

Jealousy, happiness and the quest for status and salaries

By BRIAN MARTIN

THE current campaign for pay rises for academics is about money, to be sure, but it is also about that central currency in academic struggles, status. Academics compare their salaries with those of public servants, politicians and government scientists. The social dynamics of status and envy explain a lot about academia.

Compared to most other occupations, academics have much to be happy about. They have higher than average salaries, stimulating work and great control over the way they organise their time and tasks. Yet academics complain bitterly about their pay, about increasing workloads and about ever more diverse administrative requirements.

Even without these increased pressures, happiness can be elusive. Michael

Argyle in his book *The Psychology of Happiness* notes that there is little correlation between happiness and objective measures such as income.

A key factor is comparisons with others. If academics compared their salaries to those of ministers or nurses, they wouldn't complain so much. More than money, what's really involved here is status. Salary is a symbol of status in the general community. Just as important is status within academia.

One leading scholar I know received a significant promotion. Not a single member of his department offered congratulations. A different scholar obtained a dramatically better position at another university. Colleagues offered at most grudging congratulations. One explanation for the responses is jealousy.

Universities are status systems.

Individual academics keenly seek promotions, not just for increased pay but because of increased rank and associated status are ways of improving one's status. The trouble with the academic status system is that a general improvement in everyone's status is difficult, since status depends most of all on comparisons with immediate colleagues. When one person's status goes up, the relative status of others goes down.

Many academics resent those they believe are inferior to themselves but who receive equal or greater rewards. It is less common to hear academics acknowledging that there is anyone with greater accomplishments who has been treated less well than themselves.

The enormous significance attached to honours such as membership in academies and Nobel prizes is symp-

tomatic of the scholarly status race. There is usually more interest in who receives such honours than in what the recipients are being honoured for.

Envy has far-reaching consequences in academia, few of them pleasant. In the recent round of institutional amalgamations, some academics from "old" universities bitterly resisted joining with staff from former colleges of advanced education, who they perceived as inferior. Someone else rising in status can be quite a threat, even if one's own position remains objectively the same.

One way to get beyond the status race is to focus on intrinsic satisfaction. This is possible in teaching, in seeing students improve their understanding and performance. It is also possible in research, when the topic is chosen for its intellectual or social importance rather than its

utility as a vehicle for personal advance.

Some of my most satisfying intellectual experiences have been in collective projects outside academia. Away from the status system, it's much easier to have a free-ranging intellectual dialogue.

Inside the system, it can be a great personal challenge to carry on enjoying work without being disturbed by apparent unfairness in rewards. Those who achieve success may be resented, but often this is unwarranted. After getting an appointment or promotion, the successful academic adjusts to the new situation, making comparisons to a different group of peers. Happy? No more than before!

Brian Martin is in Science and Technology Studies at the University of Wollongong.
