

Structural unemployment and its effects: There is always a reflexive response

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Abstract

A poststructuralist perspective on unemployment is discussed to include a reflexive interplay between harsh economic "realities" and conscious decision-making. Through an example of an individual story it is argued that objective economic knowledge is often complicated by what people do with it. In this case the dominant economic discourse had penetrated the consciousness of a young man who was unemployed. Opening a conversation on the internalised effects of this discourse enabled a shift in response. Enabling consideration of the dominant discourse and facilitating such shifts in response are suggested as the focus of educational practice.

Keywords: Unemployment; reflexivity; poststructuralism; social reproduction; governmentality

Unemployment produces harsh material realities in people's lives. There is nothing imagined about the impoverishment that results from being out of work in the modern world. It impacts on many domains of personal and communal experience. It seriously delimits opportunity, undermines health, places stress on families and relationships, closes educational doors for children and reduces the agentic possibilities for shaping the conditions of one's own life. In the sense that some people use the term there is nothing that can be said to be merely "socially constructed" about unemployment and its effects. Its effects are all too real and cannot be wished away by merely reworking the constructions in a person's mind.

Given the easily demonstrated real effects of unemployment it would be all too easy to abandon the inquiry into a constructionist orientation of unemployment. I want to argue here that this would be a mistake, both theoretical and pragmatic. The theoretical mistake is to misconstrue the relationship between constructions and reality, to set them as opposites and to require the making of a forced choice between what is acknowledged as "real" and what might be considered a "social construction." Ian Hacking (1999) has tried valiantly to tease out this kind of difference, but in the end draws his distinctions perhaps too sharply.

A more useful approach is to insist on social constructions as always producing "real" or "material" effects and also to insist on material effects as limiting, but not determining the range

of constructions that can be imposed on experience. I would argue that nothing is relative in any absolute sense. Moreover the process of designating some things and not others as "material effects" always itself involves a process of construction and an interpretive exercise. In this article I also want to assume the validity of always inquiring into the processes by which realities are constructed without recourse to some underlying economic determinism. In short I want to insist that it does not entail some kind of slide into romantic idealism on the one hand or moral relativism on the other to claim that the conditions under which the material realities of unemployment exist, are shaped and constituted through particular historical, discursive, and socially constructed assumptions.

The experience of unemployment is always mediated by human actions at both the societal and personal levels. These actions take place within history and the possibilities they give rise to, are always constrained by what has gone before, by what exists on the ground and by what opportunities for thinking about these things exist in the available discourse. I shall use one story to illustrate this idea.

I remember a young man whom I interviewed in New Zealand some years ago. Let me call him George. George was eighteen years old and had been unemployed for two years since leaving an unremarkable school career with little in the way of the kind of qualification that would be accorded value when traded for paid work. Through the course of his schooling George had not developed an identity that was rich in cultural capital (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977) that was valued in the "labour market."

Yet George had noted his place in the world very carefully. I distinguish here between the kind of learning that is educative about the realities of his existence and the official narrative of learning offered by the dominant neoliberal discourse of schooling. In this neoliberal discourse it is claimed that schools offer many opportunities to individuals in the marketplace of schooling. Provided that the individual is prepared to demonstrate the requisite degree of self-reliant industry, success will accrue and employment doors will open. This discourse masks a hidden curriculum of differential opportunity. As Nick Crossley (2003) states eloquently: "The school thus launders cultural advantages, albeit unwittingly, transforming them into the hard and clean currency of qualifications" (43).

George was a Maori. When I visited him in his grandmother's home where he lived, I was offered warm hospitality that was couched in the vague hope that I could not just interview him for a research project, but that I could help him open doors in his life.

As I talked with George, it became clear that he was operating according to a theory. He had internalised some of the economic discourses of the day and was employing them to make sense of his own situation. The general discourse of the economic climate in New Zealand at the time was rich with talk about structurally produced unemployment. This kind of unemployment, it was commonly argued by economists, was different from the transient unemployment experienced by people who were simply between jobs. It was a result of shifts towards a more market-dominated economy and no one's fault. One implication that was commonly stressed was that it was becoming more common for people to be unemployed for considerable periods of time, particularly those who lacked an abundance of the kind of qualifications that could be traded for economic rewards.

As I enquired about George's efforts to find employment I was struck by his lack of effort to actually seek work. Yet, contrary to some popular opinion it was not that he did not want to find employment. There was nothing he wanted more. As I pressed the matter further he hinted at how he had not tried really hard to look for work because he did not expect to succeed. He cited his uncle, who was unemployed, and he knew others who had done better than he did at school.

In point of fact he had internalised the idea of structural unemployment and the lengthy timeframes of several years that were becoming common for the unemployed to go without any

opportunity for paid work. I asked him directly whether he thought that he had to wait for a certain length of time before his turn would come. His face lit up in such a way that this reflection confirmed it to be his theory in use.

"How long," I wondered, "might you expect to have to wait?"

The question made George think. It was clear that he had not gathered his thoughts yet, but he was willing to try.

"About two years," he ventured tentatively.

I was curious about how he had become convinced of this. He could not really answer and just grinned somewhat sheepishly. It was clear to both of us in this moment that the idea that he should have to wait his turn was slightly absurd and might perhaps be re-examined. Yet it was also clear that this idea contained within it a respect for how the economic system worked and a modesty about his own place within it. In his own terms, by waiting patiently for his time of deserving, he was acting like a good citizen. He was also implicitly recognising the dominance of the discourse of structural unemployment. Given this "reality", there was little point in trying to strive against what was, and it could be said to be more realistic to wait patiently until his turn came.

At this point I questioned whether the conclusion that he had been acting upon was indeed the only one possible. Perhaps I suggested you have already waited long enough. Perhaps you deserve opportunities to find work now. It was clear that this idea constituted a shift in the thinking that he had internalised. I was careful not to show disdain for his logic, and to respect his effort to present himself as a good citizen. In response George was interested in the new ideas he was considering. It led to a marked change in his attitude towards finding work. He began seeking work much more actively. His grandmother was overjoyed. She had been worried about him.

What is interesting to me here is that the economists' narrative about the labour market was having an effect on George's thinking. The concept of structural unemployment, even if George did not say so in as many words, was being internalised by him in such a way that it undermined his sense of agency. In fact he was doing his best in his own terms to be a dutiful member of society, to accept his fate and to await his turn. It is not hard to imagine these as lessons which his schooling had offered him. While he had not earned qualifications that might be traded in the marketplace, he had learned all right. He had learned that he was someone who had to await his turn. In this sense his schooling had been very educational.

George's story should give us pause in several ways. It asks us to think carefully about what young people learn from their schooling. The learning is not always what the overt curriculum promotes. Often it is a hidden curriculum (McLaren, 2005) of learning about one's place in the economic order. This idea is not new. It has been argued by reproduction theorists of education from Bowles and Gintis (1976), by Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) to Henry Giroux (2006). Reproduction theory argues that education reproduces economic opportunity from one generation to the next, and confers both privilege and diminished chances not so much on the basis of merit as on the basis of the cultural position from which a child enters schooling. The cultural positioning stressed most often has been that which refers to social class although considerable attention has been given to the effects of structured social arrangements based on gender and race.

Reproduction is achieved (there is little dispute about the outcome) by different mechanisms (there is considerable dispute about the process). Bowles and Gintis's (1976) correspondence theory implied that it was the repressive function of schooling that operated upon working class young people that kept them from the kind of success they might otherwise merit. For Bowles and Gintis the schooling system merely mirrored the economic system in a structural theory of correspondence. Students were classified into a range of futures according to their social class position. It was hardly a theory where much in the way of personal agency

could exist. In their view George was right to perceive that there was little he could do about his predicament short of participating in some kind of structural revolution that would change the economic system.

Bourdieu's more cultural orientation stressed the position of schools as mediating the relations between the economy and students' lives. Those that arrived at school with the requisite cultural capital could readily succeed at school and have their success attributed to their "natural talent." School enhanced this cultural capital and shaped it to fit a selective range of futures as working class, middle class or elite class members. There was more room in Bourdieu's schema for teachers and students to make a difference, for the development of cultural capital that was in addition to what students acquired from their families' social class background and for a degree of social mobility. From this perspective George had emerged from school as he had entered it with very modest cultural capital and was experiencing much difficulty in cashing this cultural capital in for hard economic capital.

As reproduction theory evolved, a greater stress on agency emerged and this was initially cast in terms of resistance theory (Willis, 1977; Fine, 1991; Giroux, 2006). Working class students began to be seen not just as passively accepting their economic lot but to some degree consciously aware of the reproductive forces at work upon them and also as making known their protest against these forces. They might actively assert their positive valuing of their working class cultural positioning and regard schooling failure as irrelevant or even wear it as something like a badge of honour. However what struck me about what George was saying was not that it was an expression of rebellion and resistance (at least in any overt way) but that it contained a more rational decision to accept an outcome for himself that was less than optimal from any purely self-interested perspective. It seemed to belie any structural account of action in class-based interests.

I am therefore inclined to turn to a more poststructuralist account of schooling as productive of concepts of self through the internalisation of notions of selfhood (Foucault, 2000). I did not actually interview George on his experiences of school but I might have inquired into his experiences of the educational gaze and the ways he had been positioned as a mediocre student within the testing regime that works to establish subjectivities within young people. He had certainly emerged from school with a modest account of what he was capable of and of what he could therefore expect from the economic world. Such a poststructuralist account would place greater emphasis on the formative exchanges that had taken place within the discourses of education to which George had been exposed, than on the reproduction of his broad structural position as a member of a social class or of an ethnic group.

What struck me as distinctive about what George said, however, was the explicit inclusion in his expressed thoughts of the economic discourse of the day. He was not just a pawn of macroeconomic processes. He was actively thinking of himself in terms constructed within the macroeconomic discourse and making decisions in terms of this discourse about his own actions and about the likelihood of finding work. In other words the discourse of the labour market and the various public discussions on it had penetrated his consciousness and in his response to this discourse, he seemed to be creating in his own personhood a strong match with the predictions made by economists. Economists as social scientists would likely assume that their analyses were neutral and objective. In the process of formulating analyses they may be able to claim legitimately a degree of credibility for such a claim. But what happens to their ideas after they enter the public consciousness? George's story would suggest that economic knowledge, unless kept locked away in a safe, might start to influence the very economic interactions that it is measuring and analysing.

George Soros (2008) has suggested a term for this kind of phenomenon. He calls it the principle of reflexivity. Soros argues that a distortion has been created in recent thinking about the functioning of markets, including labour markets, through the assumption that markets

operate in neutral ways that always tend towards equilibrium. The neoliberal approach to the government of markets has dominated recent decades with the argument that markets know best how to govern themselves, and that politicians and others should leave their hands off lest they distort the efficient functioning of these markets to the greatest benefit of all participants. Soros's principle of reflexivity suggests that markets are not so neutral, are frequently wrongheaded and are no better at governing themselves than are politicians and others. Soros argues that economists' analyses often fail to take into account the effect of so-called objective data in the thinking of those who are being described. He postulates a dynamic view of marketplaces as multitudinous actions taken by millions of actors according to whatever consciousness prevails in their thinking. Unlike, say, an earthquake, the effects of economic policies are reflexive because of what Soros calls "the indeterminacy ... introduced by a lack of correspondence between the objective and subjective aspects of a situation" (29). In other words, economic forces cannot ever be completely determining because their effects are always mitigated by the conscious thinking of people. People interpret and misinterpret events and create market effects, rather than simply function as the sites where these effects determine their fate.

As I read Soros's principle I thought of George. The labour market in which he was desiring to be a participant was not just an anonymous, neutral, efficient machine. It contained within it a series of processes through which human actors were creating decisions about what was happening. The market was lurching from point to point on the basis of the accumulated effect of these human decisions. These decisions were not just mysterious processes but products of human consciousness mediated by dominating discourses. To be sure no individual was in control of the overall functioning of the marketplace. Certainly George was not in control of all the outcomes of his own decisions. But he was making decisions on the basis of a rough calculation of odds, and his calculation of these odds was built on his interpretation of ideas that were being expressed in economic discourse. Explanations of what was happening in the labour market were penetrating his consciousness and he was responding to them.

Foucault (1969; 1980; 2000) talks about academic knowledge in the social sciences as creating "regimes of truth" that are not so much objective as that they are expressions of dominant discourse. Through their repetition in multiple conversations they exert power over what can be thought and said. They come to be taken-for-granted as true statements and become true through their performance. However Foucault also argued that every operation of knowledge/power also produced a response. People are not passive in the face of the knowledge regimes that govern their consciousness, just as they are frequently not passive in the face of overt repressive expressions of power, or sovereign power as Foucault (2000) termed it. As Nick Crossley (2003) has pointed out frequently such exercises in agency are aided by commitment to a social movement. For substantial research that illustrates the active exercise of agency by early school leavers, I recommend an Australian study by Smyth and Hattam (2004).

In my conversation with George, it seemed as if the governmentality that was operating on him through the mechanisms of the labour market and through the economist's analysis was for a moment dislodged from its position of taken-for-granted authority. In that moment George glimpsed the possibility that things could be otherwise, and he decided to shift from a more passive to a slightly more active role in his approach to finding employment.

I do not want to stretch the significance of this shift too far. It does not in itself change many of the economic conditions that George was positioned within, but it does allow for a modicum of importance for the construction of a self in response to the macroeconomic forces at work. It is precisely at this point that educational activity can operate. Educators can assist young people who are unemployed or leaving their schooling careers and moving into the workforce, to conduct their own analysis of the labour market and their place within it, and to work at developing a response as to how they are positioned. Such an educational practice, or

praxis, should be aimed deliberately at inviting young people to exercise a degree of freedom, to seek to participate in the governing of their own futures, even when the external governing forces are powerful and dominating. It is about the application of what Foucault called the "technologies of the self" (2005) directly in the face of the governmentality that impinges on this self through the actions of others who shape the marketplace and also of those who analyse the movements of the market.

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