‘We gotta get out of this place, if it’s the last thing we ever do’ (The Animals, 1965): exploring the roots of working-class scholars

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Although there are studies on the work experiences of academics from the working class (Dews and Law, 1995; Ryan and Sackrey, 1996; Tokarczyk and Fay, 1993) and researchers have investigated academics’ relationships with their working-class families (Welsch, 2005), to this point, little has been done to investigate the causes for the anomalous phenomenon—a working-class scholar. The purpose for this study was to discover what is different about the life-experiences of those individuals who chose to follow the long academic road to a doctorate, despite growing up in environments that often disparage higher education and seldom encourage its pursuit. What influences encouraged working-class scholars to go against cultural norms and, as adult learners, pursue a career in higher education?

Theoretical framework and related literature

The tiny percentage of academicians who were born working-class worries that they will be ‘found out’ as working-class (Lawler, 1995, pp.57). To succeed in academia, working-class scholars must learn to ‘pass as middle-class’ (Overall, 1995, pp.215). This desire to ‘pass’, effectively, silences them. They quickly learn 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, pp.282). Even after reaching the relative power and security of holding both a PhD and a position in the academy, ‘the poor have little public voice’ (Nesbit, 2005, pp.84).

According to Bourdieu (2000), higher education ignores the tastes and experiences of the working class as part of its hegemonic control over society. Academia’s survival as ‘those who possess the legitimate culture’ (pp.79) would be threatened if the tastes and experiences of the working class in their midst were investigated. Higher education is a white/male/middle-class constructed world and the price of admission for those from the working class almost always includes the sacrifice of the class culture into which they were born. 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’ (Usher, 1996, pp.463). This silencing has contributed to a paucity of research on the interests, activities, pleasures and corporealities that motivate a working-class adult learner to become a scholar.

Research design

Because my purpose was to investigate the events, experiences, and pleasures that prompted working-class individuals to pursue scholarly careers, I chose a qualitative design with purposeful sampling (Bogdan and Biklen, 2003; Merriam, 2001). I posted a call
for participants on various academic listservs and made requests through word-of-mouth, thereby utilizing snowball sampling to find scholars interested in participating. The constant comparative method of analysis enabled me to recognize patterns after just a few interviews. To date, I have interviewed 11 scholars who self-identify as springing from working-class roots. All are from the US. Two were men and 9 were women. Their ages range from late-30s to mid-60s. All of the participants returned to graduate school after several years in the workforce and/or raising families; none considered becoming an academician early in adulthood. For each of them, graduate school was a way to get a better job, rather than a planned pursuit of personal interests. All were adult learners in higher education.

Desperately seeking inspiration

The most surprising finding was that teachers from the participants’ compulsory primary and secondary schooling were not identified as a significant impetus for pursuing an academic career in most cases. Only two of the participants cited a secondary school teacher as someone who encouraged them to think about going to university after secondary school. That did not, however, translate into pursuing a doctorate and a life in academia. When one participant’s science teacher encouraged her to apply to colleges, she thought that meant ‘getting an associate’s degree and being a secretary or something like that’. For her, like the other participants, graduate school and a career in academia came after several life changes. When asked about teachers’ influence, most participants responded with comments like ‘my schools were pretty bad’ or ‘my teachers were the worst’. A university education, as one participant put it, ‘was not on our radar; the [coal] mines were’.

Rock, shock and the prime-time block

Most participants cited popular cultural products such as music, movies, television, and comic books as the primary influences on their ability to envision themselves as scholars and teachers. As one participant explained, ‘It was listening to 60’s rock that caused me to dream big’. One participant sang the line from The Animals that titles this paper when asked what factors influenced his decision to go to college. It was his introduction to a discussion of rock music as a significant broadening influence on his worldview. He put it so eloquently that I will include a lengthy quote:

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. When the Animals sang about playing in their home town of Newcastle, when the Who performed live at Leeds, or this other little band (whose name escapes me) sang that Penny Lane was in their eyes and ears – all those places were in my eyes and ears, too. I was expanded. And I wanted to reach for those and other ‘Rock and Roll’ places – San Francisco, the Fillmore, pop festivals, Newport, Woodstock, Monterey. I was California Dreamin’, on a Rocky Mountain high, ready to rumble in Brighton, and hearing London calling.

That is the power of rock and roll. Rather than become a miner like his father and the other
men in his family, he dreamed of a larger world and began to think of trying to attend a university.

Interestingly, comic books inspired some participants to ‘think outside of the frame’, as one participant described her interest in comics. 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’. Although Dave stopped his educational pursuits after his master’s and worked in community colleges for many years before deciding to pursue a doctorate, 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’. Dave went on to discuss the comic: ‘There was a page in most issues of *The Atom* that explained the actual science behind the story in the book. It was really fascinating’. The curiosity that this comic character aroused in Dave’s youth stayed with him, at times dormant, but ever-present. When he finally decided—after his children were grown—to pursue a PhD, his interests and *The Atom* led him to focus on science and mathematics education.

Another participant, Kathy, came from an abusive, working-poor home life. She escaped that life by losing herself in television and movies. She became absorbed by science fiction movies that portrayed female-dominated worlds. These Amazonia were representations of 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. As she explained it, ‘Nothing held these women back until violent men came to terrorize them. That’s when I decided that my life was not going to be like this forever. I would get out’. To Kathy, school and the movie theatre were compatible refuges. She explains, ‘I connected the two. The women in the movies were smart. I was smart. School and female-ruled sci-fi were inextricably interlinked’. Her secondary school teachers did not encourage her to apply to universities, she explained, ‘But no one in my school ever went to college. Our teachers had their hands full just trying to teach us to function in our world—they had no room to dream of better worlds for us’. Marrying young ‘to escape from where I was’, Kathy had two children and eventually found herself in an abusive marriage. While filing for divorce, she started reminiscing about those all-women worlds of her favorite sci-fi films. She explained, ‘I was shocked at how intensely I longed for those she-worlds. That led me to remembering how much I loved school, so I decided I had to go to college’.

Like most participants, Kathy’s road to a PhD was fraught with poverty, family struggles and stop-outs. But she managed to eventually acquire a doctorate in elementary education and a position at a university. With a look of chagrin, she admitted, ‘I suppose I focused on elementary education in an effort to find that female utopia I saw in the movies. Unfortunately, violence comes in many forms’. Kathy went on to discuss feelings of being an outcast, of intense loneliness, and of not feeling accepted by others in her department. Although highly successful and published, she feels that she is perceived as less qualified than her colleagues from the middle class. Now, Kathy confided with a wry grin, ‘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’. Most of the participants told similar tales of their efforts to cope with the entrenched middle-class attitudes that comprise the invisible pillars supporting the ivory towers.
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 consequently found herself fascinated with *The X-Files* and *Ali McBeal*. For her, Dana Scully, a medical doctor and FBI agent in *X-Files*, and the women lawyers in *Ali McBeal* became ‘obsessions’ and inspired her to think of women as professionals with advanced degrees. Jackie explained, ‘I know *Ali McBeal* is silly and that *X-Files* is science fiction but, to me, those women showed me how to act like an educated, self-sufficient woman from the middle-class. Especially Scully’. When Jackie finished her B.A., it ‘seemed natural to keep going. If my TV heroes could get advanced degrees, so could I... Of course, they weren’t holding down two jobs while they did it’.

**Space suits and shelob**

The second most common influence cited by participants is closely related to the first. Several working-class academics said that reading fiction influenced their decision to pursue advanced degrees. Most grew up in primarily poor, rural areas, and as one said, ‘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!’ Gail, when asked about influences, immediately exclaimed ‘Have Spacesuit — Will Travel’. According to Gail, Robert Heinlein’s novel revealed to her that ‘girls could do things, too. It was great. Of course, I actually read it again a few years ago and women aren’t exactly equal [to men], but they are doing things’, she added with a chuckle. Unlike the polygamist Mormon family she grew up in, women had status in Heinlein’s fictional outer-space. Women could ‘do the same things men could do’. For Gail, like most of the women interviewed, marriage, children and divorce came before a university education. Unlike the others, Gail’s father had more than one wife—at the same time. The messages of male superiority she and her sisters received were enforced daily. Unfortunately, her father was ill-equipped to provide for his multiple wives and children, and this added to their poverty, giving the family a reputation, according to Gail, as ‘trash’. *Have Spacesuit — Will Travel*, as well as other science-fiction novels, helped her dream of worlds where women had choices. In keeping with her faith, Gail married young and had three children before age 22. She eventually left the Mormon faith, divorced her husband and began to pursue higher education as a means to a better job to provide for her children, as a way to find independence, and as a means, at last, to study science. She still voraciously consumes science-fiction novels and films.

Reading was a prominent theme. Sue described a year living in England with her military family: ‘I decided to read everything in the library near where we lived. I started with the first shelf and went through them all’. One participant, Denise, reeled off several popular novels then added, ‘the main influence on my life as a whole and my academic interests in particular has been J.R.R. Tolkien. *The Lord of the Rings* changed my life. It focused me’. According to Denise, she saw all the injustice around her in the allegories in Tolkien’s work. Hailing from Appalachia, she recalls that when reading the novels ‘Treebeard’s forest became the ugly, bare mountains left by strip-mines’. She went on, ‘the increasing poverty and hunger I saw there, as factories were steadily moved overseas, were caused by the greedy, wealthy Saurons and Sarumons in Washington’. Leaning back and speaking
almost dreamily, as if remembering an old companion she added, ‘And Shelob, who
devoured everything living and vomited darkness, represented all forms of bigotry and
hatred’. She shrugged and confided, ‘I’ve read the books in the Rings series several times.
They’re why I majored in English literature when I eventually went to school’. A critical
educator, Denise is convinced that she would never have pursued a graduate degree had
she not read Tolkien. ‘It made me really think about what I read and what I saw. Oddly
enough, Tolkien connected me to this world like nothing else’. Denise, too, married quickly
after compulsory schooling and began her foray into higher education at a community
college during her divorce 12 years later. ‘I thought I’d get a two-year business degree and
work in a bank, which, at that time, seemed glamorous and professional. But I got caught
up in learning and didn’t want to stop’. Also, like most participants, Denise continued to
work full-time to support herself and her family while pursuing higher education. With a
tinge of resentment she said, ‘I can’t imagine the luxury of taking courses and not also
having to work a job 40 hours a week’.

‘Every day, I crucify myself’ – Tori Amos, little earthquakes

A third finding indicates that, due to their working-class background, working-class
scholars are deeply committed to a philosophy of egalitarianism and education for social
change. Without exception, all participants are engaged in both research and teaching
practices that advocate for democratic education with a social justice agenda. Much of that
determination to make a difference, however, is based on feeling guilty for leaving the
working-class world of their past and entering a world that was not meant for them. One
participant used the word ‘guilt’ 13 times in a one hour and 20 minute interview. Each
spoke of guilt when they mentioned their family and friends back home in their working-
class communities. Due to space constraints, I must leave exploration of that finding to
another paper. But I believe that if the culture of academia were not hostile to working-
class perspectives (Bourdieu, 2000), much of that guilt would dissipate. Several explained
that they felt an intense need to be activists for change in order to justify being where they
are. As one woman put it, ‘I have to work harder than middle-class people for my right to
exist—it’s not my birthright to be here’. They feel a need to ‘do good’ as penance for being.

While, as a critical educator, I am delighted by their commitment to social purpose, the
clear implication is that, despite their success and commitment, these working-class
academics are made to feel they have violated the established social order—they have
offended both their working-class communities and the culture of the academy by existing,
and they must somehow pay society back for allowing them to slip through a crack in the
lead class ceiling.

Whither adult education in the higher learning paradigm?

Lynch and O’Neill (1994, pp.308) explore ‘the dilemmas posed by the analysis of working-
class issues in education by middle-class academics’. They argue that the absence of a
working-class perspective in educational research is a significant factor in posing 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 educational research, ‘little attention has been given to the direct effects of poverty on education participation and success’ (Lynch and O’Neill, 1994, pp.321). According to Said (1991, pp.1), ‘A single overmastering identity at the core of the academic enterprise . . . is a
confinement, a deprivation’.
The core of the academy is decidedly middle-class. Critical educators working for social and economic justice must foster the inclusion of working-class people as scholarly researchers. It is important that working-class academics bring their working-class selves to their research and teaching rather than take on middle-class values, sensibilities and perspectives in an attempt to fit into traditional academic culture. What better place to begin this inclusion than the field of adult education? Perhaps, then, working-class guilt for having chosen a career in academe would be assuaged and their full emotional energies could be focused on research, teaching, and activism.

For the participants in this study, their consumption of popular culture is part of what made them break from centuries of working-class roots to travel a lengthy, obstacle-ridden journey through higher education. As Armstrong (2000, pp.2) asserts, 'The use of popular culture in creating learning cultures needs a more thorough examination'. In today’s fast-paced technological world, people are overwhelmed by what Schwartz (2004) calls the ‘paradox of choice’ when it comes to popular cultural products. It is important to understand what choices may lead to a desire for life-long learning, teaching, and researching by working-class learners. The results of this study also pose the question: If more adult education scholars were to emerge from the working-class, would that influence the course of adult education toward a broader and more inclusive social action agenda?

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