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Surviving Situational Suffering: A Classic Grounded Theory Study of Post-Secondary Part-Time Educators in the United States

Barry Chametzky, PhD

Abstract

Administrators at post-secondary institutions in the United States hire contingent faculty members to teach a great many classes. It is therefore valuable to understand what the issues are for these on-demand, non-tenured faculty members. The theory of surviving situational suffering explains how part-time adjunct educators in the United States resolve their main concern—maintaining employment—within a context of reduced appreciation, underutilization, and ingratitude. Just as with various historical events now considered discriminatory, the theory explores a form of bias and intolerance in higher education that needs to be openly discussed and addressed. The theory consists of three broad categories: (a) limiting, (b) balancing conflict, and (c) falling short. Though the substantive area is post-secondary educational institutions, the ideas presented in this paper are easily generalizable to other areas in life whenever someone is trying to survive situational anxieties.

Introduction

As an on-demand faculty member at a post-secondary school, I knew that when I started this research, the topic would hit close to home. I also realized that I had preconceptions and feelings stemming from my educational experiences as a part-time adjunct educator. Yet, by being true to the tenets of classic grounded theory, I treated those positive and negative feelings as additional elements of data (Glaser, 2007).

Numerous reasons exist to explain why some people choose to work as contingent adjunct educators. For some people, being an adjunct is convenient, as they need to be able to deal easily with family or personal issues. Because of this flexibility, the idea to keeping a professional foothold in education has value and appeal. Other instructors, including this researcher, enjoy bonding with learners inside and outside of the class

environment and feel that they are making an impact. Still other people feel that teaching is more than a job; it is a calling. For many people, being an educator is a privilege of

which the students are the most important part. There exists nothing higher than to be able to influence the course learners and how they perceive the subject.

While these worthwhile reasons are noble, a darker side exists to being a part-time adjunct educator. The purpose of this classic grounded theory study is to examine what it is like being an on-demand instructor at post-secondary U.S. schools. According to one participant, this research is “a conversation that needs to be had.”

Data Gathering and Analysis

In order to “instill a spill” (Glaser, 2009, p. 22), I conducted interviews with 11 participants (three male, eight female) and asked the following grand tour question (Spradley, 1979): What is it like being an on-demand adjunct in the US? Through the iterative classic grounded theory process of coding, memoing, sorting, conceptualization, and constant comparison (Glaser, 1965), and with suspended preconception (to the extent possible [Simmons, 2011]), I discovered the theory of surviving situational suffering; it explains how contingent educators resolve their main concern—maintaining employment—within a context of reduced appreciation, underutilization, and ingratitude.

No theory exists in isolation. It was important, therefore, to situate it within the context of extant literature. As such, when I explained the theory, I was able to use extant literature to support its key elements.

The Theory of Surviving Situational Suffering

The theory of surviving situational suffering consists of three categories: limiting, balancing conflict, and falling short. Because of the continual cause-effect and conditional relationship that exists in the theory, the categories have a strong interdependency that permits people to move from the beginning to the end.

Limiting

Limiting refers to the way non-full-time educators feel when they are involuntarily and sometimes voluntarily marginalized and are made to feel, using a term from a participant, like an “outcast.” Limiting implies devaluing, making invisible, and isolating. In each of these instances, contingent faculty members attempt to survive the experience of being dehumanized (Holton, 2007).

Devaluing

In general, contingent educators at post-secondary schools in the United States represent one of the latest examples in the historically long line of underappreciated groups of people. Following the tenets of classic grounded theory—constant comparison (Glaser, 1965) and conceptualization (Glaser & Strauss, 1967)—it emerged that devaluation takes place in two ways: under-financializing and group control (bumping and bruising). Because adjunct instructors greatly outnumber some full-time faculty members, competition exists among adjunct educators for teaching positions and courses to teach. When supply exceeds demand, prices drop; this idea is basic business.

A direct outcome of the outnumbering of adjunct instructors to full-time instructors is that in the United States, schools don't want to hire full-time adjuncts; colleges want to make money—a prime example of capitalism. As a result, too many part-time adjunct instructors exist to command a decent salary. It is "wage theft" (Saccaro, 2014, para. 4) and immoral (Fuller, 2014). In the US, post-secondary institutions do not have adequate mutual reciprocity with non-full-time contingent instructors. Adjunct instructors are poorly treated and do not feel valued or respected. One way that non-full-time adjunct instructors feel neglect, disrespect, and inferiority is through underfinancializing.

Salaries often do not reflect with the work a contingent instructor does. Participants feel that their wages are inadequate when compared with what each student pays in tuition and academic fees. It is reasonable to wonder, then, why the degree to which these instructors are valued and paid is not higher. In some instances, the salary of an adjunct is 1/3 that of a full-time employee. There is a strong desire among adjuncts for equitable and fair wages compared with those of full-time faculty members. Contingent educators are just minimally compensated for their efforts and devalued because there is no possibility for increased pay.

Participants believe that their post-secondary school makes a profit from their employment and they do not understand "where the money [is] going?" They are not able to balance their lives financially from the salaries they earn as on-demand professors. Sometimes, too, part-time adjuncts perform extra work without monetary compensation; it is unjust and angers adjuncts. Clearly, instructors exhibit strong emotions and financial imbalance when discussing their salaries (Segran, 2014).

Finally, according to James Hoff (cited in Swarns, 2014), "being an adjunct is like constantly being on the precipice of economic crisis" (para. 10). Adjuncts aren't adequately compensated. Yet, for some adjuncts, the low pay is acceptable because they are part of a "high-earning household" (Doe, 2014, para. 4) and do not need the job to survive. Or, perhaps those adjunct educators who accept their salaries fall into the "hobby professor" (Schuman, 2014) category where familial resources are available for adjuncts to survive. For non-full-time instructors who need their salaries, if they are not teaching, they are not earning income. Several weeks without pay (especially during the summer or semester breaks) are substantial and are a cause of instability. Feeling destitute results in frequent worrying and feeling disheartened. Feeling destitute and begging (where these instructors

have to plead to have another course) demonstrate the inequality between the full-time faculty members and their on-demand counterparts.

Tokumitsu (2014) commented that exploitation comes from doing what a person loves. Regardless of its source, “poverty is poverty” (Oliver, 2014, para. 4). The abusive practice of devaluing as manifested by “slavery wages” (Meszros, 2015, para. 4) with no benefits should not be permitted any longer.

From a personal perspective, some contingent on-demand faculty members feel that they are “not pulling [their] share” because they are “not bringing the same amount of income” as a full-time employee. A direct consequence of this under-financializing is the feeling of inferiority and directly affects their self-worth.

Group control (bumping and bruising)

The second element of devaluing deals with “group control [which keeps] people in line” (Glaser, 1978, p. 77). A more descriptive way to present this second element would be as bumping and bruising. It is an accepted practice in post-secondary education circles that a full-time colleague could bump (that is, prevent) adjunct educators from teaching one or more classes. In such a situation, should a full-time instructor want to teach a course that a part-time adjunct is scheduled to teach, the on-demand professor is cheated because the course will be assigned to the full-time faculty member. The very real possibility of losing a class as late as one day before the semester starts causes the disposable instructor to have a bruised ego. The feeling of a lack of concern causes extreme anxiety among non-full-time adjunct educators. Such anxiety and conflict could, in turn, lead to serious health and serious mental health issues (Reevy & Deason, 2014).

In addition, members of the administration will not tell a contingent adjunct educator that his or her class has been canceled from the course offering schedule. Conversely, some adjuncts are told about available classes days or perhaps one or two weeks before the semester is to start. A direct result of this lack of communication is a bruising of the adjunct’s ego and a resultant decrease in his or her self-worth. To members of an administration or full-time faculty, according to participants, an adjunct educator is “a peon” who is “not validated” with status or money.

Making invisible

Another way of limiting on-demand professors is the behavior of making invisible. A person may be invisible and thus marginalized in two ways: either self-inflicted or other-inflicted. With self-inflicted marginalization, the person allows him or herself to become invisible

when he or she “[flies] under the wire” and is part of “shadowland.” There may be various causes for this self-limiting behavior. One possible reason is that part-time adjuncts do not

want to bring attention to themselves and cause trouble. Taking this idea one step further, it is reasonable to believe that by not having the proverbial spotlight on them, they hope that their tenuous position could and would become permanent thereby creating economic stability in their lives. Thus, by accepting their conditions (i.e., all the components of this category called limiting), adjunct educators attempt to keep their jobs while silently suffering and surviving the situation.

On the other hand, when full-time faculty or administrators use incorrect or improper language like *everyone* or *all faculty* but mean only full-time or tenured faculty members, contingent instructors are made to feel invisible and inconsequential because of others. In addition, if permanent faculty members do not socialize with, or even acknowledge, the temporary faculty members, the on-demand adjuncts believe that they invisible and excluded because they do not consider themselves as “part of the family of faculty.”

Sometimes, the environment can contribute to contingent educators feeling invisible. An asynchronous online environment may aid with the feeling of invisibility. In such an environment, on-demand adjunct instructors are out-of-sight and out-of-mind for possibly many colleagues and administrators.

Isolating

Contingent educators feel isolated because of the environment and minimal interpersonal interactions. One manner in which adjuncts feel this isolation is during orientations and staff “rah rah” at the beginning of the year. Administrators make the orientation feel phony—as if they merely “go through the motions.” In some instances, orientation is shorter for on-demand adjunct educators than for full-time permanent faculty members. Very often, too, these minimized instructors get less support and less encouragement for professional development than their full-time faculty counterparts.

Contingent educators are not kept in the loop about events or campus policies. With no (or very limited) opportunity to be part of the governance, these professors feel increasingly vulnerable (Reevy & Deason, 2014) and isolated. Some part-time faculty members are not aware what the faculty senate might do for them. Some adjuncts have feelings of disloyalty because they are not fully engaged in the college activities. Even if adjunct governance exists, information sharing does not.

Similarly, it is challenging for part-time adjunct professors to be included or feel as if they are engaged when they are on campus only a few days of the week or, worse, when they teach online. Therefore, relationship building with students and other faculty members is difficult. For these adjunct educators, struggling silently leads to feeling invisible. The term “invisible faculty” (The Editorial Board, 2014, para. 3) is used because adjuncts have no part in faculty or academic life, minimal time to prepare because they are told about course weeks or sometimes days before a semester starts.

Part of this isolation stems from full-time faculty instructors and members of the administration. These people sometimes exhibit an air of superiority towards the non-full-time educators thereby causing the contingent instructors to feel unwelcomed and thus isolated. Another reason is that they are not allowed to do more—they are brushed off when they try. The result is that the part-time adjuncts silently do their jobs and push ahead in spite of the anxiety.

Another way adjuncts feel isolated is when they do not have their own personal space. An office, according to one adjunct, is “a godsend.” Adjuncts often work and meet students in public venues and “live out of [their] car,” instead of a private office where students could speak freely. Personal space and privacy do not exist or are very limited. The lack of vital personal space further isolates part-time adjunct faculty members from full-time educators because full-time educators have private offices. According to Fuller (2014), such a limitation is immoral.

Participants feel free to educate the students in a manner they see appropriate. In addition, they do not feel that they have to collaborate with other colleagues or deal with politics. However, isolation is a “double-edged sword” because by being allowed to “teach, have office hours, and leave,” non-full-time adjuncts do not have the opportunity to feel as if they are part of the educational environment.

Balancing Conflict

The second major category of surviving educational suffering is balancing conflict. Balancing conflict is the conceptual term to explain the behaviors of part-time adjuncts based on internal and external influences. According to one person, “life of an adjunct is a tenuous life indeed.” As such, conflict manifests itself in different ways and the educator needs to learn to balance it in life. For example, on the first day of a new job or new semester, participants feel unbalanced as they learn their way around the new environment or meet new students. This feeling is, of course, tempered with the excitement of the new job or the new semester. Little by little, these contingent faculty members become comfortable with their position and realize how tenuous their jobs are. In order to maintain their positions, they need to balance conflict.

Part-time adjunct educators demonstrate how they balance conflict in order to survive and maintain employment by modifying behavior, self-relying, and super-adjuncting.

Modifying behavior

Once settled in, sometimes an on-demand educator needs to balance conflict between what he or she wants to do versus what he or she is obligated to do. An educator might feel internal conflict when asked to do work above and beyond his or her responsibilities. He or she wants to feel part of the school but might need additional time for grading and thus feel that another person should (and could) do that extra work. It is often easy and saves time

when an educator uses stock answers in grading assignments. However, such usage is conflicting to these instructors because, while the stock answers would help them get through so many papers to grade, they genuinely want to help students learn the material. Though laudable, this desire compels the professor to want make substantive comments on each paper. Such action takes a great deal of time, which contingent instructors do not generally have. However, to do anything less bothers them.

Educators also need to modify their behaviors, thereby balancing conflict, in order to achieve favorable opinions of learners, administrators, and colleagues. Participants care about student opinions of them. Very often, student evaluations determine the success or failure of a part-time adjunct instructor at a post-secondary school. It is important, therefore, that the instructor feel that the students like him or her. Similarly, it is valuable to the instructor to get positive evaluations from colleagues and members of the administration in order to be considered for a teaching assignment during the next semester.

With reduced authority, and "because they don't have tenure, some adjuncts feel they can't challenge students and administrators because poor evaluations could hurt their job prospects" (Takahashi, 2014, para 16). The idea of not challenging authority causes on-demand educators to strategize by hiding.

While behavior modification is a valuable psychological tool, consciously changing one's behavior to make other people happy in an attempt to obtain positive or desirable objectives is not healthy. To repress one's true behavior and hide one's true feelings ultimately increase the anxiety levels and frustrations in part-time adjunct instructors.

Additionally, conflict manifests itself when contingent educators second-guess themselves or are overly critical of their behaviors in order to exceed the expectations of colleagues and administrators. By failing to surpass the criteria of administrators or persons in charge, adjuncts feel that it is just "another way [for them] to weed out who they don't want." Being a part-time educator at post-secondary schools in the United States is a competition because so many of these professors exist. In order to win, these adjuncts behave in a manner in order to sway the odds in their favor.

Self-relying

Because on-demand adjuncts may be physically separated from full-time (and tenure-track) faculty members, or, at a minimum, on campus less often than their full-time counterparts, it is important to be self-reliant. Because they are not kept in the loop about institutional policies and practices, it is vital that contingent professors investigate things for themselves and self-advocate. Self-advocating may take the form of asking lots of questions or doing and then asking for pardon. Because there is no job security, benefits, or retirement opportunities, on-demand adjunct instructors need to balance and rely on themselves so as not to fail.

Superadjuncting

The final way in which on-demand educators attempt to balance conflict is via superadjuncting. The term was derived from the term supernormalizing used by Glaser (1998, 2014, p. 49) and Charmaz (1993) to mean how people attempt to be normal after serious medical ailments. While superadjuncting does not imply any medical condition, it does refer to the behavior that non-full-time adjunct professors exhibit when they try to do “more than what [they’re] doing now.” By being available all the time, by attempting to do it all, by attempting to be indispensable, part-time adjuncts behave in a manner consistent with superadjuncting.

With full-time teaching positions being so difficult to obtain, when someone gets a part-time job, he or she is undoubtedly extremely grateful. Indeed, the instructor wants to do lots of extra work in an attempt to become indispensable and to show his or her gratitude. Yet, by being essential to full-time faculty members or members of the administration, many contingent instructors have an ulterior motive. They believe that, through superadjuncting, an opportunity might exist to convert their on-demand position into a full-time one. Such an opportunity would allow part-time instructors to obtain emotional and financial stability in their lives. When such a position does not materialize, these instructors feel devalued and demotivated. Their eyes open to the reality of the seemingly inferior position; they only receive wages for the time they are in the classroom teaching and are powerless to change things. When superadjuncting does not pan out, these adjuncts become disillusioned and depressed. Such behaviors lead to the third category of surviving situational suffering.

Falling Short

It is here that participants realize the interconnections of the theory. When financial or professional rewards do not materialize, because of limitations, isolation, and continual imbalance, contingent educators increasingly feel confined because they are not able to do what they want or need to do; they fall short of their desires and objectives.

It is important to mention that the idea of falling short is a feeling that on-demand educators experience to varying degrees throughout the part-time educational experience. As feelings of powerlessness and stress increase, motivation decreases. This inequity is highlighted when falling short. Further, it is only when the researcher discovers the

“hypothetical probability” (Yalof, 2013, p. 16) that he or she understands the pervasiveness of falling short. When those feelings are sufficiently intense, the educator becomes cognizant of the inadequacies of the environment, becomes burned out and possibly leaves the job. The final category of surviving situational suffering is falling short, which might imply feeling powerless and burning-out.

Feeling powerless

A contingent educator has limited power in the post-secondary environment. Sometimes, because a syllabus is pre-formed or philosophical disagreements exist with members of the administration regarding the best way to teach the class, the adjunct educator feels ineffective and powerless. Because of these feelings, stress increases.

Sometimes, adjunct instructors feel powerless because of their students and their inadequacies. Due to a combination of poor alignment between experience and expectation (Chametzky, 2013; Kiliç-Çakmak, Karatas, & Ocak, 2009) and poor study skills, some lower-level students are not learning anything “earth-shattering;” they regurgitate the material without trying to see the bigger picture causing the educator to become frustrated. In those situations, part-time adjunct educators may do three things. First, they may offer incentives to students. Second, they may engage—especially in an online environment—in relationship building through increased interaction with the students. Finally, they may offer explanations as to why the topic is important, from where it came, and where it is going. But these incentives are only temporary, short-term panaceas. When these instructors realize the ineffectiveness of these makeshift remedies, they become increasingly demotivated. Such demotivation leads to burning out.

Burning out

Continued feelings of exploitation and restriction result in low(er) motivation and ultimately, falling short, by burning out. Burning out is the conceptual explanation of how part-time adjunct educators feel because of their disillusionment; it is the direct result of superadjuncting not resulting in a desired effect. Burning out occurs because the position that the instructor holds is stagnant and dead-end where the possibility of a promotion is nonexistent.

Though there is a sense of temporary stability and comfort during each semester to erase some feelings on-demand adjunct instructors have, the reality is that stress increases during the semester—typically near the end—and the instructor becomes progressively anxious as a contract for the next semester is not yet available.

Participants feel that it “sucks not being able to know whether you teach next quarter.” The on-demand instructor feels restricted and constrained, as there is little he or she can do in the situation; he or she must accept the situation. These worrisome feelings fuel further anxiety that these unappreciated instructors feel subordinate to their permanent counterparts.

Limitations of the Study

Three limitations exist in this study. The first limitation concerns the location. Participants are part-time educators at post-secondary schools in the United States. It is known from the interviews that people in other cultures treat educators—especially those who have advanced degrees—differently than in the US. One possible reason for this difference in attitude is that in the United States, post-secondary schools are businesses, whereas in Europe, the government subsidizes them. Based on experiential knowledge, this researcher has seen how contingent faculty members are appreciated in Europe more than they are in the United States. Such dichotomy underscored the importance of this study.

The second limitation is the population chosen. It is not known whether the same us-versus-them mentality and the same feeling of inferiority toward tenured faculty members exist if full-time non-tenured faculty members were interviewed. Such a topic might prove valuable for a future study.

The final limitation is the national economic environment. According to columnists (Coy, 2013; Harlan, 2014), the job market in the United States is improving from several years ago. Further, "the U.S. labor market favors workers who hold a graduate degree" (Valletta, 2015, para. 1). Though Valletta (2015) made an interesting point, he neglected to talk about the polarization within the field of education. Yet, it is interesting to hypothesize how things would be if the job market were different. If more tenure-track or full-time positions were available, would contingent faculty members still feel inferior? Could unionization (Valletta, 2015) have happened ten years ago?

While the answers to these questions would be valuable and insightful, post-secondary institutions are businesses and full-time positions cost more money than part-time ones. For financial reasons, therefore, post-secondary schools need to retain contingency faculty members. Yet, more interaction with and appreciation from full-time faculty members and administration could and should be done to make these educators feel valued and worthwhile. The educational system is improving but not happening quickly for many contingent faculty members. It is hoped that this article will shed the necessary light on an important topic that will certainly affect post-secondary education for many years to come.

Implications

Because full-time faculty members and administrators do not necessarily realize that their words and behaviors have negative consequences for part-time contingent faculty members,

one implication of this study is to make them aware of the situation. Given elements beyond the control of this researcher and non-full-time adjuncts, it is not anticipated that the situation with contingent instructors will change overnight. However, this research, along with the efforts of people associated with the New Faculty Majority (<http://www.newfacultymajority.info>), will indeed add fuel to the ongoing nationwide fight in which many contingent professors engage. This research will help educate society about

on-demand instructors and assist those authorities in power to advocate and litigate for part-time contingent faculty members.

A second implication of this research is to give a voice to those “invisible” (The Editorial Board, 2014, para. 3) people. Until recently, the idea of unionization (Valletta, 2015) did not exist. Thus, on-demand instructors had to suffer silently. With the publication of this research, educators like Margaret Mary Vojtko (Kovalik, 2013) will not have to suffer silently anymore.

Finally, when contingent faculty members are respected, appreciated, and feel connected to their educational environments, not only will they feel better but the students would benefit as well. The anxiety that educators feel would not be transferred to the classroom. In addition, reduced instructor attrition would create a more stable environment for the students.

Generalizability

When people understand why they might feel anxious while trying to maintain employment, and when they understand how, in some sense, they are slaves to their paychecks, they are able to see how generalizable this research is in areas other than education. Most certainly, the aforementioned behaviors are generalizable to different walks of life and situations. When a person feels devalued or marginalized (Dermer, Smith, & Barto, 2010), when being optimistic and caring no longer work to ease tension, frustration, and oppression (Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000) of discrimination, when, according to participants, a person is no longer able to minimize all the other “bullshit that comes with the job,” he or she becomes disillusioned. At the time of this disillusion, when the imbalance (Glaser, 1978; Yalof, 2013) is sufficiently strong (Glaser, 1978), the person leaves the stressful environment in search of a better, calmer one.

Further, to be involved in an environment or situation in which a person feels discriminated is easily generalizable. Sadly, being discriminated against is an experience that many people have suffered. Sometimes, discrimination manifests itself in the form of a more socially acceptable behavior. Yet, these social injustices (Van Soest, Canon, & Grant, 2000)—different types of discrimination—damage and erode the society by creating what Ratner (2013) described as “psychological oppression” (para. 1)—a type of debility resulting from the anxiety-producing environment.

Finally, Eleanor Roosevelt said, “No one can make you feel inferior without your consent” (as cited in Manigandan & Ganesan, 2014, p. 3925). Sometimes, because of personal inadequacies, people do feel inferior. While it is generally considered unhealthy to have feelings of inadequacy, sometimes, environmental stress makes a person doubt him or herself (Liu, Carrese, Colbert-Getz, Geller, & Shocket, 2014). It is reasonable to state that, because of environmental factors beyond the control of most people, personal inadequacies are commonplace. As people become more comfortable in the environment, and thus have the ability to balance conflict, those temporary feelings typically disappear.

Clearly, then, such feelings and behaviors are not unique to the substantive area mentioned in this paper. It is important, however, to mention that though this substantive theory might have general implications, more data across different areas and fields would be necessary in order to do grounded generalizing.

Conclusion

Though teaching, to quote a participant, is "sweet work" where it is a privilege to interact and bond with students, such a situation is not always the case. Very often, part-time educators are discriminated and exploited (Fuller, 2014). Because of feelings of under appreciation, disrespect, expendability, and powerlessness where they silently struggle, these contingent instructors have increased levels of anxiety and stress. Attempting to be motivated in light of the conflicts could have negative consequences such as overall psychological and emotional instability (Reevy & Deason, 2014). The idea that these adjuncts must do what one likes or loves is "naïve and inward-looking" (Segran, 2014, para. 20).

By way of the theory presented here, the author underscored the serious, ongoing, and exploitative (Miller, 2013) issue in post-secondary education. Sadly, sometimes, on-demand educators like Margaret Mary Vojtko (Kovalik, 2013) need to pay a heavy price so that the covert non-ethical, discriminatory actions of some full-time professors and members of some administrations are brought to light thereby giving future part-time adjunct instructors in the United States the courage to speak their minds without fear of losing their jobs. Just as with various historical events now considered discriminatory (Glenn, 1991; Huebner, Rebchook, & Kegeles, 2004), the suffering and dehumanizing (Holton, 2007) survival that part-time post-secondary contingent faculty endure is a form of bias and intolerance that needs to be addressed. The process of change is slow; this research will hopefully help the conversation.

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