The Culture of Mediocrity

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Abstract  Select groups and organizations embrace practices that perpetuate their inferiority. The result is the phenomenon we call “mediocrity.” This article examines the conditions under which mediocrity is selected and maintained by groups over time. Mediocrity is maintained by a key social process: the marginalization of the adept, which is a response to the group problem of what to do with the highly able. The problem arises when a majority of a group is comprised of average members who must decide what to do with high performers in the group. To solve this problem, reward systems are subverted to benefit the less able and the adept are cast as deviant. Marginalization is a resolution of two tensions: marginalization of the adept for their behavior, and protection from the adept for the mediocre. The American research university is used as an example to describe the phenomenon and to formulate a theoretic argument. The forms and consequences of marginalization are discussed. Marginalizing the adept illustrates an anti-meritocratic behavioral pattern which serves to sustain social systems on which all people, however able, depend.

Keywords  Higher education · Stratification · Reward systems · Academic careers · Universities

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Introduction

Why do some groups embrace practices that perpetuate their inferiority? In doing so, they are labeled “mediocre.” Mediocrity consists of central group practices performed around the average whose repetition results in their embeddedness in a group. In normal conditions, some groups become inferior and seek to improve. But under other conditions, groups become inferior, remain mediocre, or improve, but not by much. A ceiling is produced that prevents their breakthrough to superior levels, despite some attempts to do so. It remains a puzzle of how mediocrity may be socially produced and maintained over time.

This article pertains to the broad class of theoretic phenomena concerned with the reproduction of status structures in groups and organizations. It addresses this concern by focusing on the phenomenon of mediocrity, which may be viewed as path dependent: mediocrity is more responsive to earlier states of a system rather than to exogenous pressures to change. As such, mediocrity becomes traditional, “the way of life,” and “how things are done” in a group. The sources of sustained mediocrity are argued to consist of 1.) an organizational problem in the distribution of ability and 2.) the presence of group leaders who reinforce the claims of the less able.

Writing what would become a classic in the American Sociological Review, Goode (1967) formulated his theoretic ideas on the protection of the inept. “The tolerance and protection of the inept,” Goode wrote, “are pervasive features of all societies. This phenomenon is a response to the ubiquitous group problem of what to do with the less able” (Goode 1967: 5). All groups and organizations must deal with individuals who are unable to satisfy performance expectations. They do this, Goode argued, not by exposing or expelling members for lesser achievement, for this would prompt untoward attention to the group and compromise its reputation. This is why professions, for instance, refuse to divulge information about the competence of professionals and why they assert that it is unethical to publicly criticize fellow members. Instead, groups utilize the services of the inept in alternative ways and thereby limit the range of their potential destructiveness (Goode 1967: 6). The inept are protected, according to Goode, in ways that protect the group from the inept.

There is a related social process, unexplored by Goode and others, at work in some groups and organizations. This consists of the marginalization of the adept. All groups and organizations are marked by a distribution of ability. For Goode, the adept (though he never used this term) always outnumbered the less able. Goode’s organizational problem was to figure out how a group can get along and satisfy its goals while still making use of the less able. What if the problem is reversed and the distribution tilted in the other direction? The adept make up the margins, the average dominate. The situation presents the organizational dilemma of how the adept must be handled in order for average members to protect themselves from the highly able. The result is a complex creation of a seeming sociological pathology wherein the normal are transfigured into the deviant. Marginalization of the adept arises through an elaborate process of social subversion.
In colloquial terms, the process may be seen to extend from “tall poppy syndrome,” the social phenomenon characteristically observed in Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom, in which people of genuine merit are resented, attacked, and “cut down” because their ability and achievement elevate them above their peers. “Jante law,” more characteristic of Scandinavian countries, is a similar process. The phenomenon originates in Herodotus’ *The Histories* (Book 5, 92e-g). Thrasylulus, the tyrant of Myletus, was an ally of Periander, one of the seven wise men. A messenger sent from Periander asks Thrasylulus for advice on ruling. Thrasylulus, instead of responding, takes the messenger for a walk in a field of wheat, where he slices off all the tallest stalks until obliterating the best part of the crop. The messenger, reporting back to Periander, thought Thrasylulus a madman, a destroyer of his most valued possessions. Interpreted by Periander, the message was that a wise ruler would preempt challenges to his rule by “removing” those prominent men who might be powerful enough to supersede him. Acting on the message, Periander proceeded by decapitating the best men around him.

All people are penalized by reward systems of one kind or another, be it in the realm of beauty, athletics, education, work, and so forth. Most people wish to believe that reward systems operate effectively because they are thought to be based on merit. Survey research has repeatedly revealed not only people’s widespread belief in the idea of meritocracy, but also their belief that systems do, in fact, work thus so (Klugel and Smith 1986; Ladd 1994; Ladd and Bowman 1998). But all reward systems, like those of Herodotus, have flaws. Sometimes people are penalized by reward systems even when merit should work in their favor (e.g., Western 2006).

This article treats academia—specifically the American research university—as an example in which to make observations and formulate a theoretic argument about the subversion of highly able people in groups and organizations. Because it is argued that the maintenance of mediocrity reflects anti-meritocratic behaviors, alleged bastions of meritocracy become places in which to examine the phenomenon. The American research university is thus a prime but by no means only case in point (Castilla and Benard 2010).

The article has five parts. First, I discuss the normative operation of reward systems, which provides a theoretic basis of the account. Second, I examine the conditions under which marginalization of the adept arises. Third, I reveal the consequences of marginalizing the adept for both the adept and the less able, and the consequences of not marginalizing the adept. Fourth, I explore the purposes of marginalization, focusing specifically on social-psychological and organizational demands that it satisfies. Fifth, in a reprise, I synthesize the work by joining the article’s institutional premises with theoretic work in a conflict perspective. I conclude with examples that highlight the array of settings where a culture of mediocrity is found. The present work treats the phenomenon not as an isolated individual or discrete event (cf. Feather 1989), but as a broader means to produce a system by habitualizing the practice of marginalization. The article represents an explanation of the overlooked but crucial role that mediocrity performs in sustaining social systems.
The Operation of Reward Systems

The allocation of positive and negative sanctions is predicated on the existence of a reward system. In any given realm of social activity, a group operates with shared expectations of prescribed and proscribed behavior. Individual behavior elicits approbation or disapprobation depending on how the behavior corresponds to values of the group. Approbation and disapprobation can vary in degree; esteem is conferred upon those whose behavior satisfies a group's most cherished values, stigma on those whose behavior sharply deviates from group values.

A line of sociological thought views modern societies as achievement-based. There are three principal ideas that motivate this understanding of modern societies. First, stratification in various social arenas and society at-large arises from the application of achievement criteria. These criteria are set to institutional goals. Role performance is evaluated based on how well it satisfies the institutional goals in which the role is based. By this view, social statuses are achieved in contrast to other types of social systems in which statuses are mostly ascribed (Parsons 1951, especially pp. 151–200). In general, when students are responsive to learning, they are rewarded by teachers with good grades, thus satisfying institutional goals of education. In general, when attorneys attract and retain clients, they are rewarded by the firm with higher salaries, thus satisfying institutional goals of a type of work. In general, when children progressively assume adult responsibilities, they are admired by parents with esteem, thus satisfying institutional goals of marriage and family.

Second, achievement criteria are universalistic (Parsons 1951, especially pp. 182–200). That is, criteria used to evaluate performance are independent of personal, particularistic individual attributes. Behavior is judged according to pre-established impersonal criteria in accord with institutional goals, as opposed to the social attributes of the people in their roles, such as race, religion, political party affiliation, class, gender, or sexual orientation (Parsons 1951; Merton [1957] 1968a, especially pp. 604–615). Teachers who reward only high-performing white students do not satisfy institutional goals of education, nor are institutional goals satisfied by attorneys who select clients based on income or parents who in modern societies confer esteem only on male offspring. In addition, universalistically grounded rewards are bestowed in accord with the measure of performance. Rewards should be commensurate with performance, further establishing a principle of merit (Merton 1973a; Zuckerman 1988: 514–520). It should take greater achievement to earn an A over a B, to make still more money, or garner still further esteem.

Finally, achievement-orientations, in small groups as in society more broadly, are normative (Parsons 1951; Merton [1957] 1968a). This is not to say that all groups or institutions or societies operate fully faithful to these premises. Rather these premises are a developmental component of advanced bureaucratic societies toward which groups, institutions, and broader societies strive to conform.

Deviation from these norms is apparent throughout society, its groupings and institutions. The well-established literature on particularism in science, to take but one social institution, illustrates the point (Long and Fox 1995; Zuckerman 1988). As Durkheim explained, deviation from these, as from other norms, is both expected and necessary (Durkheim [1895] 1982). It is expected because individuals differ,
part by the degree to which they internalize these norms, constituting a group in
which there will never be complete conformity. Deviance is necessary in order to
remind people of desired behavior. Desired behavior is only made more clear by
demonstrable contrasts from it.

This line of thought is consistent with Goode's articulation of protecting the
inert. Those doing the protecting are able, while the inert are less able, to satisfy
institutional goals. Protectors understand the goals, identify with (albeit in greater or
lesser degrees), and perform in accordance with them. The inert usually understand
the goals. One cannot be inert unless judged against a specific collectively
understood standard. They may identify with the goals but be unable to achieve
them, or they may reject the goals altogether, perhaps having once embraced them
at an earlier point in time. The inert must be "handled" by the more competent so
as not to contaminate the group, weaken its social mandate, or handicap the
institutional enterprise.

Merton, Zuckerman, and others have written extensively about the operation of
the reward system in science and higher education more generally (e.g., Gaston
1978; Merton 1973b; Cole and Cole 1973; Reskin 1977; Zuckerman 1977;
Zuckerman and Merton 1971). The institutional goal of academic fields is to
advance the state of knowledge (Merton 1973a). In the words of Shils (1984: 3):
"The discovery and transmission of truth is the distinctive task of the academic
profession, just as the care of the health of the patient is the distinctive task of the
medical profession, and the protection, within the law, of the client's rights and
interests is the distinctive task of the legal profession." In order to discover and
transmit truth, the research and scholarly role of the academic becomes paramount.
Institutionally, this is the case even amidst other significant roles that academics
perform since performance in those roles is ultimately contingent upon the fruits of
labor in research.

Like other statuses, the status of [the academic] involves not a single role but,
in varying mixture, a complement of roles. These are of four principal kinds:
research, teaching, administrative, and gatekeeping roles ... The research role,
which provides for the growth of ... knowledge is central, with the others
being functionally ancillary to it. For plainly, if there were no [scholarly]
investigation, there would be no new knowledge to be transmitted through the
teaching role, no need to allocate resources for investigation, no research
organization to administer, and no new flow of knowledge for gatekeepers to
regulate (Merton and Zuckerman 1973: 520).

In light of the institutional goals of academe, when individuals satisfy them (in
varying degrees) through research and publication, they are rewarded, if the reward
system is itself operating in accord with institutional goals. The rewards are
normally conferred by peers in one's field since these are the people understood to
be competent to judge contributions, a key factor in the process of certifying that the
extension of the knowledge domain is in fact a furtherance of what practitioners in a
field already know (Merton 1973a). Rewards are also conferred, in response to peer
recognition, by administrators who oversee the colleges, universities, centers and
institutes in which academics work. Salary, promotion, honors and honorific titles,
awards, elected offices, esteem, prestige, and many other forms of recognition constitute the currency in which rewards are distributed.

By contrast, those who do not satisfy the institutional goals of academe do not reap rewards, if, again, the reward system is itself operating in accord with institutional goals. Those who satisfy them partially are partially rewarded. In short, increments of reward and recognition ought to accrue in ways commensurate with contributions, if in accord with the normative underpinnings of the institution and its operation.

Instances of particularism in the operation of the reward system of academe, in which its normative functioning is partially suspended, are well-noted. The Matthew Effect, so-named and discussed by Merton, is a case in point (Merton 1973b). The Effect holds that already recognized scientists tend to receive disproportionate recognition for subsequent work compared to less recognized scientists for comparable contributions. Such disparity in the distribution of rewards, when it occurs, constitutes a structural failing in the operation of the system.

This explains why individuals of scholarly and scientific accomplishment are marked by rational authority (Shils 1972). Society members stand in awe of the Einsteins and Newtons, Nobel Prize winners and Fields Medalists because a community of their peers has judged their contributions to be among the very best, by having satisfied the most exacting institutional goals of their fields. The same is true of the Michael Jordans in sports, the Mozarts in music, the Picassos in art, the Burhams in architecture, the Schweitzers in medicine, and so forth. To operate at their best, institutions are socially set-up such that we reward outstanding performance (Goode 1978).

This normative, achievement-based understanding of modern society, though first articulated some years ago, remains a useful lens through which to begin to view the present concern. It is, however, important to note that this mode of understanding also possesses limitations. What is more, it wholly overlooked the presently described phenomenon wherein meritocracy yields to anti-meritocratic patterns. This normative understanding, then, helps to orient the discussion, but it is not the whole story. Indeed, a fuller interpretation of mediocrity relies upon flaws found in this view. We shall return to these issues in the “theoretic reprise.”

Conditions of Marginalization

The situation described above presents reward systems allied with institutional goals. In groups and organizations, however, conditions arise when the reverse occurs. Those who do not satisfy institutional goals are rewarded; those who do, marginalized. A reversal of norms occurs. The process indicates an inversion of Merton’s Matthew Effect: to those who have not given as much as those who have, more is provided.

Marginalization is a social process wherein an individual is relegated to a position of comparative unimportance and powerlessness. Marginalization of the adept takes multiple forms: intimidation, torment, pressure, humiliation, mocking, provocation, and outright discrimination, as in unfounded disparities in the
distribution of resources and rewards. In their work on faculty incivility, Twale and De Luca (2008: 19) discussed behaviors that in combination also operate in the process of marginalizing the adept:

- Manipulating and intimidating the seemingly powerless.
- Divulging confidential information.
- Assigning work loads with unrealistic expectations.
- Using public humiliation, insults, innuendo, rumor, slander, libel, sarcasm, backstabbing, talking down to, and lies.
- Excluding, alienating, ostracizing, silencing, patronizing, and scapegoating others.
- Unfairly criticizing, treating, hounding, micromanaging, and undermining.
- Withholding resources or information or failing to render a decision.
- Belittling or dismissing valid opinions and ideas.
- Deceiving, using passive-aggressive behaviors, and flaunting power.
- Eroding another’s self-confidence and self-esteem.
- Not correcting false information.
- Involving others as allies who become complicit in these behaviors.
- Shunning, denying someone’s existence, questioning judgment or decisions, and continually and consistently interrupting.

The example of the American research university helps to draw out the points. In select academic departments and in offices throughout a university, one can witness a reversal of institutional norms. In its most common expression, the reversal consists of marginalizing high-performing publishers while rewarding lower-performing academics who have stopped publishing or publish little and have turned to other pursuits, typically teaching and service roles.

In the context of the research university, value is assigned to publication because of its correspondence to ultimate institutional goals of academe—the extension of certified knowledge. Thus, wherever one engages in it, however great or little, there is a presence of rational authority (Shils 1972). Because publication is preeminently central, individuals who perform it are, institutionally, rewarded, recognizing that the amount of the reward will, of course, depend on the size of the contribution as well as organizational norms about performance. In any case, it is contrary to the system for individuals to be marginalized for such achievement.¹

The value of research and publication is seen in its conformity to institutional goals of academe. But because it most differentiates among academics, including those employed by research universities, it also runs the potential of generating animosity. Carried further, it potentially prompts ridicule, attack, and ostracism. In these general conditions, the distribution of rewards is contested by competing individuals or groups. Following Gamson (1961), the conditions favor coalition formation: decisions about rewards are to be made and there are more than two

¹ Unless we change the context. In American comprehensive universities, liberal arts colleges, and community colleges, for example, teaching is, if not the gold-standard, then much more prominently part of the normative role set. Quantitative and qualitative differences above the average in teaching may garner still more rewards; those who devote “too much” time to research may be punished. Still by this view, the system operates meritocratically in accordance with organizational goals.
social units attempting to maximize their share of the payouts. No single alternative will maximize the payout to the competing parties and thus there is no agreeable resolution to the competing claims. No one possesses dictatorial power and thus no resources sufficient to control the allocation of rewards individually. And, no one has veto power—every member of the broader group need not be included in the winning coalition.

A problem arises in the operation of a reward system, and the substance of social life that ensues, when two conditions change:

1. The distribution of ability in a group or organization sways in favor of the average, and;
2. Among the average, there are leaders who in defiance are able to institute an alternative system of rewards.

These conditions make marginalization of the adept enforceable and sustainable. Ultimately, they lead to a group legitimacy of marginalizing the adept. Moreover, it is not only that distributive and procedural justice fails situationally (Cook and Hegtvedt 1983; Hegtvedt and Markovsky 1995; Jasso 1980); injustice is instituted as part of an enduring order. The result is the production and maintenance of mediocrity.

How do the less able come to outnumber the adept to make subversion possible? The distribution of the less able is apt to sway in their favor when group membership criteria are vague. Membership criteria are most likely vague when the goals of a group or organization are themselves ambiguous. Ambiguity of goals arises when the goals are largely unknown, poorly articulated, or so complex and multifaceted that a group or organization is left with no unifying purpose. This is often the case, for example, in large public universities.

There are two principal ways in which the less able can come to outnumber the adept. One way is through recruitment. Weak people are brought into a group or organization in the absence of clear selection criteria. They are also brought in through an explicit disfavor for high-achieving individuals. For example, some faculty members might be heard to say: “Why would someone from Columbia University want to come here?” Or, “She belongs at Stanford or the University of Chicago, not here.” Decoding such talk, the observation is: “Why waste money on someone who is slumming it and will be taken elsewhere.” Given the quality of the host department, there is something rational about the remark. Ultimately, it makes inferiority permanent. The dynamic is, in other words, a self-fulfilling prophecy (Merton [1957] 1968b).

A second way of obtaining the less able is through socialization by the group. Members learn that they can be average while still reaping rewards. Individuals come to understand that they need not perform at more exacting levels if lower levels of performance will garner roughly comparable benefits. People may learn to “be quiet,” to play along so that they can get along with the reward system.

Leaders among the average facilitate subversion. In the absence of leaders, an alternative system of rewarded behavior stands a greater chance of being crushed, and the group or organization “brought into line” by higher authorities. There is no contradiction between inability and power. The average may be unable to perform
their roles in accord with institutional goals at a high level, but (at least some of them) can be smart enough to figure out ways to re-configure the system so that they and others can benefit with different kinds of ancillary achievement. A majority of the average bolsters such a regime and protects its base of power, making it possible for the less able to sustain mediocrity over time.

While in order for the adept to be systematically marginalized they must be outnumbered by the less able, organizations must also have a category of achievers that it rewards. Otherwise marginalization of the adept cannot take hold. The cynic can say marginalization of the adept is a non-problem: in a competitive social system, an organization that marginalizes its top performers would lose out to competitors and fail. Consequently, a necessary condition of marginalization of the adept is not only adeptness but also articulation by the adept of meritocratic values. Not all adept members actively articulate meritocratic values; they are “taken care of” by the less able. Lack of merit in the system is not a threat to them. They do not raise a fuss, and go along with it. An example is the prolific grantsperson in the otherwise weak department. The person is rewarded by the organization, which in turn depends on such revenue and achievement. Even though the individual is in a position to see major failings of the group, he does not resist, because he knows he will be taken care of in exchange for remaining productive and quiet. The military officer who chooses “not to see” dereliction of others in order to preserve chances of promotion is another example, as is the New York City police officer who is blind to corruption so as to curry favor by the group (Jackall 1997). Such a person also benefits from the less able’s marginalization of others who articulate the importance of merit; it stymies the efforts of status rivals, preserving an organizational position of profit amidst group malfeasance (de Waal 2007; Ridgeway 2006a). Thus, achievement is necessary but not sufficient for the phenomenon to occur. The high-achiever must speak of meritocracy to activate marginalization.

It is also true that an average organizational member need not participate in the process of subversion. They may be average, but not an active member of the coalition. They tend to adhere to institutional goals. Despite any such adherence, their abilities and achievements do not pose threats to the rest, such as military officers who know they will not be promoted anyway, or at least not in a hurry, or police people who, not the high risers, are simply part of the beat. Consequently, it is not they who need to be marginalized. Indeed, these individuals tend to be left alone, and in general, they in turn may be content. At the same time, these average individuals may not join the coalition because they believe in the institutional goals and because they would have little to gain. But neither are they drawn to join a coalition of the few adept because their own average performance cannot justify open articulation of meritocratic norms. Where the phenomenon arises, there are individuals in the middle who typically play a passive role (Phillips and Zuckerman 2001).

These considerations enable refinement in the definition of the average. People can, of course, be adept along multiple dimensions (Berger, Ridgeway, Fisek, and Norman 1998). The average can be skilled in the manipulation of power and of people, for instance. They are adept politically. But herein the concerns lie centrally
with a group’s official mission, with its stated aims: the average are mediocre in their work toward institutional goals.

These conditions arise more readily in some settings than in others. The settings are most likely found in peripheries of social systems. Thus, in academia, they are most readily found not among elite universities, for these organizations strive vigorously to conform to academe’s institutional goals. This is one interpretation of why the most accomplished scholars are found at elite universities. And even in the cases where the seeds for takeover are found in elite universities, the grip of institutional conformity is typically too strong to allow any member of the less able to take control. Weak departments in elite universities are typically given chances to improve. Short of improvement, they are sanctioned. They may be tolerated silently, ignored, and starved of resources. The adept sanction the less able until the less able get their act together.

Instead, the conditions are more readily found outside of the elite, in the rank and file of universities. In the large public research universities, for instance, one is more apt to find ambiguity of goals, caused by complexity and plurality of organizational mission (Blau 1973). When goals are the most varied and ambiguous, reward systems are at greatest risk of manipulation, even to the point where some groups can bring themselves out of alignment with the dominant aims of a social institution. Recruitment criteria are at greatest chance of appearing vague and plural in response to the same conditions found in organizational goals. The less able can come to outnumber the adept in certain departments and even throughout a university. Recognizing an opportunity, leaders emerge from the less able who introduce before their followers an alternate system of reward in nonconformity with institutional goals.

This does not mean that mediocrity arises and endures in all peripheral locations of a system; only that such locations are where mediocrity is most likely to arise. As indicated at the outset, some inferior groups seek to improve. By turn, academic departments on the margins may be observed for their efforts to progress. They do so by embracing institutional goals. But in other instances, inferior groups follow practices that ensure their mediocrity. They do so by repudiating institutional goals. Thus, it is one circumstance to become mediocre, and another to remain so.

Subversion of an order is able to endure because one’s local status among the average is enhanced by actively repudiating and marginalizing alternative status orders. In the example of the research university, it is the exogenous professional system that is repudiated in favor of local alternatives. Local status is built through a contrast with exogenous goals. A professor who abandoned research but receives high ratings from students is enabled to be a “department star.” One could point to all that a department, let alone an entire society, has to lose by marginalizing its most adept members for a long period of time—its credibility, status, and resources. The average, however, do not so much care about these items; they are parcel of the exogenous professional system that is actively repudiated.

The subversion is able to continue in the presence of higher authorities (deans, provosts, and presidents in the context of academe) by a number of conditions that explain why a university administration does not thwart the takeover. First, the adept are outnumbered. Their voices are fewer and their arguments weaker in view of the
prevailing order. Second, the administration may find some of the alternative rewards appealing to one of the many organizational facets. For example, a department that frowns upon superior research achievement but nevertheless can showcase “good” teachers can find support in the administration of universities, especially public universities. Good teaching satisfies some important constituencies. A malfunctioning department can learn to satisfy this goal and not others, and still be tolerated by higher powers. Third, the university administration may never know of the state of affairs. They lack the knowledge because they are placated by some organizational benefits emanating from an otherwise weak department and because the average veil the department’s inner workings. Marginalization of the adept typically occurs under a shroud of secrecy to people on the outside, what has been termed “forbidden knowledge” (Kempner, Merz, and Bosk 2011). Forbidden knowledge “is considered dangerous because it fails to keep separate the spheres of the sacred [the institutional goal of scholarship] with the profane [workplace politics that sacrifice the goal], threatening to violate some putative social order” (Kempner, Merz, and Bosk 2011: 478–479). When the adept cry foul, they become the deviant among a majority voice. Finally, higher authorities of an organization may themselves be mediocre and thus endorse, or otherwise not intervene in, these workings.

It might be logical to believe that under these conditions adept members of a group would simply leave and thus render the process of marginalization inert. Indeed, some members of a group do just this—they move on to greener pastures. Group exit, to the extent it occurs, thereby constitutes an additional mechanism by which the average maintain a majority. Exit also helps to account for why some weak groups remain weak over long periods of time. Many of the high performers move on.

But not all leave, and thus the grounds of marginalization remain fertile. The question thus becomes: why would highly able people stay and endure the marginalization? One may theorize that the answers are found in the choices that the adept make about their professional and personal lives. For instance, they may have families, and the household is the economic unit as well as the unit of analysis for their overall satisfaction. Taking a hit on one’s happiness so that everyone else in one’s family can live the life one otherwise enjoys is a choice people make frequently. The adept may also find other venues for their creativity and satisfaction, such as external consulting, to help compensate for their colleagues. The major point is that compensatory and coping behavior become a focus, as opposed to a synchronization between one’s professional values and one’s institution that might have been anticipated. In addition, the adept may stay out of necessity. Despite strong records, many academics cannot simply move. Not all high-performing academics can be accommodated with employment in the top thirty departments of their fields. This factor is especially true in highly competitive labor markets.

Enactment and Effects of Marginalization

Researchers have defined the related practice of workplace bullying as “repeated attempts to torment, wear down, or frustrate another person” such that the practice

One can glean several elements at play in enacting marginalization of the adept:

- The sense of politics in which a reward system has been altered to make it inconsistent with institutional goals.
- Recognition by the adept of their minority status and absence of a “critical mass” necessary for institutional functioning.
- A pervasiveness of control in which much, if not all, group life has been altered by a reconfiguration of a reward system.
- A social organization of the less able in which they coordinate and communicate their activities among one another.
- Recognition of the importance of articulating meritocratic norms, that those who raise questions and objections are marginalized whereas those who are quiet are rewarded.
- The belief that the reconfiguration of a reward system can only be reformed, if at all, through drastic measures, which would entail “cleaning house” and installing “ethical” leaders and high-performing subordinates.
- The idea that marginalization protects others whose status would be eroded by the achievements of the adept.
- The perception that those who protest are further marginalized.
- The practice of recruiting new members of the group who will, immediately or eventually, conform to the beliefs and values of the average, thereby maintaining their majority and control of power.
- A realization that one can neither be expelled easily nor voluntarily remove oneself easily from the group. There is an element of permanency in membership.

It is also possible to detect social-psychological effects of marginalization on those who are marginalized. These effects include frustration of circumstances, anger toward individuals who hold power and toward the group in general, and isolation from the group. In turn, the adept feel a disappointment, both in the organization that has allowed the subversion to occur as well as in their own careers or lives, which have suffered and not amounted to a way of life they had expected. They also suffer eroded self-confidence and self-esteem, by-products of being marginalized. While they have sought to exit the group (by getting academic jobs elsewhere), this is difficult in a buyer’s market. Thus in the absence of exit, they withdraw, becoming active players in another’s game, the consequence of which is to intensify alienation and the effects of marginalization (Twenge, Cantanese, and Baumeister 2002).

Beyond the social-psychological effects, there are observable organizational consequences of marginalization. While the adept may voice desire to “reform the system,” they exhibit an intensified loyalty to self-interests. They customarily distance themselves from the organization and may belittle its interests and goals (Morrill, Zald, and Rao 2003). They are not loyal employees. They may intensify their adeptness and its ancillary characteristics, flaunting the differences drawn between the adept and less able. In a small academic pond, the adept may seek still
greater publication, more grants, and more presentations. The reverse also can occur. The performance of the adept can be compromised in light of the adversity, but their performance remains above that of the average, reinforcing their differences. In the academic department, the adept who are marginalized may, for example, publish less than they would ordinarily, but still at a greater rate than average colleagues. They do so because they are adept.

Indignation may be carried further: the adept may attempt to sabotage the organization’s own goals or those who hold power (Jermier 1988). They may go out of their way, for example, to make “the department head’s life” difficult, questioning banal procedures, attempting to enforce petty policy. In the presence of large infractions, small justices are sought as seeming headway toward righting the wrong.

The adept may also be more inclined to question rules and procedures, particularly those that are evaluative and which affect the distribution of rewards. “The use of fair procedures...solidifies the group structure and values, enhancing individuals’ pride in their group. In addition, authorities who treat their subordinates in a trusting, respectful, and unbiased fashion are likely to be viewed as procedurally fair” (Hegtvedt 2007: 4435). Even in adverse conditions, “Individuals are more likely to tolerate unfair or low outcomes if the procedures by which they were produced are perceived as fair”—the proper functioning of a reward system that allocates benefits unequally (Hegtvedt 2007: 4435). The adept may attempt to introduce or restore their standards. On such occasions, the adept are cast as mavericks and complainers.

It is also noted how the adept are not marginalized. The adept are not marginalized by being expelled from the group. This would seem an obvious means for the less able to achieve their goals, but in most cases, expulsion is neither practical nor possible. It is not practical because it risks calling negative attention to those inflicting the marginalization, of “sending up alarms” to those in greater positions of power who might question or change what is going on.

Thus expulsion is too severe since it may crush the crusade of the less able. Elaborating on a prior point, marginalization of the adept occurs in relative secrecy to those on the outside. The less able do not “announce” what they are doing—this calls the attention of outsiders. This is not to say that marginalization is always private or dyadic. Indeed, some marginalization is highly public, but remains within the boundaries of the group (Simmel 1906). Concealment is a group process. Only those in the group proper are aware of the dynamic. A mediocre academic department does not disclose the ways its members preserve its mediocrity—this prompts the eye and ear of the professional association and colleagues elsewhere who condemn such deviance. This practice would openly violate the very achievement norms being silently subverted. Because it is shameful, marginalization of the adept must be kept quiet. Only a mediocre department that seeks to improve may disclose the practices it is utilizing to achieve higher goals, in conformity with achievement norms.

Expulsion is typically not possible because membership in task-oriented groups, like academe, often carries a form of tenure (Ridgeway 2006b). It is difficult to terminate high-achieving faculty in universities. Indeed, it is difficult to terminate
faculty in general. The instances of the profession permanently expelling a member are historic events (Metzger 1973). The same is true across a wide variety of organizations and professions (e.g., Bosk 1979; Smigel 1964).

It is possible to hold back the adept, to establish conditions that make their achievements less likely and less notable. And where this occurs, the less able are pleased, for they satisfy a chief objective. But successful marginalization of the adept does not result in a transmutation into the less able. The adept may back away from original pursuits. At times they may even pander to the average, veiling their real ability, beliefs, and values, sometimes in an effort to allay marginalization, to preserve their orientation, or simply to seek a tentative truce (Ridgeway 2012). Consequently, the adept are always treated with suspicion and never trusted by the less able. This sustains the sense of threat, clearly demarcates beliefs and values, and solidifies sub-group boundaries. The less able who allow the adept to infiltrate the group risk a restoration to normal functioning.

The ways by which the adept are marginalized prompt counterarguments. A consideration of them helps to clarify conditions in which the adept are marginalized. One counterargument is that the adept simply suffer from sour grapes. This counterargument may be made by outside observers, but it is also used by the less able to deflect attention away from legitimate concerns about their exercise of power. Professors, like all people, can be disgruntled for all kinds of reasons which may have nothing to do with the explanations they use to account for their situations. In fact, the counterargument holds, it is because the reward system operates as it should that these people are dissatisfied.

Another counterargument, and one again employed by the less able in their own defense, is that such people are merely malcontents in a system that otherwise works well for the majority. In a group, there will always be people who complain, and in a system that distributes rewards, there will always be people who believe the system is unfair, given differing perceptions of how rewards should correspond with performance. These counterarguments allegedly gain some credence because the majority of people under these conditions, or at least those loyal to current leaders, favor the prevailing social order. But this favor is made possible because of benefits derived from a reward system. How can one question the functioning of a system when many people benefit from it? Thus the belief becomes: if the system benefits numerous people, the system works. Those who complain and raise questions are dealt with, not by identifying problems with the system, but by identifying problems with those individuals. Such mechanics constitute the art of social subversion.

One may dispense with the counterarguments with a variety of evidence. First, rewards in the specific settings in which marginalization occurs are not allied with institutional goals. The majority in the specific academic department fail to conform to institutional goals, and yet are rewarded in ways incommensurate with their performance. Second, the objective performance records of those in the minority are better than those in the majority.

Finally, one looks for evidence similar to that used to establish credible allegations of harassment, in or outside the workplace, whether it is racially, ethnically, or sexually based. In harassment, many of the same conditions hold. A majority approves of and benefits from the system. A minority are abused. Is this to
say that the minority are at fault in their performance in the system and have no legitimate claims? Research on harassment finds the contrary (Hodson 2001; Hodson, Roscigno, and Lopez 2006; Salin 2003; Welsh 1999). It is often the case that those subjected to harassment feel isolated and set apart from the wider group—this is part of the tactic.

In most academic departments, even weak ones, usually more than one individual strives to conform to the institutional goals toward which they have, in greater or lesser ways, been socialized as members of the academic profession. In the weakest departments, where one might find no one striving to satisfy academic’s institutional goals, there is no need to marginalize the adept—they do not exist. Thus, it does not take a majority of harassed people in an environment to constitute harassment. Where marginalization of the adept occurs, patterns of repeated episodes and patterns involving more than one case are observable.

While similar in some ways to harassment and bullying, marginalization of the adept is a distinct phenomenon. The adept are harassed and bullied, but the harassed and bullied are not always adept. The adept are marginalized on a universalistic criterion: the possession of merit. Their marginalization is delivered because of conformity to institutional goals. Individuals are harassed and bullied typically on particularistic criteria: race, gender, sexual orientation, etc. Harassment and bullying are delivered without institutional goals in mind.

Furthermore, in marginalization of the adept, there exists a distributional imbalance of individuals relative to institutional goals. The adept are marginalized by way of a majority of the average having subverted a reward system. In harassment and bullying, a reward system has been suspended for particular individuals, but the majority of others act in accordance with institutional goals under a reward system that arguably operates functionally.

What is more, harassment is actionable under law, at least as it is defined in terms of protected groups. Despite sharing with harassment the definitional elements of severity and pervasiveness, marginalization of the adept finds no recourse in law. This is an empowering condition of the less able. It protects their behavior.

**Purposes of Marginalization**

If so much of marginalizing the adept is filled with vice, one must search out its virtues to explain the purposes of the phenomenon. One means to identify the purposes of marginalizing the adept is to infer the consequences of not marginalizing them. Whereas the article has previously drawn a distinction between social-psychological and organizational properties of marginalizing the adept, the same holds in a consideration of its purposes.

Social-psychologically, failure to marginalize the adept results in fateful consequences for the less able: hostility, a sense of worthlessness, meaninglessness, distrustfulness, and an overriding insecurity of self. In short, in the absence of marginalization, there is not a way for the less able to enhance their status. The celebration of mediocrity gives the less able a boost. Consequently, marginalization of the adept entails a primary social-psychological function: Marginalization of the
adept—and resultant mediocrity—makes possible the preservation of self. In so doing, it makes an identity possible for those who, short of marginalizing the highly able, have few claims to stake in performing a role that is meaningful to a group. The meaning of their identity, on which the coherence of self depends, is derived from an altered system of rewards. That altered system makes their success more possible. Thus, the system is changed so that a group can find a way to celebrate the average, elevating such people’s status and endowing them with purpose. The contributions of the less able are magnified by the minimization of the highly able.

Organizationally, marginalization is geared to changed performance standards but such performance is noncompliant with what institutionally the standards ought to be. If this practice is found in institutions, it must perform an organizational function. The adept must be marginalized so that the average are not sacrificed for the excellent. The practice salvages a way for the average to contribute, to demonstrate measurable productivity by way of alternative, non-normative rewards. This is imperative under the prevailing distribution of ability. Where the adept are in control, even mediocre groups and organizations can seek to improve. But where the adept are outnumbered and out of positions of control, another basis of performance can come to be desired.

In the peripheral settings where mediocrity is most likely to take hold, many people would suffer if groups operated only in accord with their normative standards. Ironically, the damage caused by adherence to high standards could be so substantial as to compromise the functioning of an institution. If all academics in research universities were expected to satisfy the organization’s most central institutional objective, many universities would fail to operate—large numbers cannot live up to this standard.

This structural accommodation, when well-established, may be passed to successive generations. As noted, recruitment into and socialization by the group operate as principal mechanisms by which the average maintain their hold. Organizations hire similarly able people and/or socialize them to “regress toward the mean” (Rivera 2012). In the absence of this mechanism, social institutions are at risk of placing too high a demand on people. Subversive practices constitute an explanation for how mediocre groups and organizations remain mediocre, all while honoring local confederates and carrying on as though everything were normal. Generational succession further accounts for the instrumental ways by which the less able sustain social systems. Where would we be without all the mediocre services that are available to us? Without mediocrity, our lives would be made more difficult.

Mediocrity is thus path dependent. That is, it results from successive practice, such that it becomes embedded in the group, where the conditions allow it to occur. Groups develop a rhetoric of tradition to reinforce their practices: “That’s not how we do things here,” or “We’re going to go about this as we always have.” Mediocrity is therefore said to be cultural because it constitutes a way of life for a group. It specifies how decisions should be made in order to preserve the prevailing order of things. It is conditioned by interlocking beliefs and practices, documented above, that are endemic within a culture of mediocrity. Culture keeps mediocrity going.
Theoretic Reprise

Mediocrity builds on institutional theorizing about stratification because it constitutes a previously unexamined phenomenon in the operation and distribution of rewards. It is, however, important to see how the phenomenon also challenges prior lines of thought, for therein we can derive a more complete explanation.

Goode emphasized meritocratic behavior in the allocation of rewards. The present account, by contrast, emphasizes anti-meritocratic behavior in the allocation of rewards. The account postulates that on the peripheries of social systems, conditions can develop where anti-meritocratic behavioral patterns are evident. But the patterns arise not to beg their rectification by the system, as Goode’s argument would have it, but rather to sustain it, in light of system conditions that would otherwise eradicate positions and people who are unable to perform at superior levels. A social system must at times make a corrective adjustment on peripheries of its operation in order to continue performing. It does so by reversing the meritocratic logic by which it otherwise operates in the “mainstreams” of system life. In this respect, Merton’s claims on merit risk running societies into performative bankruptcy. Societies must create places for the mediocres, and develop accommodative ways to reward their contributions. The alternative of not doing so is socially untenable.

Tumin (1953) identified shortcomings in functional theories of stratification (Davis and Moore 1945). In particular, power was said to be unexamined. A concern for conflict has since given way to alternative theorizing, advanced, in ways germane to the present discussion, by Collins (1975), Bourdieu (1984a), and Abbott (1988).

By these subsequent lines of thought, status orders as discussed here do not revolve around normatively sanctioned pursuits of goals, but rather exist as sites where actors with different kinds of competencies and capacities struggle with one another. The goals that come to be recognized as legitimate are merely the continually contingent outcomes of such struggles. As Collins has argued, conflict shapes the distribution of power, wealth, and prestige in societies and in groups. Such theorizing thereby seeks to explain order and changes to it by understanding how people pursue their interests in conflict with others, by imposing their cultural standards on competing individuals and groups, and by exploiting resources on their behalf (Collins 1971; 1975; 1992).

As the discussion has emphasized, status orders are contingent on conflicts and contests, and indeed on power: who has it, builds coalitions with it, and implements it to their advantage in the form of a sustainable system, even though their achievements do not ascribe the status they come to command.

The conflicts between individuals and groups described herein are analogous to those identified by Bourdieu in his treatment of academics (Bourdieu 1984a). On the one hand are those who possess “academic power,” brought about by the likes of administrative position, lectures, and the compilation of textbooks, encyclopedias, and dictionaries. On the other hand are those who possess “scientific or intellectual power,” brought about by recognition from peers for their contributions to knowledge. Bourdieu found a power struggle among faculty which pitted those
more oriented to the accumulation of academic power against those more oriented toward the accumulation of scientific/intellectual capital.

For Bourdieu, academics (and all intellectuals) are fundamentally political, because their profession consists of hierarchically ordered positions that are governed by a “quest for distinction” (1984b). The struggle for distinction is not unique to academics, but is thought to be especially acute in them because, in intellectual life, “to exist is to differ, i.e., to occupy a distinct ... position” (Bourdieu 1983: 338). The university becomes the field of struggle in which strongly symbolic and tangible forms of legitimation compete with one another. In the French case, the consequence is a stratified system in which professors with concentrated academic power are disproportionately located at the Sorbonne whereas those with concentrated scientific power are predominately located at the Collège de France, the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, and in newer disciplines. Accordingly, universities and their professors, like other cultural fields, are defined by interests, conflicts, and hierarchies. They exist contingently by virtue of negotiated struggle, rather than normatively in which people act in accord with “autonomous” goals. In the present case, the conflicts are analogous to the teaching/research dichotomy, and the contests for rewards engaged by those whose identities are staked in polar interests.

Building on ecological conceptions of social life, Abbott (1988) developed a modern view of professions in which their existence, scope, and shape are the outcome of battles for jurisdictional control. External forces (such as other occupations) and internal forces (such as change in job tasks) create sequences of disturbances that are absorbed via the professionalization or deprofessionalization of a group or by adoption into the internal structure of a profession. “At every step in these chains occur jurisdictional contests” (Abbott 1988: 90), and each contest ends in one of a variety of settlements, ranging from full jurisdictional take over to subordination and/or advisory jurisdiction. Some professional groups may be destroyed by such processes. Like Freidson (1970) on whom Abbott draws, professions are marked by dominance and power, not collegiality and trust. Professions, however relatively weak or strong a given one may be in this “theory of contingent forces over time” (Abbott 1988: 316), owe themselves to their ability to successively engage and control competing parties. Such is the case, too, among the mediocre, who organize as a coalition, ritually marginalize the adept, and subvert a system, the net outcome of which consists of control. In ways consistent with Abbott, this social order operates in the form of legitimacy, underneath which resides a continually managed struggle of dominance. Thus the view presented here treats mediocrity as an overlooked but important condition in how reward systems operate, but it does so by accounting for the ways in which conflict, contest, and competition for power compose constitutive forces in the preservation of systems over time.

Further, the phenomenon is manifest at micro, meso, and macro levels of operation, and the twin elements of order and conflict are found at each level. At a macro/system level, distributions of ability are skewed and power is differentially concentrated. This partly accounts for why top-ranked departments rarely evince the phenomenon; the concentration of high-achievers, performing largely in accord with
institutional goals, prevents mediocrity from settling in. At a meso/interactional level, groups engage in conflicts and contests for power. In those places in the system where ability distributions and power imbalances are especially acute, mediocrity can take hold over merit. At a micro/individual level, the adept are marginalized. High-performing individuals are out-numbered and, where the phenomenon is found, out-resourced politically. The marginalization feeds back to the macro level by reproducing and sustaining skewed ability distributions and power imbalances (through mechanisms of recruitment and socialization, as discussed). It is a sustainable micro-macro link mediated by meso-level group processes (Alexander 1987; Collins 1988; Fine 2012).

The argument is generally consistent with Burris' (2004) explanation of academic caste systems and their reproduction. Burris argues that departmental prestige hierarchies are more or less static. By a conflict view, there is little chance of a rank and file department ascending in the system because elite departments preserve their position by acts of social closure; elite departments recruit almost exclusively from other elite programs. In these respects, mediocrity of departments is reproduced by the macro-operation of the stratification system itself. For Burris, change in faculty productivity is, in and of itself, of little consequence to a department's prestige unless accompanied by mass intake or outflow of highly productive people. One can question, however, whether the outcomes observed would be the same in the absence of marginalization and the institutionalization of mediocrity at play in departments composing a status order.

It also important to note that, while it is difficult to change in rank, since only one department or university can occupy a single position, it is less difficult to change in type, category or kind. Numerous departments and universities have improved or deteriorated over time in ways recognizable more by "like kind" than by exclusive rank. In the case of sociology departments (the object of Burris' analysis), we can turn, among others, to Rutgers, UC-San Diego, UC-Davis, UNC-Charlotte, Washington State, the University of Pittsburgh, or Princeton as places now relatively plenty where there was once comparatively little. With perhaps just one exception in the illustration, none are top 10 ranked sociology departments, but all are demonstrably better viewed as a type than they once were, and their status is not marked by heavy in-flow of ability at any given point in time. Described herein, and respectively through the treatments found in Collins, Bourdieu, and Abbott, identifiable micro and meso level processes are linked; they help to sustain macro order; and they perform instrumental roles in bringing about macro-level change.

Conclusion

The marginalization of the adept is a process found in some groups and organizations. This phenomenon is a response to a group problem of what to do with the highly able when low achievers constitute a majority and have supportive instrumental leaders. Patterns of marginalization are observed in varieties of groups, and their presence in modern societies represents both an evasion of achievement norms and an honoring of
other values and beliefs. The phenomenon offers a lens on the reproduction of status orders.

The discussion has focused on the American research university; additional evidence is found in the operation of reward structures elsewhere. Becker, Geer, and Hughes (1968) portrayed students’ academic relations to faculty in the large modern American university. The “grade point culture” is learned and dominates students’ orientation to college. But this is made possible, and the learning stems from, a pact with faculty who do not want to be bothered by the vast numbers of underprepared students who increasingly enroll in universal higher education. “The tests, papers, and other assignments that faculty hand out typically punish students who pursue their own lines of interest, who do respond to intellectual interests to the detriment of fulfilling the mind-numbing make-work that faculty impose in an effort to deal with the conditions of mass education” (1968, xv). Consequently, academically motivated and intellectually curious students who shun the grade point mentality of simply marching along to get A’s are labeled as deviants, poorly understood by their peers and weakly supported by the college system. The highly able are subdued to the forces of a system that is brought about and “managed” by the less able. This helps to explain why such strong intellectual incentives exist for talented students to attend smaller, selective institutions (Katchadourian and Boli 1994). The academic culture is on their side and thus more effectively conditions them for a future that they desire.

Similar situations have been observed in the primary and secondary levels of schooling. In his ethnographic study of school culture in England, Willis (1977) explained how working-class kids end up getting working-class jobs. The “lads,” who oppose the official, institutional code of school, deny their own social mobility and rehearse themselves for manual labor. They defend themselves against an alien social class that promises what is perceived as an uncertain future and material reward. The oppositional culture of the group targets not only the “ear’oles” who conform to the system, but also able lads who, like the ear’oles, face ridicule, harassment, isolation, and physical punishment from age-peers. A class-conditioned resentment of working-class youth is directed toward the bourgeoisie, externally validated by the lads’ parents and generalized images of established adult life. As Willis explains, the behavior of the lads is a form of institutional opposition that preserves a class structure.

More general class-related patterns of marginalizing the adept are found in Kohn’s (1977) work on class-based behaviors and orientations. One observes the occasion, rooted in class value systems, when offspring or siblings are viewed by those around them as “acting up” or “getting out of line.” The more general symptom is the display of aspirations, through deliberate actions or even articulated points of view, that do not conform to values held by the family of origin. People are sometimes too big for their britches, but in this circumstance are well-suited for them and held back by their own families under the class-linked guise that they do not merit the sought-after reward.

In the class-based process, those possessing institutionally compatible aspirations are blocked, and if not blocked, become outsiders. The family member is “different,” “strange,” “not one of us”—poorly understood and weakly supported
by the family regime. This often arouses contrary sentiment expressed as jealousy, ridicule, attack, and attempted sabotage within a family. Despite the inconsistency between institutional goals of achievement and mobility, on the one hand, and family conformity, on the other, the marginalization preserves the operation of a class system. Marginalization is necessary: most families in this location of the class structure are unable to achieve at the levels that prompt the marginalization. Thus maintained, the class position allows for both an identity and a role that otherwise could not exist.

Research on race has examined the practice of “acting white.” “Acting white” has been defined in this literature as “an epithet to convey the response of African-Americans to the institutionalization of norms that are generated and maintained by the larger, dominant community” (Fordham 1996). Researchers disagree on the extent to which this oppositional sentiment permeates racial groups (e.g., Ainsworth-Darnell and Downey 1998; Farkas, Lleras, and Maczuga 2002), but that is not the present concern. To the extent the practice exists and is discussed, the phenomenon may be considered. The term may be applied by groups in varieties of settings. An African-American is chastised by other African-Americans for allegedly adopting the behavior and outlook of whites. Usage of the term may be occasioned by varieties of behavior; academic achievement in racially segregated schools has been researched as one of them (e.g., Fordham and Ogbu 1986). The intent of the epithet is to marginalize persons for behavior inconsonant with the group in which the offending individual is a member. Based on the definition above, the behavior is sanctioned despite it conforming to institutional goals. Not all African-Americans “act white.” The result is a sustained demarcation between races, allowing for an ethnic identity and role, even as a minority of individuals continue to deviate by purportedly adopting behaviors of the negative reference group.

Studies of thieves, convicts, and prisons reveal elaborate behavioral codes that stipulate marginalization for those who fail to conform. But it is not conformity to deviance, but rather conformity to institutional rules, that is marginalized by prisoners. Like an academic department with institutional expectations, prisons impose behavioral standards that are often too difficult or objectionable for prisoners to satisfy.

It has been consistently reported that one response of male prisoners to the pains of imprisonment has been the establishment of a sub rosa social system. Male prisoners...support to varying degrees ‘a system of group norms that are directly related to mitigating the pains of imprisonment.’ These norms constitute the so-called ‘inmate code’ and the degrees to which inmates support the various components of the code constitute a variety of interrelated social roles—the inmate social system...In the code are rationalizations for criminal behavior, solutions for obtaining scarce goods and services, and descriptions of appropriate ways of dealing with staff and fellow inmates. Men new to prison find information available from merchants. Right guys and good cons provide models for appropriate inmate behavior (Ward and Kassebaum 1965: 30, original emphasis).
The inmate code stipulates specific behavioral conduct, such as the codified belief that: “There are basically just two kinds of people in the world, those in the know and those who are suckers” and “When inmates stick together it is a lot easier to do time” (Ward and Kassebaum 1965: 39–40). “Do-rights” are threatening. They challenge the existing order. They act in ways that attempt to satisfy institutional goals which other inmates cannot meet, such as compliance, rejection of past identity, reformed behavior, and rehabilitation. Good behavior as a path to shortened time, or simply as a style of conduct, often entails significant costs incurred through marginalization by fellow inmates (Irwin and Cressey 1962; Ward and Kassebaum 1965). Marginalization of adept inmates allows the prisoner rank and file to assume an identity and role, and to reap rewards, otherwise unavailable to them. The marginalization sustains a social system on which the lives of prisoners depend.

In his work on quota restriction and goldbricking, Roy (1952; 1954; 1958) examined production behavior of industrial workers. Based on participant observation of factory workers, Roy concluded that loafing on the job is not a simple form of inactivity. “Soldiering” enforced quota restrictions on output in order for piecework machinists to produce at an optimal rate, wherein they produced enough to gain the greatest return in pay but not more to avoid altering the piece rate. This is the equivalent of a faculty member saying I am going to produce only two articles per year because that meets the pay raise threshold and the marginal gain of producing any more articles is not worth the effort and undermines the metric with which a majority of one’s colleagues are in compliance (see also Burawoy 1979: 46–73). Rate-busters have to be marginalized so that the majority is not penalized by lower pay for nominal work. As with academics, the goal of the less able is not to get rate-busters to conform (there will always be rate-busters and thus always marginalization). Once guilty of rate-busting, a halo of suspicion will always hang because the implications of busting for the less able are so great. It is difficult to forgive and nearly impossible to forget the adept. The goal is to lessen their damage and weaken their impulse. In this instance and in the many situations like it, productive workers are marginalized for being too good. But marginalization on the shop floor serves a vital purpose: as in prisons, social classes, races, college classrooms, and academic departments, it allows others to “make out.”

Marginalization involves a contested subversion of reward systems such that a majority can benefit and find a way to contribute in demonstrable measure. The examples illustrate the range of instances where the adept must be marginalized “for the greater good.” Average members are needed for all others to survive. In marginalizing the adept, the less able salvage themselves, making possible both a role and a meaningful identity. In doing so, they sustain social systems that would otherwise fail if left to rely exclusively on the merits of the highly able.

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The Culture of Mediocrity


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