

## **Critiquing the idea of a prestige economy**

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Recent work on the idea of a prestige economy in academic life (Blackmore and Kandiko, 2012a,b) has focused largely on the department or research centre (Blackmore and Kandiko, 2009) as a significant site of prestige. It has been argued that the academic department remains the principal structure through which academic work is organised, and that recognition and reward comes through the institution, largely for research-related achievement and generally on a disciplinary basis. However it has also been noted that disciplines transcend departments and that indeed an increasing amount of academic work is interdisciplinary or at least multidisciplinary, so it is not realistic to think of an academic department as an isolated entity when considering patterns of prestige. Exploration has been largely sociologically-based, drawing significantly on Bourdieu's ideas of capital and habitus (Bourdieu, 1984; 1988) to propose departments as sites of prestige generation, recognition and trading. A three-part model has been proposed, to suggest that academic habitus rests at the intersection of: internal motivation; external motivation and requirements; and the social site of the department or centre. The model has offered a relatively straightforward way of conceptualising and investigating prestige, and identifying some of the tensions in academic work.

Current exploration of this field problematises this useful but limited conception of prestige in three ways. Firstly, making the department or centre the focus of an investigation contains an assumption that prestige is best understood through conceptualising the organisation as a conventional structure, with a related assumption that this is the most effective way to frame social relationships at work. Even if one takes a structural view of organisations using a metaphor of mechanism (Morgan, 2006), this entails conceptual issues about how one department-level prestige economy relates to another, and how other organisational levels, such as the faculty, the institution and the system interact with the departmental level. The influence of the discipline adds another dimension and layer of complexity. Taking a view of the department in its organisational context leads to consideration of the nature of communities and boundaries, and how these relate to the generation, recognition and trading of prestige. This is a potentially fruitful area of investigation but it also leads to a conceptual concern: a questioning of conventional mechanistic ways of viewing organisations principally as enduring, formally articulated structures. Academic life is much more complex than that, and is characterised by a multitude of connections that individuals and groups develop and maintain for a range of purposes, fluctuating in use and usefulness through time. Network theory, and more particularly social network theory (Kadushin, 2012), may offer a way of moving beyond a mechanistic view of organizations by focusing on the ways in which networks can be conceptualised, how and why they develop, what sorts of entities and relationships occur in networks and what the implications of this are for the generation, recognition and trading of prestige.

Secondly, a more psychologically-based account of prestige would explore the ways in which the seeking and recognition of prestige is a way of meeting basic psychological needs for safety, affectance and status (Kadushin, 2012), offering an internal account of prestige dispositions and actions, to complement a sociological perspective and thus offer a rounded view. Recent writing on the psychological aspects of community have emphasised dispositions to engage socially (Lieberman, 2013) and the psychology of moral tribalism (Greene, 2013). Significantly, perceptions of the prestige associated with an object influences judgement. That is to say, if someone is informed that something is

prestigious, they are more likely to see it as having positive qualities and to accord it higher standing (Hargreaves, 1986). Thus prestige is a way of functioning effectively in a complex world, partly through stereotyping (Schneider, 2004) and related mental processes. This removes the need for much detailed decision-making but raise questions about the consequences of unquestioning acceptance of socially held perceptions of worth. If decisions are influenced by an unconscious process that uses prestige to filter perception, this raises potential moral and ethical concerns about the ways in which prestige may be socially excluding in its effect.

Thirdly, the idea of a prestige economy and the use of a term such as capital seems to emphasise a self-interested view of human endeavour. However, developments in conceptualisations of social capital in recent years (see Field, 2007) have challenged Bourdieu's view of capital being individually held by members of elite groups to maintain their position. Instead Putnam has emphasised the existence of social capital at the level of society (Putnam, 2000) and Coleman (1994) has proposed that all members of a society can possess social capital, which may differ in nature. In particular, a distinction is drawn between bridging capital, which may be weak in terms of social ties but provide access to other resources, or bonding capital, which offers strong social ties but is anchoring and limiting in its effects. An exploration of these ideas helps to relate collegiality in academic life to the concept of prestige and also offers a way of bridging organisational levels. Prestige is thus conceptualised as being potentially of narrow or broad social benefit. This leads once again to consideration of the ethics of prestige, in that it implies that some forms of prestige are more inclusive than others.

It is believed that a concern for the organisational, psychological and ethical components of prestige can offer a wider and more nuanced view of prestige in academic life. These aspects will be considered, as contributions to a framework that will assist further research in the field.

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