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Introduction

KENNETH OLDFIELD,

RICHARD GREGGORY JOHNSON III

This collection of narratives has its roots in an American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) National Conference held in Washington, D.C. We were both invited panelists speaking about how our discipline, academic public administration, mostly ignores social class concerns when examining policy formation and execution. In our separate discussions, we described how public administration students receive little or no instruction about the role of socioeconomic status in the development and implementation of government programs. (For stylistic convenience, we will use “social class” and “socioeconomic status” interchangeably.) To call attention to the group’s focus, the chair invited only speakers who were, like him, “working-class academics,” meaning college professors whose parents were high school graduates or less and who held, at best, blue- or pink-collar jobs.

Although having never met, following our session we, the editors of this text, immediately struck up a warm and animated conversation based on our shared socioeconomic origins and common experiences as working-class academics. Almost instinctively, we started by discussing *Strangers in Paradise* (Ryan and Sackrey 1984) and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* (Dews and Law 1995), two must-read collections of essays authored almost exclusively by working-class academics.

As these books and other research show, people of poverty and working-class (hereafter simply “working-class”) origins are significantly underrepresented within the professoriate. We discussed the countless published studies showing the strong relationship between social class origins and one’s chances of completing an advanced degree or even finishing high school. We traded stories of how higher education abides an environment that allows professors

to say things about working-class people they would never say about practically any other group. We had both heard nonchalant references to people who are “poor but honest.” Certainly, if any professors offering papers at our national conference (or most other conferences) were to describe someone as “Hispanic but honest,” or “African American but honest,” they would have been roundly condemned, and rightly so.

We were pleased that over the last several years, higher education has become a more representative enterprise, at least on a few fronts. Many universities have been actively recruiting more women professors and faculty of color. Unfortunately, and not surprisingly, no college or university includes social class origins among its faculty diversity concerns, despite the well-established constitutionality of such plans (see Kahlenberg 1996; Oldfield 2007a; Oldfield and Conant 2001; and Taylor 1991). We found this omission especially revealing given higher education’s popular image as a place of innovation and a willing opponent of the status quo. However, when it comes to social class background, most people within the university are unaware of its import, notwithstanding a substantial body of literature showing its profound effects.

Our conversation about social class flowed seamlessly. After finishing our coffee, we went for a walk and continued talking. As we traveled along the boulevard, we shared personal stories of colleagues raised in middle- and upper-class homes who tautologically and dismissively insist that once people of humble origins receive an advanced degree, they are no longer working class. The underlying assumption is that, upon finishing their studies, these individuals somehow abandon all memories of their youth, an expectation applied to no other demographic group we knew.

As various authors in *Strangers in Paradise* and *This Fine Place So Far from Home* show, instead of abandoning their pre-graduation recollections of being of humble origins, these faculty often see themselves as becoming “bicultural” as they move between their noncollege-going family and friends and their university students and colleagues. These professors evidence mind expansion, not memory loss.

The lasting effects of social class origins should be evident to anyone who knows us, for certainly most would consider us an odd pair. One (Oldfield) is a white, straight, emeritus professor of public administration at the University of Illinois at Springfield, who has been happily married to his first wife for over thirty years. The other (Johnson) is in his early forties, African American, openly gay, an assistant professor in the Educational Leadership and Policy Studies program at the University of Vermont, with dreadlocks to die for. But social class origins are a strong force, and they quickly united us in friendship.

Near the end of our walk, we started trading stories about the academy’s prevalent classism versus the progress it has made on other fronts, including how openly gay students, administrators, and professors are insisting that college

campuses recognize and respect them, and grant them the same rights other groups enjoy. Not surprisingly, this movement has been spawned and accompanied by a growing body of literature ranging from, for example, the unique challenges lesbian faculty members face (see Mintz and Rothblum 1997), to general writings that are finding an audience on college campuses nationwide (see, e.g., Allison 1995; Heron 1994; Kumashiro 2004; and Pratt 1991).

One story we shared was of a colleague one of us had met at a national conference. She had recently come out as both a lesbian and a working-class academic. To her surprise, she said she encountered perhaps more prejudice from colleagues because of her socioeconomic origins than her sexual orientation. Although she faced considerable homophobia, she spoke of her ongoing battle against classist comments from professors and students of higher socioeconomic origins. She said these insults were leveled against her and the working class in general. She explained that coming out as a lesbian and a working-class academic forced her to reflect more on how both her sexual orientation and her socioeconomic origins affect the way she approaches life inside and outside the academy.

This last story led us to question whether there were other professors like her who were still deeply conscious of how their socioeconomic origins and sexual orientation affect their academic relationships and their off-campus lives. We wondered whether we could attract enough contributors to compile an anthology of autobiographical narratives wherein the authors use the joint criteria of social class origins and sexual orientation to interpret their lives before and after entering the academy. (For more on the educational value of personal narratives, see Nash 2004.) We agreed the best way to answer our question was to issue a Call for Manuscripts.

The immediacy and number of responses we received surprised us. We quickly hit our target figure for contributors, and the demographic diversity of the authors was striking. They ranged in age from retirees to people still early in their careers. Some were raised in big cities while others grew up in small towns or on farms, and, as we would learn later, their religious affiliations, family situations, and sexual proclivities varied in many interesting ways. The authors taught assorted subjects and at many levels, going from English to earth science and from doctoral seminars to community college classes. There were scholars of color among the contributors, including Richard Gregory Johnson III, the volume's coeditor.¹ There was a roughly even split between male and female contributors. We were also happy to receive a proposal from a higher education administrator, who had done some college-level teaching and wanted to submit a manuscript for consideration. We encouraged her to do so.

Except for Angelia R. Wilson, all the authors included in this anthology are native born and live in the United States. We found Dr. Wilson's narrative

invitingly insightful and because she was raised in Texas but eventually became a professor at a British university, we thought her “overseas” perspective would add yet another dimension to our work. As you will see, Wilson’s chapter raises many provocative questions about differences in attitudes between the British and American cultures regarding sexual orientation. We agreed that perhaps others would take Wilson’s writings as an incentive to produce still more texts like ours, but with an international cast of authors.

In corresponding with the contributors as they completed their narratives, it was intriguing to see how many said they found the assignment painful but therapeutic. A few mentioned they had always hoped someday they would have the opportunity to tell their story in a scholarly context, and our proposed anthology gave them that chance.

After reading all the chapters, we noticed a leitmotif running through them. While each author faced countless prejudices and setbacks, all of them, in their own distinct ways, found solace in books, school, work, family, or friends. When the going got especially difficult, they used these support systems to gain the sustenance necessary to continue. All these scholars triumphed over incredible odds to become academics. They survived because of their *resilience*, a term, interestingly, just one author mentioned, and only in passing, when describing his mettle. By then, we knew this word had to be in the book’s title.

Not long ago, “queer” was a derogatory descriptor used to insult certain people. Today, a growing number of authors and commentators use this term with pride, much as African Americans began reclaiming “black” as a dignified label. James Brown’s 1968 hit record “Say It Loud—I’m Black and I’m Proud” contributed mightily to this campaign for racial self-respect. Although not everyone in the “gay” community embraces “queer,” the term has become so widespread that Johnson insisted we use it in the title, so we did. Perhaps our book will give the word still further credence as a statement about strength and pride.

We arranged the chapters into four categories based on either the author’s teaching specialty or role as an administrator. Applying these criteria, we grouped the manuscripts as follows: physical science, language arts, social science, and governance. Even with this arrangement, we were impressed that authors writing under the same rubric had such different stories to tell, which was yet another lesson they taught us.

CONCLUSION

Ideally, this anthology will contribute to knowledge in at least two ways. First, these writings should help people in the majority comprehend how certain minority group members deal with dominant power structures. Personal

narratives can help majority group members empathize with the “other” and the challenges that accompany being outside what might be called “the taken-for-granted view of what or who *should* be.” In short, the writings of these authors can help readers appreciate the components of subjectivity and oppression.

Second, these narratives have a symbiotic link to quantitative studies, and vice versa. Consider, for example, that when survey research shows only one percent of the population falls in some category, this information can prompt subsequent qualitative analyses designed to improve our understanding of the lives of people in the subset. Inevitably, information gleaned from this research can stimulate still other follow-up quantitative hypotheses. This cycle repeats endlessly. Another way to appreciate this interpretation of symbiosis is to recall physicist Richard Feynman’s story of how one day while eating in his college dorm’s cafeteria, he watched as a student threw a plate into the air. Feynman thought he noticed a pattern in the plate’s spin and later applied this insight in some of his own research. His analysis eventually earned him a Nobel Prize (Feynman 1985).

Consequential intellectual growth—the proclaimed hallmark of higher education—involves exposure to ideas and people we might rarely encounter otherwise, or at least not on their terms. These first steps into the unknown can be unsettling. There is solace in the familiar. However, comfort is seldom conducive to meaningful learning. It has been said, “Sailing ships are safe in their harbor, but that’s not what sailing ships were built for.” This anthology was built to carry those new to the subject to places far beyond their safe harbors and into a sea of ideas only authors like these can offer. At the end of this voyage lies the promise of an enhanced appreciation for the lives of those who have rarely been credited for the extraordinarily long race they have had to run in pursuing and maintaining their current, and well-deserved, academic stations. Perhaps the paramount lesson they teach us is how, despite the myriad hardships they faced along the way, all recount their journeys without lingering bitterness, thereby evidencing the restorative power of resilience.

NOTE

1. The other coauthor describes his working-class origins in Oldfield (2007b).

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