

Scientists as social parasites?

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*During my [flyfishing vacation last year](#), pretty much nothing was happening on this blog. Now that I've migrated the blog to WordPress, I can actually schedule posts to appear when in fact I'm not even at the computer. I'm using this functionality to re-blog a few posts from the [archives](#) during the month of august while I'm away. This post is from [June 20, 2011](#):

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In a recent [report on German public TV](#), a sad but tragically very commonplace procedure is being described as the latest, most extreme case of worker exploitation: scientists continuing to do science while being officially unemployed. 🤖

On the face of it, the report seems to be correct in claiming that people who are working despite being paid unemployment benefits are incriminating themselves – which is what people colloquially call social parasites. However, the idea of paying these benefits is to enable people to look for jobs, maybe even to go and learn a new, more promising trade. In short, to give the candidate the leeway to do everything possible to secure a new job as soon as possible. Now what is the best way to secure a job in science? To do more science, get more papers, get more teaching experience, etc.: whatever pads your CV is what will enhance your chances to get the next job in science.

Moreover, scientists are so highly specialized, unemployment agencies are not able to find adequate employment for them. This means that German unemployment offices who have experience with unemployed scientists are actually complicit: they will specifically allow you to keep working as a scientist while they pay you, because they know that this is the best thing in this situation. In fact, they realize that it would be counterproductive to force you to stop doing science. If you are a scientist in Germany and unemployed (pretty common species), go to your local unemployment agency and ask them if they'll let you continue working and they'll say yes, I promise. That's how normal this situation has become, with 65% of all jobs in German science being on short-term contracts.

This doesn't mean that it's a good thing that the money for science in Germany comes partly from the social budget and not exclusively from the science and education budget. Far from it. It is despicable that in some departments, the majority of PhD students will write their dissertation on unemployment benefits. If it weren't so sad, it would be laughable that so many of the 'excellent elite' PhD students who were able to secure a scholarship for their PhD, will not even get unemployment benefits, but have to finish their degrees on welfare. There's nothing positive about scores of postdocs finishing their last experiments and writing their papers while simultaneously writing the grant for the next projects and being paid from the wrong government branch. But it is neither criminal nor some exploitation perpetrated by unscrupulous professors in some isolated departments at German universities. It's just the deplorable standard situation in a totally messed up scientific career system and it's not even the worst part, not by a long shot.

And here is another reason why this practice will be difficult to change: the German taxpayer saves a lot of money. Think of this one scientist in the report who worked on short-term contracts for 17 years. For four years he was on benefits, which in Germany is 60% of your last

salary. This means that in this time, the German taxpayer, who would have been paying him a full salary, only paid 60% for the same service and part of that is even paid for by the scientist himself in the form of his unemployment insurance. That's some major savings right there.

What would the rational reaction of German politicians be to this report? Certainly not to try and prevent this gigantic money saver! More likely, one would expect them to demand to cut the salaries of scientists by 40% because 60% seems to be sufficient to keep them going. 🐼