uncertainty about the outcomes of their job searches. In both cases, job seekers typically start with an optimism that declines over time. The difference in the games is not in the uncertainty but in the perceived strategic discretion to affect the outcome. In the chemistry game, job seekers' strategic moves are the most prominent determinants of the hiring decision. The underlying logic of this game, as described in Section B, rests on two foundational assumptions; namely, that how one presents oneself in writing and in person (a) critically affects the job-search outcome and (b) is within the job seeker's strategic control. By contrast, in the specs game, job seekers' strategic moves are perceived to be peripheral to the outcome. Job seekers may increase the volume of applications, but the most determinative factors—their specs—are fixed elements, not changeable through strategic action. The most prominent determinants of the outcome are the filtering practices of the staffing agencies and the testing institutes, not the job seeker's own strategies.

The chemistry game's structure means that losing is perceived to reflect poor play. The assumption at the core of the game—that it is the job seeker's strategic self-presentation that determines the outcome—provides the interpretive frame through which American job seekers understand their labor-market difficulties. As discussed at the beginning of this article, American white-collar job seekers often point to their shortcomings *as job seekers* as the cause of their continued unemployment. For example, they often attribute their difficulties to inadequate networking. Jason explains his



difficulty in finding a job as follows: “I am terrible at networking. Calling people I don’t really know. Approaching them in a way that does not scare them away.” Robert reports that, in interviews, he tries to project a persona that is “calm, competent, and thoughtful,” but is convinced he does not succeed in conveying this impression. He attributes his difficulty in getting a job to the fact that “interviews put me in a nervous state because I feel I am being judged.” He recently failed to get a job because, as he explains, at the interview “I was stilted, tense. Things didn’t flow as well as they should have. A lot of it was nervousness.” As these quotes suggest, the chemistry game focuses job seekers’ attention on the effectiveness of their presentations-of-self, resulting in self-blame when the strategies do not succeed.

The specific search strategies of the chemistry game further intensify personal vulnerability. Success in the chemistry game requires job seekers to externalize inner elements of the self in an effort to create interpersonal connection. Executing these strategies requires—as American job seekers frequently put it—“putting yourself on the line.”

This experience of vulnerability arises in every step of the chemistry game. For example, when networking Scott feels “like the guys who start washing your windows at the intersection on a red light.” Job interviews are typically the most personally exposing and emotionally draining moments of the chemistry game. Erica described the sense of exposure: “Interviewing feels like auditioning where you do this dance and there are people behind the screen that you can’t see *judging* you.”

It is in the wake of unsuccessful interviews that self-blame most often arises. Nancy, who had previously worked in venture capital, described her experience:

At first I felt good when I got all those interviews. But then it got rough when I kept getting rejected over and over. I started to feel there was something wrong with how I interviewed. And then, something wrong with me. I started to have self-doubts. I hit a downward spiral.

Each of the chemistry game job-search strategies discussed in Section B, from writing résumés and cover letters to networking and interviewing, demand that American white-collar job seekers put themselves “on the line” and reveal the self. It is this highly exposed and vulnerable self that experiences the repeated negative labor-market outcomes. The perceived strategic discretion to create chemistry leaves American job seekers with no one but themselves to blame for losing, and the practices of revealing the self to create chemistry give this blame its particularly personal edge, ultimately leading some job seekers to talk of feeling “flawed” or that something is wrong with them. The deeply personalized quality of American self-blame expresses the very structure of the chemistry game.

The specs game generates very different search experiences and subjective responses. Most Israeli job seekers who have experienced over three months of unemployment report a growing sense of *choser onim*, which translates to “not knowing how to respond” or being at a loss. In this game, job seekers feel they have very limited control in dealing with a rigid and arbitrary system. The sense of *choser onim* is generated by the repeated experiences of being thwarted by unyielding filters that do not seem to look beyond superficial factors. As previously discussed, job seekers experience staffing agencies’ screening interviews as blindly weeding them out by referring to checklists and buzzwords without considering their underlying skills and qualifications. As Uri explained: “All the [staffing agencies] care about is buzzwords that they can check yes

or no. If I could talk to a manager, I could explain and convince, but here I get filtered out. They want to get me as a *commodity*, like when they buy a computer with specifications.”

While Uri described felt like a commodity, Eran and others, felt that “the staffing agencies are a meat market . . . you get a young 25-year-old screener, not a professional, and you need to explain your field to her. They know nothing. It creates the biggest humiliation.” Rinat, looking for work as a marketer, expressed similar frustration and anger:

. . . the staffing agency screener is an idiot and she will decide your fate, and you see others going through the same humiliation. To see *who* is deciding your future is terrible. At those moments you say, “I will never go to another interview” and you think, “I want to leave the country.”

The consideration of leaving Israel, as expressed in moments of desperation by Rinat and several other interviewees, also reveals the locus of blame. When difficulties are understood as rooted in the system, one considers switching systems.

Adding to the frustration are pre-employment tests. Israeli job seekers reported that the tests create a sense that “you are invisible.” Oren elaborated:

When I go to these tests, I am boiling with anger. The tests are humiliating. These are idiotic situations that are determining your fate. I don’t understand. What do they want from me? You feel like you are up against a wall that you can’t get over. I just want to work and these feel like obstacles that I can’t overcome. . . . It creates a feeling of *choser onim*. You feel like, “What can I do?”

Einav likewise described feeling how “[t]he tests create a sense of no control. How can I know what kind of tree they want me to draw? *Choser onim*.” The perceived arbitrariness of the tests furthers the sense, as Omer put it, that “it’s fate. It’s got nothing

to do with me. The feeling that you get ultimately is *choser onim*. It doesn't matter what I do."

In their encounters with staffing agencies and testing institutes, the core experience of Israeli job seekers is of the limited effects of their actions due to the perceived rigidity and arbitrariness of the filters used to reject them. This limited strategic discretion ultimately means that Israeli job seekers experience difficulties in finding work as reflecting a flawed system that fails to recognize their skills and experiences.

In sum, the chemistry game combines high levels of perceived strategic discretion with the imperative that job seekers externalize and expose what is usually kept private: one's inner self. This leads to subjective interpretations of negative job-search outcomes as explicit rejections of a flawed and unworthy self. The specs game, in contrast, with its far lower level of perceived strategic discretion, creates an experience of being boxed in by a system. Negative job-search outcomes are subjectively interpreted as the result of a rigid and arbitrary system, incapable of seeing one's underlying merit. Whereas American job seekers feel exposed, Israeli job seekers feel invisible. Instead of a flawed self, Israeli job seekers experience a flawed system.

## **Conclusion**

This article explores the roots of self-blame among American white-collar job seekers and, more broadly, of subjective response to unemployment. The literature on self-blame, which focuses on the American culture of individualism (Newman 1999), does not provide a sufficient explanation. Because the American cultural toolkit (Swidler 1986) contains both individualistic and structural ways of understanding career hardships, broad cultural claims cannot account for white-collar workers' tendency to turn to

individualistic understandings when discussing their difficulties in finding work. This article provides a new framework for explaining self-blame and subjective responses to unemployment by theorizing the links between such responses and the labor-market institutions that structure the job-search process.

As this article shows, labor-market institutions generate distinct job-search games (Burawoy 1979) with distinct strategic logics (Friedland and Alford 1991; Thornton and Ocasio 1999, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012). Playing these different games shapes the job-search experience and, ultimately, how job seekers interpret difficulties in finding work. While further research is necessary to explore the generalizability of these conclusions, my findings show that the distinct logics of labor-market institutions—particularly the institutionalized filters used in the hiring process—are an important though usually overlooked source of variation in subjective responses to unemployment. Concretely, labor-market institutions give rise to different white-collar job search games, which make salient different hiring filters: specs in Israel and chemistry in the U.S. Both games involve uncertainty about ultimate outcomes, but the chemistry game gives the job seeker a much stronger sense of his or her strategic discretion to affect the outcome. Playing the chemistry game therefore focuses attention on the flaws of the self while playing the specs game ultimately focuses attention on the flaws of the hiring system.

This article develops the theory of work-games (Burawoy 1979) by showing the significance of institutional differences that shape the extent to which agents perceive strategic discretion to determine ultimate outcomes. Beyond the context of unemployment, this theoretical framework may be used to analyze subjective responses to any social situation in which there is some uncertainty about the outcome and in which

agents perceive *some* degree of strategic discretion to affect the outcome. Such contexts can vary from college applications to romantic courtship to struggling with a disease. In all these cases, the framework developed here can be used to generate hypotheses about the expected relationships among institutions, agents' strategies, and agents' subjective responses to outcomes.

The findings and theoretical framework presented here also suggest an approach to explaining why there is almost no collective action among unemployed workers in the United States. In an important study of this question, Schlozman and Verba (1979) concluded that the absence of collective action is the result of unemployed Americans being steeped in an individualist ideology that is impervious to their experiences of encountering structural labor-market obstacles. This article suggests that the absence of collective action is not due to an ideology of individualism existing in a realm separate from experience, but rather that it reflects the actual experience of playing the American chemistry game, which generates a focus on the self and its perceived flaws. Whereas the specs game renders the Israeli job seeker invisible, the chemistry game renders structural constraints and public solutions invisible.

More broadly, this article also contributes to the literature linking labor-market institutions to subjective selves. Understanding the interrelationship of the objective and subjective dimensions of social reality is one of the central aims of social theory as well as of theories specific to the context of work and careers (e.g., Hughes 1937; Burawoy 1979; Hochschild 1983). The cross-national comparison in this article explicates how different institutional logics (Friedland and Alford 1991, Thornton, Ocasio and Lounsbury 2012), and the distinct games they generate (Burawoy 1979), can result in

sharply diverging subjective experiences and perceptions of one's self in relation to social structures.

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Table 1: Sample Demographics

Site	San Francisco area sample	General unemployed population (SF area)	Tel Aviv area sample	General unemployed population (Israel)
<b>Number of interviewees:</b>	57		48	
<b>Percentage male</b>	55%	53%	58%	44.9%
<b>Age (median)</b>	48	36.4	43	37.2
<b>Percent married</b>	37%	32%	56%	48.6%
<b>Over one year unemployed</b>	38%	35%	36%	40%
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>	White 74% African-American 12% Hispanic 5% Asian-American and other 9%	42% 13% 20% 25%	European descent 48% Middle Eastern descent 28% Other 24%	18% 43.8% 37.6%

TABLE 2: Summary of Job-Search Games

	<b>Specs (Israel)</b>	<b>Chemistry (U.S.)</b>
<b>Strategic focus</b>	Market	Self
<b>Résumés</b>	List	Advertisement
<b>Cover letters</b>	Two-sentence formality	Self-revealing
<b>Networking</b>	Corrupt	Efficient
<b>Interview Metaphor</b>	Oral exam	Date

Figure 1: Analytical Framework

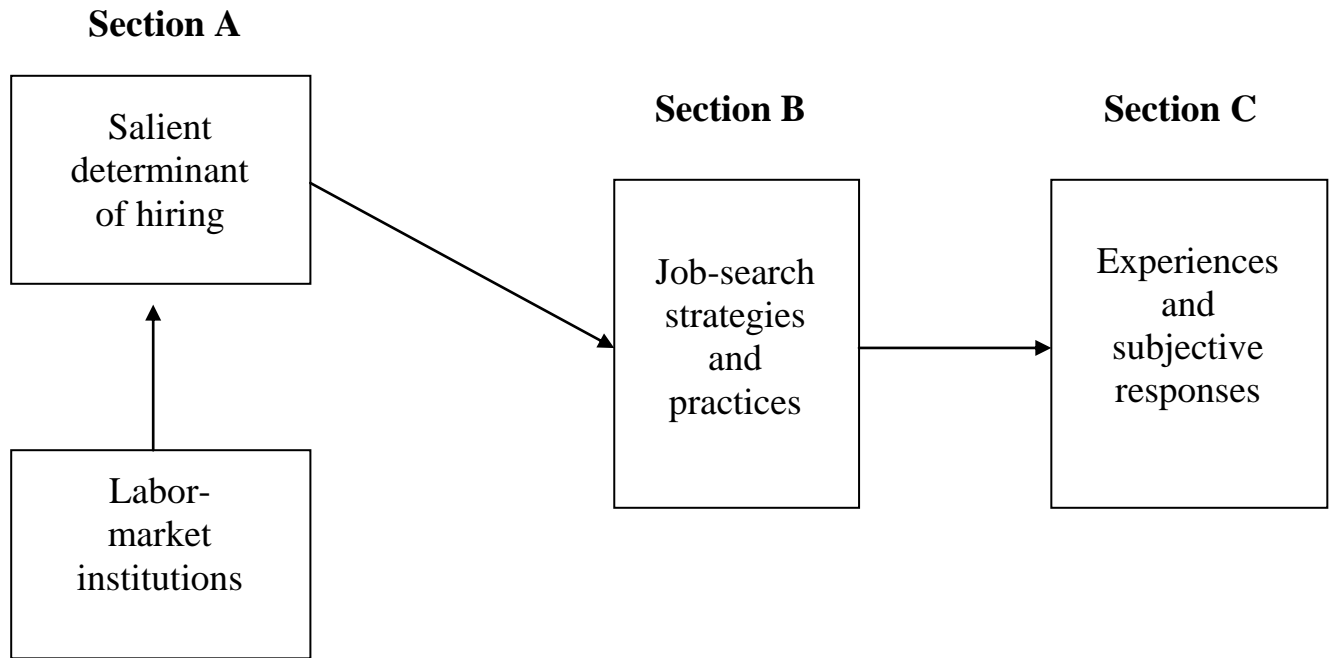


FIGURE 2: Summary of Argument

