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Class Dismissed: Exploring the *Semiotic Niche* of Academicians with Working Class Roots

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Abstract: This paper is one part of a larger study of scholars with working-class backgrounds. The purpose was to find factors in their working-class upbringing that led to their pursuit of a doctorate and life in the academy. In this section, I use symbolic convergence theory and biosemiotics to in the analysis and discussion of two major threads running through the study: the role of parochial education and an early passion for reading.

Although social class is rarely evident in adult education discourse, no one should doubt its existence. ~ Tom Nesbit, 2011

I have a confession to make. I probably shouldn't do this—in fact, I realize that I'm taking a risk; after all, I'm not yet tenured. But this is the field of adult education, with roots in social activism and radical pedagogy, right? Still, I realize that the profession as a whole has shifted away from those social-justice roots toward teaching skills to increase job security, improve individual skills, and support existing capitalist structures.

But I'm procrastinating. I need to just put it out there; say it quickly, like yanking a Band-Aid. OK, here goes: I'm a working-class academic and I've been *class-passing* for nearly two decades. There—it's out. Although I didn't earn a Ph.D. until 2007, I had been working full time for many years as a learning center director with a M.A. in English. Currently I'm swimming against the current in the “tenure stream.” But I'm definitely working-class and that means I don't quite fit in my own life. I put on middle-class clothes, shoes, and make-up; I try to speak “correctly” and not laugh too loud or swear too much (I fail miserably at that one). But I know my working-class shows through, so I might as well fess up.

My dad earned his GED when I was in elementary school. Mom never did. Both had quit school in 9th grade to go to work to help the family. Dad worked in a saw mill, drove a truck and, eventually, after his GED, trained as a machinist. Mom worked in a Red Cap shirt factory. Somewhere along my journey from the tiny Appalachian town I grew up in to where I am now, I realized that working-class means more than “those who, when they are employed, work for someone else and have a minimum amount of control over the conditions of their work, regardless of the color of the collar they wear on the job” (Brookfield & Holst, 2011, p. 95-96). I mean, I am an assistant professor, so I'm not saying that that definition doesn't apply. I'm saying that class is deeper than the job or the bank account. Of course, my spouse and I are both working-class and have raised four children, often caring for grandchildren, as well. We live paycheck to paycheck, are upside down on our mortgage, and owe more in student loans than we have in our retirement accounts. I live in fear that one of our cars will break down or one of our grown, uninsured children will need major medical attention. There always seems to be more month than money. In those ways I am and always have been working-class. When you start

out in a deep hole and no one is throwing you a rope (indeed, their trash gets pitched in on top of you), you never seem to reach the top.

But being working-class—with a Ph.D. from a fairly prestigious university—is much more than perpetual financial insecurity and student loans I'll be paying from the grave; I would even argue that it's *different* from that, but often includes it. In our current economic times, middle-class people are finding themselves closer and closer to working-class financial fearfulness. I have come to believe that class is encoded into the cellular structure of our bodies before any other form of self-knowledge. Valerie Lee Chapman (2005) understood that class is inscribed onto our bodies even before we are gendered. Understanding that intellectually is easy. Feeling and facing it—every time I walk into a room with colleagues or students, every time I sit down to study or write, every time I go out in public, and every morning when I open my eyes—wears me out; the struggle of place exhausts my soul. As a critical educator, I have cultivated a habit of reflecting and analyzing my experiences. I understand that class is deeper than DNA. What I haven't worked out is why I was driven to a life of academic pursuits, a life that is as far removed from the life into which I was born as European aristocracy. That question: *What is a girl like you doing in a place like this?* is the impetus for this study.

The purpose of this study was to collect and analyze the narratives of academics who grew up in working-class worlds in order to understand what experiences led to their desire to pursue a terminal degree and life as an academic. Only a tiny fraction of the professorate is from working-class and working-poor origins. While this is an understudied phenomenon, there have been a few recent studies aimed at trying to understand why there are so few graduate students from poor and working-class backgrounds. One study found that “debt can stifle post-baccalaureate educational opportunity” (Malcom & Dowd, 2012, p. 294) and working-class and poor college students tend to accrue ‘an excessive’ amount” of debt, forcing them into the workforce with only a baccalaureate, despite a desire to further their education. Another study simply argued that “we must not underestimate the role of social class in shaping graduate students’ school experiences and career goals” when endeavoring to retain students in graduate programs and mentor them into the professorate (Ostrove, Stewart & Curtin, 2011, p. 769). The shortage of professors with working-class backgrounds in research institutions was the motivation for Ostrove, Stewart and Curtin’s study of working-class graduate students’ academic self-concept. Their findings “provide important quantitative confirmation of the extensive qualitative and anecdotal evidence about the potent influence of social class background on the higher education experiences of men and women from all racial backgrounds” (p. 767). They found that working class doctoral students had a lower academic self-concept which directly related to their being less interested in careers as professors at research institutions. They also found the reverse; students from middle and upper-class backgrounds, regardless of their academic abilities or success, were confident about pursuing careers as professors at top research universities.

Such studies clearly indicate the need for more research. We know there are a relatively small number of academics with working-class backgrounds. We do not know what happened in the lives of that tiny minority that enabled or drove them to overcome the social, political, financial, and cultural structures serving as gatekeepers for those from poor and working-class backgrounds.

Theoretical Framework

The framework for this research is two-fold. First, as an activist-scholar I want to change the world. Having seen the ravages of poverty, disease, domestic abuse, and ignorance firsthand, my life purpose is to work for social justice and a democratic socialism. My research, therefore, is analyzed through the lens of critical and critical feminist theory and applied through critical pedagogy. Secondly, my embodied experience of lived class consciousness drew me to consider how a social construction (class) can be physically encoded on my body so deeply that I can never slough off the engraving, even with the holy trinity of loafahs: distance, diplomas, and determination. Transformative learning can only transform up to a point. In my efforts to understand that phenomenon, I turned to biosemiotics.

According to the International Society for Biosemiotic Studies, Biosemiotics is an interdisciplinary research agenda investigating the myriad forms of communication and signification found in and between living systems. It is thus the study of representation, meaning, sense, and the biological significance of codes and sign processes, from genetic code sequences to intercellular signaling processes to animal display behavior to human semiotic artifacts such as language and abstract symbolic thought. (<http://www.biosemiotics.org/>)

It is the interdisciplinary study of how the signs and symbols of our environment become part of our biology.

The Semiotic Niche

Biosemiotics can explain a lot. The Dutch molecular biologist, Jesper Hoffmeyer (2008) points out that “many kinds of *knowledge* are purely embodied, . . . the immune system’s knowledge of past infections, or the proprioceptive calibrations in the motoric system that explains why you are still able to successfully bike or swim, even though you haven’t practiced any of these skills for years” (p. 6). Social class is more than a learned behavior and salary range. It is a system of signs and symbols that becomes a part of the identity we begin to construct the day we are born. It is learned in the same way we learn gender and race. It surrounds us and becomes us and we it. We see class symbolically in every aspect of our culture. Don Favareau (2002, pp. 10-11) argues

conclusively that sensory percepts such as *visual images* are not so much “received” from incoming photon impulses as they are semiotically and co-constructively “built” across heterogeneous and massively intercommunicating brain areas. Thus we find that sensory signification per se is intimately bound up with motoric processes of bodily and environmental interaction in an ongoing process of semiosis that cuts across the sub-systemic distinctions of brain, body and world.

Working-class people literally see the world differently than middle and upper-class people. The American philosopher Maxine Sheets-Johnstone (1998), outlined the natural history of consciousness where sense, especially *proprioceptive* senses, play a central role in what she calls a *somatic consciousness* (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 11). Consider the times you’ve had a knee-jerk reaction or a gut feeling, or you’ve been walking down the street and your hair stands on end. No conscious stimuli, just a physical response to some sign in your environment or a danger symbol invading your *semiotic niche*.

The *semiotic niche* is a term constructed to “embrace the totality of signs or cues in the surroundings of an organism - signs that it must be able to meaningfully interpret to ensure its survival and welfare” (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 12). The semiotic niche includes all of the traditional

ecological niche factors (i.e. an organism's way of life), but also strongly emphasizes the semiotic. The semiotic niche thus comprises all the *interpretive challenges*, like picking a mate, acquiring shelter and water, choosing food that will keep you alive and so forth, that the ecological niche, or way of life, forces upon a species. Hoffmeyer (1996, p. 59) explains that an organism or species “has to master a set of signs of a visual, acoustic, olfactory, tactile, and chemical nature, by means of which it can control its survival in the semiosphere” and that set of signs is its semiotic niche. He later added to those means of semiosis, “ultraviolet, ultrasonic, magnetic, electrical, solar, lunar, and presumably a host of other communicative media” (Hoffmeyer, 2008, p. 12).

Methodology

For this study, I interviewed 28 academicians who self-identified as working-class. The result was over 700 pages of single-spaced transcripts detailing the life histories of adult and college educators and scholars whose path to the academy was fraught with struggles. I chose narrative analysis, and specifically, *symbolic convergence theory* (Bormann, 1985) as the sieve through which to shake out common influences and elements of group consciousness in the backgrounds of working-class academics that had to be reassessed, sometimes rejected, and always renegotiated. I needed a methodology that would be “geared toward trying to understand the phenomenon in question and [toward] trying to say something meaningful about it” (Freeman, 2004, p. 71) and that could be melded with my theoretical framework of biosemiotics and the semiotic niche. Therefore, my choice of symbolic convergence theory was “determined by the nature of the phenomenon, what’s interesting about it, and what’s worth saying” (Freeman, 2004, p. 71).

Symbolic convergence theory is:

the broad framework that accounts for human communication in terms of *homo narrans*. The theory explains the appearance of a group consciousness, with its implied shared emotions, motives, and meanings, not in terms of individual daydreams and scripts but rather in terms of socially shared narrations or fantasies. (Bormann, 1985, p. 128)

This approach enables researchers to investigate how groups become ensnared in narratives that are promoted by their surroundings and culture—media, oral traditions, religious teachings and other culturally shared experiences—and then those fantasies determine the life-choices they make. The preponderance of service-oriented, family foci in the narratives led me to choose symbolic convergence theory to analyze these narratives. According to Bormann (1985):

When members of a group share a fantasy they jointly experience the same emotions, develop common heroes and villains, celebrate certain actions as laudable, and interpret some aspect of their common experience in the same way. They thus come to what [he calls] a ‘symbolic convergence’ about that part of their common experiences. (p. 131)

Gergen (2004) explains that once researchers were drawn to the idea that social groups were creating their conceptions of reality together, it was a reasonable extension to recognize the central importance of social groups in creating and sustaining the stories by which reality is formed and transformed. If story forms are produced within cultures to make sense of life, the central questions became, “What are the stories available in a culture?” and “How do the stories we tell influence how we live?” (p. 269) I endeavored to use the same theory to examine how people are able to gain enough distance from those common stories to critically analyze and move outside of their storied culture.

Findings

When analyzing the narratives, I looked for elements of the “group fantasy; the content of the dramatizing message that sparks the chain of reactions and feelings [that Bormann calls] a fantasy theme” (Bormann, 1985, p. 131). These group fantasies had elements of both social class and place, which Nesbit and Wilson (2010) define as a location with a strong influence on a group of people who have direct experience with it. For me, Appalachia is such a place. The mountains that I grew up in are a part of me, a family member, a comfort, and a familiar friend. Their subsequent rape by the coal industry is a personal affront and has left me with a deep sadness. But the darkness also comes from within the mountains, too. With all the factories gone overseas, the mountains are riddled with domestic abuse, oxycotin addiction (hillbilly heroin), malnutrition, and poverty. Since my participants hailed from all over the U.S. as well as Ireland, Puerto Rico, and Canada, place was a variable in their particular group fantasies. Yet the results were surprisingly similar.

The Crusaders

Two of the group fantasy themes that emerged from my analysis will be discussed briefly here. The first belonged almost exclusively to those who grew up in urban areas, whose “place” was city life. I call this group fantasy *the crusaders*. They were highly influenced by religion—particularly Catholicism and Catholic schools. Of the 28 participants, 17 of them discussed the impact of devotion in the service of God through working to help improve society. Of those 17, 12 were Catholic, one was Mormon (a polygamous sect), one was raised an Orthodox Jew, and three were protestant. While only a few were still practicing the faith that inspired them, the dedication of either parents or educators to service for others had a profound impact. The Catholic school participants had a wide range of experiences both negative and positive, but were encouraged by teachers to pursue education. By contrast, few participants who did not attend Catholic schools had anyone in their lives pushing them to take education seriously. One participant explained, “the purpose of [the school] was to take first of all orphans, and then poor boys who wanted to be priests, and train them for the priesthood and then send them out to poor dioceses in the United States who couldn’t supply their own vocation.” Another participant had observed this phenomenon herself: “The one thing I really notice, when I look around at the black women professors . . . most of us went to Catholic Schools.” Another connected his Jesuit school experiences with activism by explaining, “I don’t know if you know much about Catholicism, but the Jesuits are the intellectual radicals of Catholicism. Whereas the Christian Brothers are more conservative, and the Dominican sisters are as well. The Jesuits are the freethinkers, they would say you have to use your conscience to decide what’s right and wrong and what to believe—or they would be doing antiwar protests (laugh).” This may reflect the “unified putting-together of various scripts that gives participants a broader view of things” (Bormann, 1985, p. 133). While their experiences in Catholic schools varied from abusive to incredibly supportive, “Catholicism as a culture is imbued with service” was a common theme. Many participants said they were educated and became educators because of this collective “all-encompassing symbolic systems [that] can be considered *life-style rhetorical visions*” (Bormann, 1985, p. 133) or in biological, embodied terms, their *semiotic niche* from which they absorbed the desire/need/duty to study, work, and teach.

These were, of course, “charity cases.” Those participants who went to Catholic schools were given an opportunity to experience an educational system usually reserved for middle and upper-class kids. Is that middle-class opportunity the reason they were able to navigate the

middle-class world of academics and academia? Is that what differentiated them from their neighbors?

The Bookworms

The second fantasy group is one I call *the bookworms*. Reading, for them, was a passion, an escape, and a redeemer. Twenty-one of the 28 discussed their insatiable drive to read as a motivator to pursue doctoral degrees and to become academics. Place, in this case, was both urban and rural, but these participants were all loners, less social than the 7 who were not over-the-top readers. Their *semiotic niche* involved libraries and being alone in their rooms with books as companions. Typical remarks were, “I started reading really early” and “I read everything that I could get my hands on.” These were more than just casual readers. They built their lives around reading and it started early. Many mentioned that they were reading before they started school. They often gushed (it’s the only word I can think of that fits) about reading:

I have always been a reader and spend my free time reading, which is what I like doing so I spent my free time in libraries and bookstores. When I was a little girl we all went to the library together once a week.

All in one breath.

Yet this niche, unlike the crusaders’ niche, was sometimes a source of contention for them: “I got negative signals from other people, friends and also other family members about being too smart or about keeping my head in the books too much.” Or “my mom would tell me to ‘get your nose out of that damn book and go outside.’ I was often punished for reading when people thought I should be playing or doing chores or whatever they thought I should want to be doing.” Those bookworms who experienced tension from family and community because of their incessant reading were the same participants who, as academics, were somewhat estranged from their families because “they just don’t understand what I do.”

Due to space constraints, I will have to truncate my discussion here. There is so much more that I wish I had the space to add, but it must be saved for a longer article

Discussion and Implications for Adult Education

The fantasy themes that form within working class cultures are *semiotic*, symbolic, linguistic, and embodied, and they are also culturally constructed through language and story. Sarbin (2004) explains how this embodiment happens through these shared cultural rhetorical visions or stories. He argues

that imaginings are induced by stories read or stories told, that imaginings are instances of attenuated role-taking, that attenuated role-taking requires motoric actions that produce kinesthetic cues and other embodiments, and that embodiments become a part of the total context from which persons decide how to live their lives. (p. 17)

Working-class fantasy themes rarely involve the pursuit of the professorate. The purpose of this research was to find those rare socially shared narratives within working-class communities that allowed for the possibility of higher and graduate education. Particular religious groups that included in their teachings a commitment to public service and activism, and that actually provided a middle-class school and mentoring experience to working-class and poor children who would not have had that opportunity otherwise, and an early passion for reading and story were two semiotic niches evident in the participant group. Those participants developed fantasy themes that not only allowed them to imagine the possibility of extended academic pursuits and a life of study and teaching, but may have literally, physically and cognitively, formed their identities.

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