

## **Ethnography of an Unemployed Ph.D.**

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Here's my story and I hope that it can help others.

I recently finished a two-year position as Visiting Assistant Professor at a top liberal arts college. The college established a tenure-track position, for which I did not apply because my partner was accepted into a dental school in another city and we were planning to relocate. While I vigorously pursued the job market before our move, I relocated without a job to start.

After months of searching for work in a variety of settings including the private sector and higher education, I lacked employment. My father, who is a union steward responsible for helping members with unemployment and pension issues, asked me if I was receiving unemployment. I indicated that the contract had "ended" and that I probably didn't qualify. He indicated that I was probably correct. We were beginning to run out of our savings and the credit card bills began to mount. Luckily, while searching The Chronicle on-line for jobs, I came across a small article that indicated that adjunct lecturers are able to file for unemployment in most states. I thought that, if an adjunct teaching one class can receive unemployment, possibly I could also. I went to the state's unemployment web site and after reading each and every word, which took about two hours, I was convinced that in fact I could not qualify for unemployment. The key to claiming unemployment benefits is being "LAID OFF" or not having work through no fault or your own. I was not laid off. I had just reached the end of my contract and assumed that my lack of work was my fault.

Since I have considerable time on my hands, I decided to go to the unemployment office for face-to-face rejection. I compiled folders of paperwork, which included contracts and payroll stubs spanning 2 years. I arrived at the time when they "process" new claims. About 15 people and I waited in the main lobby with all of our paperwork. A representative from the agency came out and asked, "how many of you are filing a claim for the first time?" All of us raised our hands. The representative then asked, "which of you have been laid off?" One person raised his hand. The representative stood there shocked and then asked, "all of you have been fired and have a claim dispute?" Now we all looked shocked. One person said, "no, my contract just ended." I indicated that I had a similar scenario and that my contract had just simply "ended". The representative said with a tone of disdain for our lack of understanding unemployment rights, "then you are LAID OFF" and walked away. Oddly (or maybe not), 15 out of 16 people in that office did not consider themselves to be laid off.

As I began to process my forms, I asked a man sitting next to me what he did for a living. He said, "I am an academic. I conduct biology research and my grant ran out." He went on to tell me that he has been without a paycheck for 6 months and was certain that he would not qualify for unemployment. Since he was broke and had a family to support, he decided that would at least try. He had spent the last 5 years conducting research at a very

prestigious university nearby. He has applied for more grant money but - as we all know – it will take time and it's approval is uncertain.

It is obvious that he and I never considered ourselves to be laid off. Perhaps we never considered ourselves truly employed. Part of the overworked white-collar professional identity involves a sense of controlling one's professional destiny. This identity is similar to the logic of being self-employed or an independent contractor with a lack of ties to any particular organization (Frasier 2001; Shor 1992). We essentially do not consider ourselves workers or proletariats but instead we are "professionals." I felt the ghost of Karl Marx sitting right next to me saying "and this is what I meant by false consciousness." The biologist's claim was accepted, as was mine. We are now out-of-work Ph.D. proletariats on unemployment.

Here's my attempt to raise consciousness. Either this biologist and I are extremely stupid individuals or there are many more out-of-work academics that are not accessing this important social safety net. I hope that it is the former but, as a sociologist, I suspect that it is the latter. Here are some important resources. Please forward them on to anyone that you think might need help.

Chronicle article:

<http://chronicle.com/jobs/2004/09/2004092301c.htm>

Department of Labor's link to state unemployment agencies:

<http://www.dol.gov/dol/location.htm>

Best wishes,

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