
The Neo-liberal Research Shredder: The Study That Never Was¹

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This article begins by describing an ethnographic study of the perceptions of African American students from urban backgrounds of their experiences at a predominantly white university in the mountains of upper East Tennessee. The results of the study suggested that international students might have similar experiences, so the researchers planned a follow up study. However, two of the three original researchers were lost to the subsequent study. One died, and the other, the Dean of Students, lost his job. The primary researcher, Talbot Rogers, then recruited his wife, Judy Arnold Rogers, who worked at the same institution, to the new study. However, the theme of ‘lost jobs’ became an ethnographic study in itself when seventeen faculty from one department, including Dr Arnold who was the senior member of the department, received notice that their contracts would not be renewed because of ‘loss of enrollment’. In the two years following that original ‘Valentine’s Day Massacre’, (it occurred on February 15, 2013), more faculty were released even as the institution hired new, younger faculty. Dr Rogers lost his job in the spring of 2015. The article turns from the study of the students to the experiences of the faculty, particularly Dr Arnold, who suddenly found themselves thrust into the world of unemployment and government services. A description of some of the experiences is given with emphasis on the fact that what happened to a group of professors who lost their jobs is not nearly as important as what happens to those people in poverty who try to jump through the hoops of government services. Unemployed professors have resources that those who live perpetually in the world of unemployment do not have. It is suggested that the ethnographic researcher has a responsibility to study and report about a serious issue which raises the question of survival for the poorest of the poor. The article concludes with a discussion of neo-liberal attitudes which caused the professors to lose their jobs — world-wide attitudes which allow bosses to treat people like widgets to be moved around in response to what the market will bear. The loss of the opportunity to proceed with research which might have had negative conclusions for an institution to consider is a significant loss. However, for the ethnographic researcher, the loss of jobs, income, and stability, and the responsibility of the government towards those who are suffering these losses has become a paramount issue suggesting many topics for study.

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In the academic year 2011-2012 three researchers participated in a study (Rogers, Stevens and Greene 2013) in which six urban African American students attending university on academic scholarship at a small rural university in the mountains of East Tennessee were interviewed in an effort to get their perceptions about life in the rural environment. These students were bright students who had been recruited from big cities such as New York or Memphis to come to the university on scholarship in order to help increase the diversity in the predominantly white, rural student population.

The university enrollment is approximately 3500, including all graduate and undergraduate programs. Established in 1897, the university has a rich heritage in the region with a mission statement that stresses helping the isolated Appalachian population. Most of the students come from nearby communities in Tennessee, Kentucky, and Virginia. Most of the students, even those who live on campus, have transportation and can go home, especially on the weekends, giving the university the designation of being a ‘suitcase school’. These

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urban students came from very different background than the average student at the university.

The students who were interviewed for the study were selected because they were African American undergraduates from large urban areas who lived full time in the university dormitories. These students were attracted to the university by scholarships but were unfamiliar with the isolated rural environment. They arrived on campus without further means of transportation, probably not realizing both the distance of the university from large cities and the lack of public transportation. They knew no one in the neighboring communities, and it was highly unlikely that they would be invited to visit area families on the weekends. They did not understand the culture that they had selected for their tertiary education having been initially attracted to the beauty of the mountain area and to the academic quality of education that they would receive.

The university administration did not understand the needs of these students who had been recruited precisely because they were different. As far as the administration and faculty in general were concerned, adapting to the new environment was the responsibility of the students. After all, the students had been awarded scholarships. They had come to the University for academic, not social reasons. They were confident students with plans for good jobs or graduate school in their future. One student intended to move from the undergraduate program into the university's medical school after graduation.

Two of the three researchers were white professors at the University. The third researcher was an African American who was Dean of Students at that time. The interview protocol included questions about the students' perception about their role at the University. The Dean of Students predicted that the students would report racism, but, surprisingly the students' responses did not include significant mention of racism.

While the findings of this original study did not mention racism, the researchers concluded that there was a theme of hidden racism. The students reported boredom as their primary complaint, accompanied by a refusal of the administration to listen to them when they suggested ways to alleviate their boredom. Specifically, the students asked for weekend activities which would include intramural sports and social activities. Since these students did not have their own cars like the local students did, and there was no public transportation to take them away from the campus, they spent their weekends on a virtually empty campus. Moreover, these students lived too far away from the campus to allow for weekend trips to their urban homes. Therefore, they reported being bored in their isolation while being left on campus with the other isolated group, the international students.

At the conclusion of this study, the researchers decided that further study of the international students was warranted. However, at this point, one of the researchers died, and the Dean of Students was no longer employed by the university. Another researcher was added to the study, however, subsequently, she lost her job at the university. The remaining researcher was prepared to continue with the study. However, he also lost his job.

The study became a moot point as the two remaining researchers were thrust into their own ethnography. The first researcher found herself dealing with the hoops required when a 60 plus year old woman becomes unexpectedly unemployed. The second researcher saw

connections between his previous studies on Neo-liberalism and the fact that the results of the African American study that highlighted the students' suggestions alleviating the boredom of their university experience were ignored while the study of the international students was stopped completely. Additionally, during his last two years at the university, the administration had systematically denied funding for this professor's participation in any type of international experience in his field, minimalizing his international experiences, and stonewalling efforts to do ethnographic research comparing American systems in education to systems in other countries.

The neo-liberal theme was further apparent in the way the urban students were treated on the rural campus. The students had been brought from their urban worlds to the rural campus in order to address the need for diversity in the urban world. However, they were little more than widgets in the overall scene of campus management. The fired researchers found themselves also to be widgets in the overall scheme of university and societal management. Each of the professors had been loyal and highly regarded having received excellent student and administrative evaluations and teaching awards.

In their search for jobs and unemployment insurance, and other social services, they found themselves in a new and uncomfortable world. They could not help but to compare the difficulties they were having to those of individuals they knew who were less fortunate. In many ways, their society seemed to be constructed in a way as to discriminate against the poor and uneducated. They soon found that as unfortunate as their situation had become, they were middle class educated people who had more resources than the people commonly found applying for the social services for which they had become eligible.

The female researcher, Dr Judy Arnold, chronicled her experiences in the world of unemployment in a blog entitled 'Old White Women Can Jump' which has been identified as a self-ethnography. Portions of the blog follow:

"Those of us who were "let go" by the university qualified for unemployment. In fact, one of the profs went straight out of his Valentine's Massacre "Program Planning" meeting to the local unemployment office where he learned our names had already been turned into the state. The state knew that we were about to be unemployed before we did! The contracts of this newly unemployed group had differing ending dates, so application by LMU former employees came at different times. During the course of the end of the various contracts, the state closed local unemployment offices to save money. Therein lies some of the rub!

I am getting ahead of myself though. My full-time contract ended on May 15th, 2013. However, I was still teaching all the way through to December, 2013. Even with a full load, I was now listed as an adjunct, and I was no longer receiving benefits. I'm still getting ahead of myself. First, I had to get over the shock that I was actually unemployed and that I was eligible to apply for such a thing as unemployment. My first reaction was that there was no way I would apply for unemployment benefits. I have been employed in some form since I was sixteen years old, permanently and full-time employed from the time I was

twenty-one. How could I possibly be in the unemployment line? The soup kitchen. My conservative side said that I should not accept anything from the government; my liberal side said that I should. Both sides got together and decided that since my university had paid that money to the state for unemployment insurance, I should claim it. It was legitimately mine.

By the time I started my jump through that hoop, the local Unemployment offices were closed to save money. The only way to apply was by phone (no cell phones supposedly) or online. We quickly learned that applying and receiving unemployment was not for the faint of heart, or for the uneducated. What does a group of professors who are recently unemployed do in order to receive “their due”? One of us called their state senator. One called the Commissioner’s Office. All of us were persistent. We owned computers; cars; phones. We were not starving. None of us had dependent children at home. (I won’t go into adult dependent children here!).

Let me make something absolutely and perfectly clear. There are many people who deserve unemployment benefits who do not have the resources to apply. By resources, I don’t mean money. I hope that’s obvious. Let me give an example. I know a woman in her eighties who was fired from her hospital job after many years of service. Fellow employees heard supervisors say that the woman was just “too old” to do her job which had to do with transporting patients through the hospital. Those people urged her to file an age discrimination complaint. She had no idea what that meant, so there was no possibility of any type of complaint. However, when I spoke with her daughters months later, none of the family even began to realize that there was such a thing as unemployment benefits.

This eighty year old woman lives with her two sixty year old daughters. They have a car but only one daughter has a driver’s license. This became a moot point since there was no longer a local unemployment office. I have to ask though: What about those people without transportation. Beyond the fact that at one time they were supposed to go to the unemployment office, how do you apply for a job, go to interviews, keep a job, etc. without transportation? Public transportation and friends and family with cars cannot possibly cover all the needs of these individuals.

Anyway, when I described the process of applying for and receiving unemployment, I uncovered many cans of worms that would never be opened. First, there was no way to apply online for this family. They have never owned a computer and would not know what to do with one if they had one. There is no real possibility of any of the three women ever learning about a computer. Next, calling the state unemployment office was a task beyond these women. It takes days to get through as I learned from the beginning. In fact, it was at a visit to the local unemployment office before it closed that I learned from an unemployed Aramark worker that there were certain days and times to call when after a very

long wait, someone might get to your call. There was certainly no person around locally except for this unemployed guy who could give us any information.

At least half a day needs to be set aside to make the call. Once all of the appropriate buttons are pushed and the appropriate information is entered (a task beyond these women), a counselor might answer after hours of waiting. There was only one of the three women capable of speaking to someone on the phone. The other two, including the mother, were too scared to talk on the phone and got too nervous to talk. The daughter who could talk worked during the day (at a part time job that was keeping her on full-time hours) and was not available to make the calls and probably could not make sense of what she needed to know to talk to a counselor. In talking to this daughter myself, I found out that she did not really know the date her mother became unemployed; how long she had worked at that job; whether or not she had insurance. This woman did not know that her mother had a retirement fund and how to apply for it. Once I got her to ask about it on her mother's behalf, she learned that after what was well over thirty years of employment, her mother only had around \$7000 in the account. I suspect that the account required some type of monitoring over the years for investment and that much of what might have been in the account had been lost on the stock market, but I don't really know why the amount was so low. They thought \$7000 was a lot of money. I don't know if they ever managed to receive it.

If anyone deserved to receive unemployment benefits, this woman did. She and her daughters have worked all of their lives and worked hard at minimum wage jobs. They have been mistreated so many times by so many people in the employment world (not to mention in the social world, including their church) that they just expect that nothing is going to work out as it should. Their hard work has provided them with a condominium that they share and a car. They are not starving. However, that unemployment money would have meant everything in the world to them. When I told the mother the process involved, particularly about the fact that she would have to apply for three jobs a week in order to maintain eligibility, she just couldn't cope and ignored the whole process.

At one point, I wanted to help her and her daughters myself, but then all of the cans of worms presented themselves. I simply could not get enough information out of them to help them, and there was no way that I could have been involved with them weekly trying to go through the process of job applications and the rest of the red tape (hoops.) The daughters did not know what they were entitled to in the way of benefits on their jobs. They didn't know if they had insurance or not. They had dealt with social security and Medicaid for the mom by loading themselves in their car and going to the appropriate offices where someone helped them. There was no one to help them with the unemployment benefits. You see, these are three "old white women" who cannot jump through the hoops.

As much of a problem as the unemployment benefits were for these women, they are more fortunate than many. How many people are there in the country right now that haven't even applied for benefits that they deserve because they don't know how to apply and don't know how to get help? How many people are out there now in the country whose benefits were cut off while the Republicans and Democrats play politics with their lives? This country is in danger of creating an uneducated, unrepresented, hungry and angry poverty class that will lower the standard of living for us all. I sit in my nice house with two cats and two cars and pensions, etc. and while that unemployment money meant something to me, it means everything to many people who deserve it and are not getting it.

Will we lose children to starvation in this country before congress or someone does something about it? Will we even know that people are dying? Who has already died from hunger or lack of medication or lack of a place to live? I know that there are people out there who are suffering greatly because they can't find jobs and they have no income. Many if not most of these people want to work. I know I would like to work and have not been able to find a job. A woman my age in my profession at this time cannot find a job in my field. I have tried to get jobs outside of my field also, but I am too old to be considered – and I am female.

Let's really get back to me – use me as an example. I am getting to like the idea of retirement. However, I had intended to work much longer and was enjoying working. It seems to be generally accepted that I was good at what I do. Let's say I am/was. Let's forget me and say someone like me — like the other profs who recently lost their jobs — people that enjoyed working and would have happily put in more years in the workforce if they could — and had reasonable assurance right up to the Valentine's Massacre that they would be valued workers for as long as they would like to work because of the value of their work. What has our workforce lost by shutting these people out of work and giving them unemployment benefits when women like the ones I have described here are given a process that is so complicated that they cannot possibly understand it and are unable to claim what they deserve? And what about the people who don't have the resources that those women have. Are they on the streets? Are they living in substandard housing somewhere or in their cars? Do they have children?

I started jumping through the unemployment hoop when it was torched into a raging fire. I'm waiting to see what congress does for the unemployed. I am not waiting so much for myself though, as I am waiting for those people that I think about every day. People must be starving “out there” in a world that I do not know. The current system is starving them. I am reminded of an old Quaker woman that I used to know who when confronted with this type of problem was ready to go into immediate action. I can still hear say “But what can we do? What can we do?” Indeed what can we do? What kind of conflagration is going to occur

from all of the fires from all of the hoops that all of these people are jumping through just to survive? What can we do?

(Arnold, J. 2014, June 24. The unemployment hoop: The most fiery hoop of all. Retrieved from <http://oldwhitewomencanjump.blogspot.com/>)’

Conclusions

We live in a neoliberal world. It is safe to say that the entire population of the world has felt the effects of this polarizing philosophy. All the subjects of this paper have suffered increasingly from the effects of neoliberal policies. Job benefits have been diminished. Unemployment benefits and other benefits meant to ameliorate the effects of vocational devastation have been made difficult to obtain or abolished altogether.

The poor can literally be devastated by the loss of their jobs. After 26 weeks of unemployment payments at approximately \$275 per week, the only benefit that they have until they reach social security at age 62 is food stamps, a benefit insufficient to avoid homelessness. The women described in this ethnography worked hard all of their lives to live a semblance of a middle class life — a life that they could see others living and that they understood. Losing the opportunity to work put them in precarious circumstances that they did not understand.

The college professors in this study understood their circumstances all too well. The professors realized that they suffered from the loss of the future — financial security, job security, maintaining a position in the upper-middle class, and opportunities for advancement at all levels, and the knowledge that their services were no longer valued except as expendable merchandise.

In the neo-liberal view, education has become a business rather than an ivory tower. In businesses around the world, workers who have dedicated their lives to a company have been laid off by bosses who have less understanding of the company than the long-time employees do. Loyalty to the company is not a two-way proposition, and in education loyalty to an institution of higher learning and to the propagation of ideas seems to mean very little to the business-oriented administrators who lay off faculty at alarming rates for reasons mostly designed to protect their own jobs.

Before the second study could begin, two of the researchers lost their jobs and the third left the University. The neo-liberal chickens had come home to roost.

Benjamin Ginsberg’s book *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-administrative University and Why it Matters* (2011) examines this neo-liberal trend. The book’s cover summarizes the situation well:

‘In the past decade, universities have added layers of administrators and staffers to their payrolls every year while laying off full-time faculty in increasing numbers—ostensibly because of budget cuts. Many of the newly minted—and non-academic—administrators are career managers who downplay the importance of teaching and research, as evidenced by their tireless advocacy for a banal “life

skills” curriculum. Consequently, students are denied a more enriching educational experience—one defined by intellectual rigor. Ginsberg also reveals how the legitimate grievances of minority groups and liberal activists, which were traditionally championed by faculty members, have, in the hands of administrators, been reduced to chess pieces in a game of power politics’.

Ginsberg does believe that there are ways to reverse the trend. He believes that the system should be revamped so that the ‘real educators’ can regain their voice in curriculum policy. In essence, his answer to the Quaker woman’s query, ‘What can we do?’ is answered by his belief that institutions of higher learning can return to what they once were if the faculty is allowed to teach and research in an atmosphere of acceptance rather than an atmosphere of fear. A great many writers use the word ‘hope’ in their analysis of the future. Logic and current trends do not augur well for our society in its struggle with neoliberalism, and sometimes a blind faith that the human lot might improve independent of the facts is all the academic has left to offer. ‘Hope, in this instance, is one of the preconditions for individual and social struggle, for the ongoing practice of critical education at a wide variety of sites’ (Cote, Day and dePeuter 2007: 31).

Both researchers of this article have fought back with what limited resources are available to them. Both have continued to speak and write on this topic and both have taken legal action designed to bring the circumstances of their dismissals to court. They have been thrown out of the ring, but are not out of the fight.

*To have squeezed the universe into a ball
To roll it toward some overwhelming question
To say: ‘I am Lazarus, come from the dead,
Come back to tell you all, I shall tell you all’ - (Eliot 1917)*

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