Confronting academic snobbery

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Snobbery in academia can involve academics, general staff, students and members of the public, and can be based on degrees, disciplines, cliques and other categories. Though snobbery is seldom treated as a significant issue, it can have damaging effects on morale, research and public image. Strategies against snobbery include avoidance, private feedback, formal complaints and public challenges.

Introduction

Story 1:

Academic speaking to a member of the public: 'What would you know about it?'

Story 2:

A prominent researcher visited a university to give a public lecture. When a local teacher dared to ask a question, the visitor responded, 'That was the wrong question, from the wrong person, at the wrong time. Better luck next time.'

It is not unusual to hear people who have encountered academics and the university environment telling about the scorn coming down at them from above. Non-academics may feel what they say is considered of little value just because they don't know the right jargon or have a degree. When their questions are dismissed without serious consideration, they may think: Are my questions stupid? or Why won't the academics answer?

Many undergraduates find that their opinions are not respected by their teachers. Research students feel overlooked when their supervisors cannot remember their names or don't greet them when they meet in the corridor. Going to international conferences in their discipline to present a paper for the first time, doctoral students might encounter an inner circle of highly regarded professors who do not look in their direction, and hardly ever bother to introduce themselves if they happen to end up next to them in the lunch queue. Academics in the social sciences or humanities who work together with natural scientists soon realise that what they are doing is not considered real science, just as sociologists using qualitative methods are treated as less scientific than those who use statistics. Scholars on short-term appointments are potential targets of academic snobbery from those with permanent jobs (DeSantis, 2011).

In this article, the authors introduce the topic of academic snobbery, using stories to illustrate its different forms. The authors' special interest is in the seldom-investigated challenge of how to expose and oppose academic snobbery.

Varieties of academic snobbery

Story 3:

A junior academic who could find only short-term work felt she was invisible. Her head of school did not respond to her emails. When others entered a room, they were greeted, but she was ignored. Then, one day, she brought a friend, a famous local figure, to give a seminar. For a change, everyone said hello to her, and her head replied to her latest email. However, within a couple of weeks she was invisible again.

Story 4:

At a university, academics met to discuss a planned relocation of their organisational units within a common

building, which had a pompous main entrance. The representative of one of the social sciences, who obviously considered his discipline superior to the others', said: 'We can't accept any proposal where we will be located away from the main entrance. That entrance is part of our brand.'

Story 5:

A group of junior academics developed a new research area. Those in mainstream disciplines ignored the junior academics and their research – until the group managed to secure a very large research grant. Suddenly, everyone was eager to cooperate with them and went to great lengths to make their own research projects include a perspective on the area.

Story 6:

At a seminar, the head of a research institute was presenting his latest research. A PhD student asked a question about the professor's data collection method, and received this reply: 'I have written my PhD thesis and had it approved. I now have my driving licence for doing research.'

Story 7:

In a unit where nearly all the academics had PhDs, people called each other by their given names. However, one of the academics, doing a PhD, was regularly addressed by a particular colleague as 'Ms Jones'.

Story 8:

A highly productive scholar was leaving the men's toilet and encountered a scientist who (believing his own discipline was superior) said: 'Leaving your office, are you?'

These stories here are samples of those told to us during informal conversations in Australia and Sweden. It seems as if everyone who has spent just a little time within academia has a snobbery story to share. Details that would identify a particular university or individual have been removed or altered to keep the identity of the sources of the stories confidential.

As illustrated above, snobbery can be directed towards a number of targets: non-academics, students and colleagues with lower status, including those working in disciplines or on topics considered inferior, those on temporary contracts and those with degrees from 'inferior' universities. Sometimes snobbery is revealed by a scornful remark or glance; in other instances, it is manifested through behaviour, as with the junior academics developing a research area. Sometimes snobbery is revealed by the absence of attention or politeness; the insult is in being treated less well than others.

Academic snobbery can be directed towards particular individuals; it can also involve condescending attitudes towards entire disciplines. Academic snobbery resembles other types of discriminatory or unpleasant behaviour involving status and hierarchies. What appears to one person to be snobbery might be better interpreted as gender stereotyping, racism, ageism, bullying or ignorance. Similarly, what some see as gender discrimination might be better interpreted as snobbery. Although remarks might be hurtful, academic snobbery is seldom as harmful as bullying that systematically targets an individual.

There is a bigger picture too. The competition between universities to improve their reputations and to rise within national and international rankings is a breeding ground for snobbery. The increasing attention given to celebrity intellectuals encourages striving for fame rather than the satisfactions of service to scholarship and the community. At elite universities and within disciplines whose members feel superior to others, cultures of contempt for lesser orders can develop and fester.

Does academic snobbery matter?

Some people might think: So what? Snobbery is everywhere, and if you think academic snobbery is especially annoying, find another job. This type of snobbery has consequences beyond the effects on people's emotions. It might mean that relevant questions and concerns are not addressed because they don't come from the right kind of people. Innovation can be stymied when leading figures treat ideas from newcomers with contempt.

Individuals who might have become passionate and innovative teachers and researchers may turn their back on academia if they don't feel respected and valued, and instead put their energy and initiative into other endeavours. Research findings might be ignored because they came from the wrong discipline.

The scholarly system of peer review of publications is designed to promote quality independent of the status of the authors. Status considerations, which are hard to avoid, even in peer review (Epstein, 1990; Wenneras & Wold, 1997), play a major role in other facets of academic life. Senior figures, for example, can use their influence over appointments, tenure and promotions to give priority to people who support their line of academic thinking. Within small academic environments, people curry favour with their superiors to maximise their chances of promotion and funding.

In a Danish study on emotions within academia, Charlotte Bloch (2012) interviewed 54 people in academic positions, ranging in status from PhD students to professors. Although her book is first and foremost concerned

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Table 1. Possible responses to academic snobbery, with advantages and disadvantages

Method	Advantages	Disadvantages
Avoidance	Reduced exposure to snobbery	Not easy with colleagues and superiors; snobbery not challenged
Private feedback to individuals	Behaviour change possible while saving face	Some individuals will not respond or will be offended; risk of an increase in snobbish behaviour
Direct challenge in public: serious/rational	Behaviours confronted; witnesses potentially empowered	Increased antagonism
Direct challenge in public: humorous	Behaviours confronted; witnesses potentially empowered; antagonism limited; difficult to respond to	Problem perceived to be treated as not serious
Formal complaints	Behaviours confronted	Complaints not addressed; complainant seen as over-reacting
Reverse snobbery	Snobbery countered	Snobbery entrenched as mode of interaction

with emotions and how staff within academia deal with them, it provides plenty of examples that can be interpreted as academic snobbery. For Bloch's informants, doing good science for the benefit of society does not come across as a high priority. Instead, researchers spend much energy positioning themselves to have their work recognised by the right people and to secure a job in a competitive working environment.

When success in academia depends more on navigating the system than developing and communicating useful knowledge, society can lose out. So it is in the general interest to combat academic snobbery. Few people like to think of themselves as being snobs – after all, they think they really are superior and are deserving of more attention and respect than others.

Dealing with snobbery

There is considerable research on the social and psychological dynamics relevant to snobbery, such as on hierarchies in animal and human groups (Chase, 1980), scorn and envy (envy being the obverse of scorn) (Fiske, 2011), class analysis and social stratification (Scott, 1996), narcissism (Twenge & Campbell 2009) and the corruption of power (Kipnis, 1976; Robertson, 2012). This research can provide insight into what is going on when a person is snobbish. Here, though, our interest is in a more practical matter: what you can do when confronted by academic snobbery. This is a matter of strategy and tactics.

Research into strategy and tactics occurs in some fields, such as business and warfare, but interpersonal interactions are rarely studied from a strategic point of view. To do this, it is possible to draw inspiration from the classic work by Erving Goffman (1970) on strategic interaction,

and on more recent analysis of the dilemmas of strategic encounters by James Jasper (2006). Studying men's domination of women in political parties and organisations, Berit Ås (1979) identified five 'master suppression techniques', ranging from 'making invisible' and 'ridiculing' to 'withholding information'; however, little of such work looks specifically at snobbery.

The authors drew up a list of possible responses to snobbery inspired by tactics used to oppose other sorts of injustice, such as unfair dismissal and police beatings (Martin, 2007). Another source of ideas was a set of counter strategies and validation strategies proposed to deal with each of Ås's master suppression techniques (Amnéus et al., 2004). We circulated the resulting list to others to obtain feedback, including examples and other types of responses (see Table 1). In all this, our aim is to discover effective ways to challenge snobbery rather than to justify, continue or increase it.

Broadly, strategies can be classified into 'exit' and 'voice' (Hirschman, 1970): either avoid snobbish behaviours or speak out about them. 'Exit' in this context means avoiding people or situations where snobbery is likely to occur. This is possible at, for example, a large conference where there are many people to talk with, but avoidance is more difficult when faced with snobbery in your research team or by your department head. Snobbery is not usually serious enough to warrant changing supervisors or jobs; however, even if you are not personally bothered by snobbery, it may be causing damage to learning and research in your area.

'Voice' means expressing criticism or complaint. There are many ways to do this, and it can be done by individuals, a concerned group of colleagues or through an already established organisation, such as a union. The

most discreet approach is to speak to individuals in private, encouraging them to reflect on their behaviour. This can be effective in some cases, but those most likely to be responsive are probably least likely to be offenders.

Another method of speaking out is to make a formal complaint using, for example, a grievance procedure. While there might be rules against sexual harassment and bullying, there are no rules against snobbery, so making a formal complaint is unlikely to be effective. Complaining to a boss is possible, but what can a boss do except have a private conversation with the alleged offender?

The most promising form of voice is some sort of public challenge to snobbish acts. 'Public' here means in front of the person concerned and/or others who are potentially aware of the behaviour. Most strategies are verbal, and for this it is possible to draw on responses to verbal abuse (Elgin, 2009; Horn, 1996; Thompson & Jenkins 1993).

Story 9:

Smith, a junior researcher, has just given a seminar and not done especially well. A senior figure in the audience comments to a colleague, loud enough for you and several others to hear: 'That was pathetic. Smith ought to go back to the caves.' This is accompanied by a facial expression of disgust.

What can you say? What can you do?

Option 1:

'Smith is new to the game. I'm going to suggest how the presentation could be improved.' Even though the speaker is demonstrating a supportive approach, it is an implicit reproach.

Option 2:

'I hope you'll give Smith some helpful feedback.' This is more explicit.

Option 3:

'When did you start thinking that sneering is a scholarly sort of response?' This is stronger.

Option 4:

'Why are you being such a snob?' This explicitly confronts the snobbery head on.

Because snobbery is seldom seen as a major issue, one risk in challenging it is being perceived as over-reacting, though it is a probably a risk less for witnesses than for direct targets. In addition to having a moral responsibility to react, more options might also be available to the witnesses than to the target of the scorn.

One way for targets and witnesses to minimise the risk is to use humour. This leads to more options, given that humour can be diversionary, subtle and/or aggressive. The following comments need to be accompanied by appropriate facial expressions and gestures, and delivered with just the right timing.

Option 5:

'Back to the caves? Does that mean joining you?'

Option 6:

'Back to the caves? Isn't that where Plato obtained inspiration?'

Critique expressed in an ironic frame is likely to be taken as less severe than open criticism; the non-serious framing takes the edge off the criticism (Dews *et al.*, 1995). In addition, since having a sense of humour is so highly valued in most societies, anyone considered unable to take a joke is considered to be over-reacting. Many feminists and targets of bullying have heard remarks about their lack of humour; those who are snobbish are just as vulnerable to this criticism. Because humour is often situation specific, preparation and practice are needed to develop the capacity for effective responses. People who anticipate encountering snobbery might benefit from practising with a friend or trusted colleague.

Story 10:

After a centre of excellence was set up in a department, which involved just a few academics, one of those left out put a sign on his door: 'Peripheral mediocrity.'

When exposing snobbery, there are two main audiences: the person exhibiting snobbish behaviour and the witnesses. Taking action in front of witnesses is usually more powerful. Suppose an academic, Xavier Uppity, when walking by, says hello only to those he thinks are worthy of consideration. If you are one of those he snubs, you can draw attention to his behaviour by pointedly by saying hello to Xavier, given that it is normally considered impolite not to respond to a greeting. If someone is accompanying you, or standing nearby, Xavier's snub will be witnessed. This will be effective only if Xavier doesn't want to be too obvious about being snobbish.

For completeness, another type of response should be mentioned: reverse snobbery, namely, being snobbish yourself. If academics in a clique let everyone know they think they are superior, you can form your own counterclique. This strategy might be satisfying, but it has the serious disadvantage of perpetuating snobbery. Indeed, you are likely to end up scorning others who are innocent of snobbery.

Conclusion

Higher education, formulated as an ideal, is about learning in which ideas are of prime importance. If engagement with ideas is central, then it should not matter who is expressing the ideas; they should be examined on their own merits. This accords with a traditional view in science that what matters is the evidence, not who presents it. The practice of anonymous peer review is testimony to this orientation.

These high-minded ideals are often violated in practice. In science, a person's status does make a difference to how their ideas are treated, with Nobel Prize winners being accorded more credibility than non-Nobelist scientists and non-scientists, even when Nobelists speak outside their areas of expertise.

Snobbery, scorn, condescension and contempt are deviations from the ideal of the primacy of ideas; they are negative attitudes about people. Snobbery is an attitude that targets people rather than (or as well as) their ideas. In this sense, challenging snobbery is important in the struggle for an egalitarian ideal, namely, the primacy of ideas in higher education.

Strategies to deal with snobbery include avoiding people who are snobbish, making private comments to them, confronting behaviours in public and using humour to expose and deflate snobbery. Countering snobbery can be seen as a strategic interaction, although few people have studied strategies against snobbery. There is much to be learnt from everyday encounters.

Because much snobbery is low key and not widely seen as all that important, there is a risk in making a big deal about it. It's possible to misinterpret an innocent comment as scorn and, as a result, be seen as overly sensitive. In the face of obviously scornful behaviours, there is a risk of being seen to over-react. When cultural differences are involved, the risk of being incorrectly seen as snobbish and the possibility of over-reacting are greater. The more common problem is that people are either unconcerned or afraid to do anything about academic snobbery. The first major step is to make any sort of a response, the second is to choose a method and the third is to learn from the interaction and become more effective in the future.

Acknowledgments

Brian Martin and Majken Jul Sørensen are colleagues in the School of Humanities and Social Inquiry, University of Wollongong.

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