



HOW PROFESSORS THINK:

Inside the Curious World of Academic Judgment

By Michèle Lamont

Excellence. Originality. Intelligence. Everyone in academia talks constantly about quality. But what exactly is it, and how do professors know it when they see it? What does someone mean when he says research is “exciting” or that an author is “very smart”? What makes him entitled to judge? If someone else with a PhD disagrees with him, how do they come to a conclusion they both can live with?

In the academic evaluation system known as “peer review,” respected professors pass judgment, usually confidentially, on other people’s work. But only the people in the discussions know exactly what is said, and how it’s said. Michele Lamont sat in on funding panels for fellowships and research grants and interviewed the members at length afterward. In *How Professors Think*, she tells us what she found out.

Anthropologists, political scientists, literary scholars, economists, historians and philosophers don’t have the same standards. . Economists like mathematical models, historians like different kinds of evidence, and philosophers don’t care much if no one but other philosophers can understand them. But when they come together to assess many other peoples’ work, they have to explain their criteria, respect each other’s expertise, and guard against only liking what looks like their own work. Is research original? Is it important? Is it brave, or simply self-promoting? Timely, or simply trendy?

If moral judgment affects judgment, so does diversity--but not in the way you think. Disciplinary, institutional, and regional diversity can matter even more than ethnicity or gender. To have too many awards go to philosophers is as bad as having too many go to men.

Judging quality isn’t robotically rational; it’s emotional and social too. Who else is in the room can matter a lot. Yet most academics’ self-respect is rooted in their faith that they can analyze complexity, and recognize and respect quality, to come to the fairest decisions about that elusive god “excellence” available in an imperfect world.

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