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Class, Popular Culture, and the Academy: Critical Comments of Scholars from the Working-Class

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Abstract: *Twenty-five self-identified working-class scholars were interviewed about their life histories in an effort to understand their career choice. Participants credited the incidental and informal learning they received from consuming film, television shows, popular music, comic books and novels as expanding their world view and instilling a desire to succeed academically.*

Introduction and Background

Those of us in education, cultural studies, humanities and social sciences sometimes debate whether men can be feminist scholars or whether Whites can be valid scholars of African-American or Hispanic studies, but rarely does anyone point out that few *critical* scholars—those who focus on *class structures* and the domination of the oppressed masses by the elite few—hail from the working-class or poor. Critical theory posits institutionalized and normalized class disparities as the fundamental hegemony to be analyzed, deconstructed, and resisted in order to effect socially just change. Yet, the language and scholarship of critical theorists, pedagogues, and researchers are often seen as deliberately elitist and inaccessible to everyone *except* those with the best educations and broadly developed vocabularies—in short, those in the middle- and upper-classes, with privileged academic backgrounds who are well-versed in academic discourse. Critical theorists and researchers in education *study* people who live in “scarcity and squalor. . . compounded by the consequences of a test-curriculum that strips the school day down to meaningless small particles of unrelated rote instructions” (Kozol, 1991, p. 160). But university researchers have rarely experienced that all-too-common level of what I call *deliberate discovery deprivation* that Kozol describes—the state instituted and mandated suppression of joy, creativity, wonder and excitement in meaningful knowledge construction. Such discovery deprivation inhibits the development of an ability to reflexively analyze life experiences and critically approach life choices.

Studies consistently reveal that working-class and first generation college students are far less likely than their middle-class counterparts to attend college. Those who do, often drop out in the first year because most do not have the specific types of “college knowledge” required to succeed (Tym, McMillion, Barone, & Webster, 2004; Pike, G. R. & Kuh, G. D., 2005). Working-class college students are older on average and are more likely to attend part time while shouldering responsibilities for jobs and families. Not surprisingly, just over one in ten working-class students who attend university will persist to a bachelor’s degree. (Tym, et.al., 2004; Pike, G. R. & Kuh, G. D., 2005). Estimates of how many of those college graduates attend graduate school range between two and five percent. The percentage of *those* students who manage to acquire a doctorate has not been documented, but there is an expanding body of research indicating that an overwhelming majority of college and university faculty come from higher socioeconomic origins. Moreover, those post-secondary teachers who hail from working-class families tend to work in community colleges and small state universities, while the tenured faculty of Ivy League and both public and private Research I institutions are overwhelmingly

male and almost exclusively products of higher socio-economic backgrounds (Oldfield, 2007). As Oldfield's (2007) investigations indicate,

if two people apply for an academic position and one aspirant's parents were both PhDs and the other was raised by a single mother with a sixth grade education who worked her entire life cleaning houses, the college personnel committee will never acknowledge the two candidates' widely divergent origins when making its final selection. Although the child raised by the two PhDs was a beneficiary of countless benefits commonly associated with academic success, the two applicant's disparate upbringings will never be mentioned in the formal hiring process. (p. 219)

This is a distinct disadvantage for academics of working-class origins because their tenacity, motivation, self-direction, and persistence in the face of continual road-blocks (necessary characteristics for the highly competitive tenure track) are ignored. Moreover, "academic pedigree" is often openly considered in hiring decisions, with applicants from more prestigious schools faring better. Considering the prevalence of declarations about encouraging diversity and promoting egalitarian ideals in university mission statements, "this failure to concede the importance of social class origins in academic hiring is particularly perplexing" (Oldfield, 2007, 219). Pretending that social class is no longer relevant reinforces the hegemonic function of educational systems in a neoliberal capitalist society and continues to render those from lower socioeconomic classes invisible—especially in academia. Throughout the hallowed halls of higher learning, "the fiction that class has ceased to exist is being spread in a world in which inequality has never been greater" (Seabrook, 2002, p. 8).

Some autobiographical work has been published by academics with working class origins (Dews & Law, 1995; Ryan & Sackrey, 1996; Tokarczyk & Fay, 1993) and Welsch (2005) looked at academics' relationships with their working-class families, yet little has been done to investigate what circumstances might lead to the anomalous phenomenon of a working-class scholar. The purpose for this study was to uncover and to understand the histories of, and influences on, academics who managed, despite the odds, to achieve a terminal degree and take up residence within ivory towers. What influences encouraged some members of the working-class to go against cultural norms and to pursue a career in the middle and upper-classed halls of academe?

Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

This research is framed by my interests in socio-economic class and social justice, critical pedagogy, and adult identity development. To succeed in academia, working-class scholars often learn to "pass as middle-class" (Overall, 1995, p. 215). This desire to "pass," silences them. They quickly come to understand that underneath the "layers of elitism and anti-labor attitudes that cover many academicians, you unearth a genuinely elitist and anti-working-class essence" (Pelz, 1995, p. 282). Even after reaching the relative power and security of holding both a doctorate and a position in the academy, "the poor have little public voice" (Nesbit, 2005, p. 84).

Nesbit (2005) points out that the entire system of education socializes people into conformity. He posits that "educational institutions serve as places to cultivate the characteristics of passivity, conformity, productivity, and competition" (p. 86). In order to change this system, "educators must infuse their work with a critique of capitalism. . . [and] expose it not simply as an economic system but rather as a totalizing system of social relations" (p.89-90). Academia, indeed, is an overwhelmingly middle- and upper-class social realm. This naturally precludes

working-class faculty from feeling free to point out discrepancies between their lived experiences and the middle-class attitudes and neoliberal “common sense” solutions to class issues and educational discrepancies that saturate academic discourse. Indeed, in the course of this research, I found that pressure to conform and to compete, combined with the insecurities that accompany having scaled the ivory tower from working-class origins, inhibits working class scholars’ innovation and creativity when approaching research and research design. This further silences working-class voices and working-class ingenuity in the academy.

Research Design

To investigate the experiences that prompted working-class individuals to pursue scholarly careers, I chose a qualitative design with purposeful sampling (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003). I posted a call for participants on an academic listserv and made requests through word-of-mouth, thereby utilizing snowball sampling to find scholars interested in participating. I interviewed 25 academicians who self-identified as springing from working-class roots. The result was over 700 pages of single spaced transcripts—a wealth of data to mine. I used a combination of the constant comparative method and narrative analysis to analyze the data. All names in this paper are pseudonyms and identifying descriptors have been removed.

A Sneak Preview of Findings

Due to space restrictions, this paper primarily focuses on one major finding. While many participants mentioned a particular teacher from their K-12 schooling whom they admired and who had believed in them, this did not usually translate directly into the pursuit of a doctorate and a life in academia. For example, even though one participant’s science teacher encouraged her to apply to colleges, that meant “getting an associate’s degree and being a secretary or something like that.” Consequently, for her, like most other participants, graduate school and a career in academia came only after several transformative life changes. A university education, as another participant put it, “was not on our radar; the [coal] mines were.”

It’s Only Rock ‘n’ Roll, but. . .

Many participants cited artifacts from popular culture as the primary influences on their ability to envision themselves as scholars and teachers. Among the pop culture artifacts mentioned were products such as music, movies, television, and comic books. As one participant explained, “It was listening to 60’s rock that caused me to dream big.” Rather than become a miner like his father and the other men in his family, he dreamed of a larger world. Another participant agreed, “Rock and roll changed my life. I’d listen for hours and it took me to cities and countries with people who had a completely different view of the world than the very small one that surrounded me.” Music transports listeners. For many of these academics, especially those living in remote, rural towns, it was their lifeline to the outside world. As one participant explained:

During the British Invasion, those young bands - barely a year or two older than me - I saw them as my peers. Anyway, they invaded my consciousness and brought places to life in my imagination. When the Rolling Stones sang about Knightsbridge, St. John’s Wood, and sleepy London town, I was there. When the Kinks sang about taxi lights, a dirty old river, and ‘millions of people swarming like flies round Waterloo Underground’ I could see it and I could smell it.

He felt that rock helped him develop a much broader worldview than most of his friends and family who tended to “learn about music from *Hee Haw* or *Lawrence Welk*.” John also experienced perspective transformation through rock music. A scholar of critical pedagogy and research methods, as well as a part time musician, he credits Jack Kennedy, his “life in rock music and Bob Dylan” as being major influences on his worldview and on his life decisions. He goes on to elaborate, “From the Beatles and the Kinks and the Dave Clark Five, and you start going down the list from there—oh! And I didn’t mention the Rolling Stones. I wouldn’t be who I am if I wasn’t playing their music.” Another participant, Bob, noted that “Music, for me, has always been . . . social protest music. . . . It set my brain thinking and that was real important to me. It still is. Music is just such a touchstone.” The formation of a self-concept, an identity, that incorporated a critical questioning of and a resistance to social-cultural-economic injustices and inequalities—for many participants, was heavily impacted and shaped by popular music.

Bam! Boom! Pop!

Comic books encouraged several participants to “think outside of the frame,” as one participant described her interest in comics. She described female comic heroes like Red Sonja, Wonder Woman, and Batgirl who taught her to “think independently.” Another example is Dave, who hailed *The Atom*, a popular comic book from the 1960s and 1970s as his “ticket” to an academic career. As he explained, “Ray Palmer (the Atom) was a college professor by day and the crime-fighting Atom—miniaturized by the power of a white dwarf star—by night.” He still feels *The Atom*’s influence: “He made being a researcher a cool thing that, somewhere in the back of my mind, I always wanted to do.” Another pragmatically commented that comics, despite popular stereotypes of comic content as somehow juvenile and academically stunted, had increased her knowledge and vocabulary exponentially. She felt this gave her an edge on college entrance exams. This finding supports Botzakis’ (2009) contention that reading comics helps readers “explore themselves and their relationships with their worlds” (p. 58). Other participants incorporated their appreciation for comics into their research agendas. For example, one is involved with the Japanese manga (comics) sub-culture and currently conducts research on its influence on Japanese fashion.

Feminist Space Fantasies

Another participant, Kathy, escaped the traumas of a life of poverty and an abusive father by losing herself in movies. She became obsessed by science fiction movies that portrayed female-dominated worlds. Like female Utopian novels, these Amazonia depict worlds completely dominated by women, and they represented thrilling possibilities to her. As she watched films like *The Queen of Outer Space* (Edward Bernds, 1958) and *Mermaids of Tiburon* (John Lamb, 1962), she imagined herself as an empowered, self-actualized person. She related incidents surrounding her public schooling that were humiliating and dehumanizing as she was viewed by her peers as “white trash.” But those films made her dream of worlds that would value and honor her as a girl and as an intelligent, curious individual. Yet Kathy’s road to a PhD was slowed by stop-outs and fraught with poverty and family struggles. Like almost all of the other 24 participants, Kathy went on to discuss feelings of being an outsider, of intense loneliness, and of not fitting in with others in her department. Now, Kathy confided, “I like the *Alien* movies—I’m Ripley—one woman against the monster of academic elitism. That’s how I feel most of the time.”

Television, too, played a role in the career decisions of some academics from the working class. Jackie, for example, said that her lifestyle changed from working-class to abject poverty after her divorce. She decided to go to a local community college to “learn a trade,” but was “so

intellectually stimulated” by her classes that she transferred to a nearby university for additional studies. As she continued to learn she “felt increasingly empowered and more critical” and consequently found herself fascinated with *The X-Files*. For her, Dana Scully, a medical doctor and FBI agent in *X-Files*, became an “obsession” and inspired her to think of women as professionals with advanced degrees who questioned authority and accepted dogma.

Space Suits and Pop Art

Several working-class academics said that reading popular fiction influenced their decision to pursue advanced degrees. As one put it, “In my little po-dunk town, there was nothing to do; so I locked myself in my room and read every book I could get my hands on. It made me dream of a different life. Actually, many different lives!” When asked about influences, Gail immediately exclaimed, “*Have Spacesuit—Will Travel*.” According to Gail, Robert Heinlein’s novel revealed that “girls could do things, too. It was great!” Unlike the polygamist family she grew up in, women had status in Heinlein’s fictional outer-space. Women could “do the same things men could do.”

Another participant, Gene, read widely and dreamed of “living the Hemingway style of life.” He was “enamored with biographies of authors who came from nowhere and made it big.” He goes on, “I realize how popular culture allowed me to escape through the blue curtain, the blue-collar curtain.” Reading led him to “that pop culture struggle of art, pop art, basically as abstract expressionism of Pollock and those others in the 50s, that gave way to the beatniks and Warhol.” It was the acceptance of such artists by the academy that led him to a career in academe, but “in 1975 there was a backlash in the academic world” and he left. According to him, the conservative “Yuppies” took over the academy and drove popular culture—and him—out. Still, his success in academia during the 1960s and early 70s enabled him to find that “Hemingway style of life” as a successful academic and fiction author.

Researching Passion

The range of disciplines and popular cultural interests among the group was vast. Carol became a participant/researcher by winning a spot on a roller derby team in order to investigate the social dynamics of women on the roller derby circuit. Anne, a communications scholar, wrote her dissertation on *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.* Frederick focuses his research on what gamers are learning from video games. And Greg has done extensive research on class and globalization issues connected with McDonalds. Each of these participants spoke about conducting research as a passion—a passion derived from their love of the popular culture that inspired them.

This paper has been just a cursory summary of one major finding from this research project. Numerous other themes arose during the analysis of this research. Some of them were:

- Language of the academy
- Loss of culture/space/comfort—loneliness
- Catholic Schools (a surprising percentage of the participants attended Catholic schools.)
- The imposter syndrome
- Lingering financial stress
- Achieving a doctorate after 40 while balancing family obligations
- Fear of standing out—suppressing innovation in teaching and research
- Lack/loss of social and family support structures
- “Sissy work” vs. “Man’s work” [male participants]
- Class discrimination in the academy

I will continue to analyze the data and write about this research in future papers.

Implications for Critical Educators

Lynch and O'Neill (1994, p. 308) explore "the dilemmas posed by the analysis of working-class issues in education by middle-class academics." They argue that the lack of working-class perspective in educational research contributes to the construction of inequity in education as a cultural problem rather than a problem of economic deprivation and increasing poverty. Because there is "no working-class perspective" in the academy, "little attention has been given to the direct effects of poverty on education participation and success" (Lynch & O'Neill, 1994, p. 321).

Bourdieu (2000) agrees. He posits that higher education ignores the tastes and experiences of the working-class as part of its hegemonic manipulation of society into a class system that benefits the ruling class. Academia's status as "those who possess the legitimate culture" (p. 79) would be threatened if the tastes and experiences of the working-class in their midst were affirmed and legitimated. Therefore, working-class scholars are "silenced by their position as outsiders in a professional sphere where middle-class values, status and privilege are taken for granted norms" (Ussher, 1996, p. 463). This silencing has contributed to a paucity of research on the interests, activities, and experiences that motivate working-class adult learners to pursue an academic career. This effectively prevents greater access for adult learners from lower socio-economic origins—thereby maintaining entrenched, elitist power structures—further hindering progressive, innovative research on class-based social justice issues by those who have experienced class oppression.

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