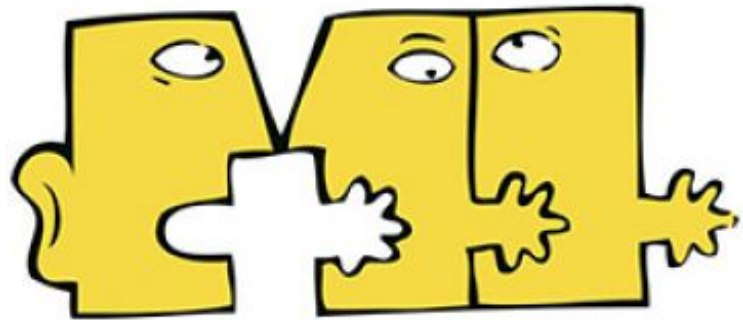


# Egoism and defensiveness are poisoning academic judgement

[THE timeshighereducation.com/opinion/egoism-and-defensiveness-are-poisoning-academic-judgement](https://www.timeshighereducation.com/opinion/egoism-and-defensiveness-are-poisoning-academic-judgement)

We are often warned against being judgemental. “Judge not, lest ye be judged”, for example, reminds us how vulnerable we are to others’ estimations of us, and how likely those estimations are to be biased.

Nevertheless, we continue to make judgements, both positive and negative, because we have evolved to do so. Human brains have been “domesticated” by our need to live in groups to survive. We assess others carefully, and monitor their views of us; if those views are negative, we may be cast out of the group.



But the academic setting is often referred to as an “ivory tower”: a biblical reference to noble purity, implying that those who devote themselves to intellectual work are untainted by the personal vanities and vulnerabilities associated with the daily round of praise and blame. And academics rightly pride themselves on making impartial, nuanced and evidence-based assessments. Nonetheless, self-serving biases abound.

These are evident not only in high-profile debates between colourful personalities, but also in the daily run of meetings, lectures and informal discussions. The academic progress towards enlightenment is full of what the psychologist Oliver James calls “office politics” and the [New York University](#) psychologist Ben Dattner calls “the blame game”, whereby people jockey for praise and demonstrate a sometimes ruthless determination to avoid blame.

For 15 years, my role in academia was at the interface of pastoral and academic well-being, for both academic staff and students. I was struck by how independent-minded academics could brood over others’ perceptions of their worth. A lecturer dedicated to teaching, for example, felt that her contributions were disregarded because her research was compromised by the time she spent with students. She knew her own value, but self-respect was not enough. Another example is requests for additional secretarial support, which often signalled a symbolic as well as a practical need: a granted request was an acknowledgement of status and workload. Over and over, too, I heard the sentence: “I don’t expect to be *thanked*, but it would be nice to be appreciated.”

While academics share a basic human need for recognition, there are elements in university culture that impede the warm flow of positive, elevating responses that can be seen in close relationships and in happier workplaces. First, discrepancies in status that appear minor to outsiders are magnified by academics' careful appraisal of one another's work. This follows Sayre's law, whereby the *interest* in esteem is inversely proportional to the magnitude of its reward. (According to the law's framer, Columbia University professor Wallace Stanley Sayre, "Academic politics is the most vicious and bitter form of politics because the stakes are so low.")

Second, academics, trained to be critical, are likely to point to deficits when invited to respond to a paper, lecture or idea. Recently, I heard a retired professor bemoan the current etiquette of thanking a speaker for a "fascinating" or "wonderful" talk (before going on to outline its deficits). In the professor's view, such praise diluted the intellectual atmosphere. This may explain a common saying of one of my former colleagues: "The sound of appreciation in this place is utter silence."

A third impediment to praise arises as academics see their reputations bound up with their own writings or discoveries. Thus, in the face of criticism, they are susceptible to "threat rigidity" – a common response in which we adhere more closely to our own views, and close our minds to those of others when we feel under threat.

And then, in academia, there is the issue of praise scarcity. In principle, esteem is not a limited commodity, but the prizes and positions that accrue to it are limited. When your status rests on research that may be read or understood by only a few select colleagues, and when those colleagues are motivated to value their work above yours, you are likely to feel insecure – a feeling that is unlikely to elicit generous appreciation of others.

For nearly three decades, universities have tried to address the peculiar stinginess of academic judgement through appraisals and mentoring schemes. These were intended to encourage mutual praise, but when criteria of excellence are fixed, overthought or bureaucratically boxed and labelled, many academics feel frustrated. Praise can often misfire, seeming forced and insincere, patronising or annoyingly off point. The so-called 360-degree technique, whereby an appraisee is invited to give feedback to the appraiser, is effective only where there is genuine responsiveness and appreciation.

With their students, however, academics generally follow very different rules of judgement. Aware of the status jolt young people experience in moving from the (normally) appreciative environment of home and school to the more demanding setting of a university, academics are generous with praise and frame criticism as faith in the student's potential.

This generous spirit needs to reach further into academia. Judgements are far more likely to be effective when they are seen to be fair and responsive, showing appreciation for others' aims, and encouragement for their future success. It is, after all, not praise that dilutes the intellectual atmosphere, but egoism and defensiveness.

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Her latest book, *Passing Judgment: Praise and Blame in Everyday Life*, is published by W. W. Norton on 9 February.