How to Exploit Postdocs

PAULA STEPHAN

Imagine working for less than $16.00 an hour with minimal fringe benefits and little job security. It may not sound that bad in an economy where 8.0 percent of the labor force is unemployed, but if you are a 30-something-year-old PhD, it is not a good return on your 7-year investment in graduate education. Yet, thousands of PhDs routinely work for approximately $16.00 an hour as a postdoc. Many have minimal fringe benefits; most do not have paid family leave. Yet, they do so at a time when the average hourly wage for fulltime workers—regardless of their level of education—in the United States is $23.22. This means that the average US worker takes home just about the same amount every week as a postdoc. But the average US worker works only 34.4 hours a week, whereas postdocs work on average about 2650 hours a year, or 53 hours a week, to bring home a comparable annual salary of around $40,000 (Stephan 2012a, US Department of Labor 2012).

Some, particularly those who hire postdocs to staff their labs, see the postdoctoral model as a means of creating a supply of trained individuals that is greater than the market can possibly employ as researchers, given the current levels of funding and society’s commitment to research. Yet, faculty members and the universities where they work persist in staffing their labs with temporary workers. Why? Much of it has to do with incentives. It is in the interest of faculty members to employ postdocs. The fact that they are cheap is certainly a benefit. If, instead, faculty members were to staff their labs with staff scientists, they would have to pay 50–100 percent more than they pay to a postdoc (Stephan 2012a).

But the low price of postdocs hides the true cost of postdocs to society. Substantial resources, both their own and society’s, have been invested in their PhD training and are now being spent employing them in labs. This means that if a postdoc does not get a research job, taxpayers do not get a return on their investment. Neither does the postdoc. Take the case of someone who did not go to graduate school and instead entered the labor force in 2001. By 2008, he or she would have been earning approximately $58,000 a year (Stephan 2012b). His or her classmate, who went to graduate school and graduated in 2008, was earning about $38,400 as a postdoc that year (National Postdoctoral Association 2012). Do the math: Taking a 3-year postdoctoral position costs the postdoc close to $60,000 in forgone earnings, and many will forgo more than that, continuing in a postdoctoral position for 4, 5, or more years. It is not only low pay; working conditions, the absence of job security, and the lack of paid-family-leave policies make it difficult for postdocs to start families while they are in a postdoc position. Yet, many postdocs are in their 30s, the