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First Person [this document contains three parts]

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Part One: Why Can't a Job Search Be Fun?

By PAIGE GORDON

Paige Gordon is a pseudonym. She is completing her Ph.D. in sociocultural anthropology at a large research university on the West Coast. She will be recounting her experiences on the job market over the next several months.

During my 15-plus years of undergraduate and graduate education, many people have suggested -- delicately or otherwise -- that I would regret indulging my interests so freely. "Sure your studies are fun," they said, "but are they practical? Will they get you a job?" I'm about to find out.

Over the years, I worked as a sleep-research technician; wrote a collection of short stories; flew in a tiny helicopter over the Arctic ocean delivering mail to musk-ox researchers; taught composition, English, and fiction writing; interviewed Arctic and Antarctic workers in a study of heroic exploration; began several novels; produced an ethnographic video of San Diego dog-park communities; studied socialization in a children's after-school computer club; and even spent two years working as a horse groom while doing ethnographic research in a traveling circus across Europe. My dissertation explores the structure, performances, interactions, and imagination in and around the circus ring. Oh yeah, I've had fun.

I ended up with a B.A. in anthropology, a triple set of master's degrees (sociology, fine arts in English, and anthropology), and a soon-to-be doctorate in anthropology. Whether or not I get my dream job -- tenure-track assistant professorship at a research university with the freedom to teach some classes of my own design, leisure to explore various research projects, and maybe even time to finish a novel or two -- I don't regret any of my interests or academic past.

I can make wonderful lists. I look back at my personal statement for admission to the Ph.D. program and I see about 50 different things I said I'd be interested in researching (a few of which I found time to pursue). Although all 50 still seem fascinating, I will admit I might have appeared a bit scattered in my attention.

"Really," my adviser said kindly when I voiced this concern later to her, "the personal statements aren't so important. We just want to make sure you're not a psycho." I suppose I passed, since they let me in. Now, with a dissertation attesting to my continued sanity (or lack thereof?), they're nearly ready to let me out, so I can try my luck making applications and lists for others.

No, I'm not fickle in my interests. My desire and ability to see connections across apparently divergent areas and ideas is a strength I hope to sell to search committees. For instance,
it's amazing how much the structure and culture of an Antarctic research station can have in common with a traveling circus. One community has stars who produce research, the other, stars who produce entertainment. Both have a hierarchy of administrators who run the show and technical workers who do the everyday background work. Different languages and cultures bump head to head in an almost claustrophobic space, and every season brings population turnover. And both have very few women involved.

It's true that some of my exotic areas of expertise may seem impractical. In the circus, I noticed that while a horse lies down by bending both front and rear legs to lower itself evenly to the ground, a llama will sit down like a dog first. Okay, maybe no one will ever want to employ me for this bit of knowledge, but perhaps they'll find me of interest for my willingness to observe and pay attention to such minutiae. I'm an ethnographer at heart, and that's what we do: observe and analyze. Minutiae ultimately add up to make meanings.

Maybe it won't be so easy to convince a search committee that I'm a serious scholar, or the right serious scholar for the job. But I didn't run off and join a circus; I went to Europe to study one. Then I came home and wrote a dissertation. I'm not a dilettante. I finished every program of study or research I began, and each relates to the others in a coherent fashion (along issues of identity and community). I admit that I like to find and tell interesting stories, and I'm not ashamed of my goal to produce a jargon-free dissertation. Serious scholarship can still be fun.

Last autumn, my dream job came up when I wasn't yet ready for it (oh, but I would have made myself ready if given the chance, I really would have). The search committee's focus was perfectly matched to my own interests, and for years I have been drawn to the sessions prepared by the college's faculty members for the American Anthropological Association's annual meetings. I wanted that position.

My adviser, noting my unfinished dissertation, pronounced that I had a snowball's chance in hell against all the other job-hunting anthropologists -- many with books and several years of postgraduate research and teaching under their belts. I like her for her willingness to give it to me straight; I don't always listen, though.

When I showed her my "I'm going to apply anyway" cover letter, she was thoughtful. "This is actually very good," she marveled, and upgraded my chances to a candle in a hurricane. I made the first short list and surprised us both, but got no further. "That's not bad," she said, "but really, you NEED to finish the dissertation now."

Well, it's a year later and I have finished. Minus a few revisions, my dissertation is done. I only got through it by NOT thinking or worrying about possible job or postdoctoral opportunities. But the academic search season is now well upon us, and deadlines are coming hard and fast.

I've gotten my share of rejection letters before (ever try to make it as a writer?), and I've watched too many friends be squashed in the cogs of some impersonal job-hunting machine. Maybe I'll end up the same, but I'd like to start out optimistic. Maybe it will even be fun.
I'm in the market for a job, but also for job-seeking advice. What jobs do I apply for? Where do I draw the lines?

If I'm interested in pursuing gender studies, for instance, but don't yet actually have a "record of achievement" in that area, are all posts specifically in gender-studies departments out of my range? In applying for jobs, should I follow the rules of dating etiquette for the class-conscious and not embarrass myself by trying to associate too far "up" or "down"? What long shots are too long?

On these matters, I receive conflicting but equally reasonable and sincere instructions. "Don't apply to jobs for which your skills and interests aren't really applicable," one camp tells me, "don't waste your time." "Apply to everything," the second camp booms, "it's a game of chance." Both rules bump against reality.

Departments advertising positions may not know precisely what they're looking for when they write advertisements, and search committees (and we as applicants) may not always know what they (and we) want before being confronted with it. So the basic assumptions of rule No. 1 falter. And there's something to be said for not limiting your options unnecessarily when others will so readily do it for you.

The reality of my discipline is that there are too many unemployed anthropologists for the limited number of full-time anthropology faculty jobs available. There are so many more applicants than jobs that most searches don't even request recommendation letters unless you make the first-round cut. Most posts draw well over 100 applicants.

I've already received a rejection letter for a postdoctoral position I had sought, reassuring me that it was "in no way a negative judgment of [my] work or prospects," since they had received nearly 900 applications for the 16 available positions and had to turn away many "worthy" candidates. OK, I won't take it personally, but I still find it difficult to look especially optimistically upon these odds.

In fact, many in my department have had long, difficult struggles for work in academia, where I know most set their sights. Although the National Research Council in 1995 ranked my department in the top 10 (of 69) of U.S. anthropology programs, only half of our Ph.D. alumni hold academic jobs. And less than 14 percent have tenure-track or tenured jobs in departments granting doctorates (the holy grail of academic jobs).

So I can see the sense of rule No. 2: Apply to everything. When the chances of success are already low, why eliminate ANY possibilities?

At the recent American Anthropological Association meeting in Chicago, I polled my former grad-school colleagues who had found academic jobs. Although they hadn't always followed their own advice, they all leaned toward casting a wide net of applications. One tenured
friend (with a development budget that happily included conference refreshment for unemployed colleagues) sat me down with a beer and explained that "the job market is all a crap shoot," and in order to win, you have to play (and play, and play ...). In his year on the market, he had applied to 56 postings, gotten four interviews and two offers. That's a high 4 percent success rate -- beating the odds, I figure.

But perhaps rule No. 2 cheerleaders are unaware of or have forgotten the hectic nature of life on the job market: finishing the dissertation, trying to start one's career, and struggling to survive financially. Allow me to refresh their memory:

I teach three classes of a freshman culture and writing course while still revising my dissertation in anticipation of the forthcoming defense. I rewrite (and rewrite, and rewrite ...) a journal article to accommodate encouraging but frustratingly contradictory reviewers. I give conference presentations on my dissertation research and draft a longer version for a job talk. I research and design syllabi for my future courses (and for the job searches that request them).

I spend hours every week researching positions and attend all the relevant job-search seminars and on-campus talks I can fit into my schedule. I write this column. At the same time, I try to maintain sanity and a personal life.

Individually, each activity is enjoyable, manageable. But taken together, when do I find the time, attention, and energy to breathe, much less to apply to large numbers of jobs? Please don't tell me this is simply the nature of life in academia, the precursor to working for tenure. I want to believe quality counts over quantity -- in my scholarship and my job applications.

I know friends who've applied to jobs they didn't want. "Oh, I hope I don't get that one," they confide, "I couldn't stand to live there." Nevertheless they write specially designed cover letters attesting to their commitment and desire, package up vita and recommendation letters and send them off. We as job seekers are NOT always rational. We quietly hedge our bets, make desperate attempts for the security of getting a job -- any job. Rejections trickle in. Perhaps we panic.

I can relate. Next year, post-Ph.D., looms like an empty void -- what I'll be doing, where I'll be living, whether I'll have money for rent and pet food, all up in the air. This anxiety can make you desperately apply to everything -- see rule No. 2 -- or conversely, it can make you freeze up and fail to accomplish anything (failing even rule No. 1). So far, the job-search stress is helping me to keep up gamely with the traffic; I haven't frozen in the headlights or bolted off into the undergrowth (yet). But I don't know if my stamina will hold out.

I set out with the best of intentions -- in the interests of survival and quality of life and applications -- to follow rule No. 1: apply relatively judiciously to openings, enjoy my work, not get overwhelmed or waste effort. But time has gone on, and here and there I've lobbed out a few particularly long-shot applications. And they (and the time they require) add up. I'm only halfway down my list for October through January deadlines, and I've already sent out 16 applications.

Rule No. 2 claims another unwilling, exhausted adherent.
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Part Three: An Anthropologist Checks Out the Business World

By PAIGE GORDON

With teaching job prospects for anthropology Ph.D.'s pretty dismal, we've been forced to search farther afield, away from the familiar halls of academe.

So last spring the grad students in my department organized a self-help "survival seminar" on the topic of career choice, inviting a well-connected alumna to come in with suggestions and success stories of alternative employment options. It sounded mildly interesting, so I decided to check it out.

She told us we could write children's stories, be C.I.A. agents, design computer software, carry out social-impact research, do pretty much anything. But what she said next made me sit up straight: We could even check out lucrative opportunities in management consulting since firms were now dipping into the overflowing Ph.D. pool. (See an article from The Chronicle on management consulting, November 12, 1999.) I was inspired.

We just needed to work on clearly and successfully communicating our skills to potential employers, she emphasized.

I had no doubt that my anthropological training was a perfect segue into an extremely lucrative job as a management consultant. We can think on our feet, find themes and patterns in complex situations, collect and analyze diverse data, and communicate information in audience-sensitive ways. But to sell myself in the business world, I knew I would need to learn the field a bit, absorb the language, talk the talk, and walk the walk.

That's how I ended up a few weeks later at an on-campus management-consulting recruitment meeting. I approached it as an ethnographer, entering and analyzing an odd foreign culture ("community of practice") of power suits, bottom lines, "actionable solutions," and other "talking points" alien to the life of an idealistic academic (non-applied) anthropologist wearing ragged jeans.

The recruiting consultants were all dressed in non-intimidating "business casual" clothes, but I checked out their shoes: not a scuff or a two-digit price tag among them. And the food was heavenly -- a rich collection of expensive fruits and gourmet entrees. But it's pretty easy to seduce people living at or below the poverty line with free drinks, buffet spread, and promises of six-figure starting salaries. As a liberal-arts graduate deeply in student-loan debt, I suddenly had to sit down. Oh yes, who wouldn't fantasize about this life?

It seemed oddly like joining a cult: enthusiastic insiders with glazed eyes extolling the virtues of membership without specifying what consultants actually DO. "We just come up with simplified 'facts' based on always incomplete data sets," they said. "Sometimes you can leave the office as early as 8 p.m.," one consultant chirped enthusiastically. Under heavy questioning, they admitted to 12-hour-plus days and weekends as hired guns paid to come up with better "best guess" solutions than anyone else could. "But I still find the time to write poetry on the planes," one man reassured us.
For them, consulting was a game of profit -- making even more money for the top companies that could afford their price tag. It was a game of following the best business rules, or forging new creative (yet still acceptably conservative) pathways. It was a game of making proper impressions and conveying authority. It wasn't the kind of work energy I was used to.

But the problem-solving sample cases were kind of fun. And the salary figure slowly seeped its way into my brain. I drank another glass of wine, nibbled on another piece of tiramisu. I applied. One thing led to another, and they flew me in to interview.

The meeting was oddly hostile, as though the interviewer had already decided I was some sort of liberal-arts flake. "You had FUN researching the circus??" he demanded, then proceeded to test my quantitative abilities for figuring market-share predictions in billions of population. I did the math, we talked about production and revenues and liabilities for a bit, then he moved on.

"Tell me about an incident in a teamwork situation where there was considerable conflict and you demonstrated leadership," he said.

Cultural anthropologists do not often work in teams, and this might have momentarily stumped me. But I knew the question was coming because I had just debriefed a woman coming out of the prior round of interviewing. So I was prepared.

"Well," I said smoothly, "last year in the teaching program I worked in, there was a threat made by one of the students to one of the other instructors, and there was a great deal of concern about safe work environments and how these types of things should be handled by the administration, particularly in the wake of the events in Littleton...."

He interrupted me. "Well, I'm sure it wasn't serious," he said abruptly.

That was odd, I thought, but maybe he just wanted me to make it brief. "Well, it was essentially a rape threat," I began again.

He interrupted me instantly, while echoes of the word "rape" still hung in the air. "Oh, I'm sorry," he said, and immediately changed the subject with a new question on what I would specifically like to do in the company.

Then I watched helplessly while he effectively twisted my willingness to travel anywhere and my earnest desire to contribute to diverse problem-solving situations into a tacit admission that I didn't know what the hell I wanted to do.

I never got to finish narrating the teamwork incident. I never got to explain how I might have demonstrated any leadership skills. I never got the chance to wrap it all up with a comfortably happy ending. I did not get the job.

To be fair, I did muf the numbers in the market-share problem. But I also suspect that good job-market advice on fitting into the culture might include this rule: "Never mention rape in a business job interview."
The consulting company claims they want people who "think outside the box," but they seem to want them to be inside the box while they're doing it. Anthropology has taught me to attend to fuzzy edges, and I suspect that I could never be quite square enough.

Since then, a sympathetic colleague sent me an advertisement for ground crew staff for a hot-air balloon touring company. They sought friendly, multilingual applicants willing to travel all over Europe. "It's perfect for you," she laughed, "it's just like the circus." Alas, the job required a European Union work permit.