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Academic work as craft: Towards a qualitative and multicriteria assessment

[Devi Vijay](#) and [Heloise Berkowitz](#) based on reviews by 2 anonymous reviewers

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In the translator's introduction to Bertolt Brecht's poetry, David Constantine and Tom Kuhn (2015) refer to T.S. Eliot's praise for Tennyson, noting that qualities of the great poets include abundance, variety and complete competence. They move to reflect on Brecht's technical virtuosity, the breathtaking forms he invented, the social and political contexts in which poetry was produced, and the uses of the craft. In contemporary social sciences, imbricated in colonial legacies and a neoliberal knowledge production system, we appear to have quantified and metrified ourselves away from our craft.

The perspective paper by Tagu and colleagues (2024) entitled "A qualitative and multicriteria assessment of scientists: a perspective based on a case study of INRAE, France" offers an invitation and a possibility to re-look at academic work as craft. This paper deals with alternative assessment of academic work, using French sociologist Dejours' work psychodynamics. As the first paper recommended by the Peer Community in Organization Studies and due to the very topic it addresses, this is a special paper for us.

What we found particularly original and interesting in this paper was: 1) the use of Dejours's conceptual framework and how this may inform organization studies, 2) the case of INRAE, France, and how it may encourage different, plural approaches to assessment in a context of increasing commodification and rank-ification of academia. Neoliberal academia, marked by accelerating rhythms, aggravating precarities, and widening inequalities, pushes for bibliometric evaluations that glorify overwork, and increasingly exploit academics as a cheap workforce generating unparalleled profits for dominant commercial publishers (Cremin, 2009; Fleming, 2021; Newport, 2016). Certainly, even as alternative, diamond model, open or slower, engaged practices, such as Peer Community In, are developing (Berg & Seeber, 2016; Berkowitz & Delacour, 2020; Mazak, 2022), the path dependency of traditional evaluation systems, using rankings, impact factor and other bibliometric indicator, remains significant barriers to sustainable and just academic systems.

Tagu and colleagues focus on the case of INRAE as an organization committed to the importance of qualitative multicriteria analysis of academic work and careers as an alternative to the dominant quantitative (bibliometric and impact-factor driven) assessment. The paper offers a perspective that interrupts contemporary orthodoxies in neoliberal academia and connects with recent arguments in organization studies and the sociology of work that interrogate these orthodoxies (e.g. Brankovic et al., 2022; Dashtipour & Vidaillet, 2017; Dougherty & Horne, 2022; Gingras, 2016; Martin, 2011; Vasen et al., 2023). The nature of inquiry and description of INRAE's assessment process is noteworthy and valuable for a

perspective article. This article also exemplifies the interdisciplinarity that the authors pitch for. We consider that the Organization Studies field can be informed by this fresh gaze coming from field outsiders.

As Tagu et al. develop, Dejours invented a subdiscipline, “work psychodynamics” which addresses individual and collective defense strategies used to fight workplace suffering. Indeed, Dashtipour and Vidaillet (2017) also highlight that Dejours’s work is still under-explored in English language organization studies. Tagu et al.’s arguments connect with other voices in critical organization studies in relation to workplace despair in neoliberal universities (Cremin, 2009; Fleming, 2021) and the contemporary irrelevance of academic research (Grolleau & Meunier, 2023; Mingers & Willmott, 2013).

Further, Tagu et al highlight the contribution of Dejours to work assessment, in particular through his analysis of the “judgment of beauty”. This beauty judgment brings in a new dimension that complements the ‘utility’ dimension that we are more familiar with. The judgement of beauty involves two interconnected dimensions, conformity and style, and has important implications for a professional individual identity (Dejours, 2011; Gernet & Dejours, 2009). First the judgement of beauty involves analyzing conformity of a work with regards to rules of the craft or profession. This means that a judgment of beauty is necessarily made by peers because they have the necessary intimate knowledge of the profession. Assessing “craftspersonship” may involve terms like "beautiful", “fine” or "elegant", terms that we are generally not used to hearing in academia evaluation. Such peer beauty judgment is considered precise and subtle but also severe (Dejours, 2011). This also connects to a “style” judgment. Once conformity has been assessed, peers can evaluate the style of the work. This means evaluating originality of the work compared to that of colleagues, something we may be more familiar with. However, here originality is not about novel theoretical contributions, an aspect that is increasingly being emphasized and pursued in organization studies. Instead, the style judgement acknowledges the “flair” the worker brings to their craft, thus adding a distinction to the conformity evaluation.

The beauty judgement is intrinsically linked to the worker’s identity as Dejours (2011) argues. Indeed, being approved by peers not only validates the conformity, style and therefore quality of a work, but also grants the worker belonging to a community. The beauty judgement affirms that a worker is a "true" member (Dejours, 2011). It is important to note that for Dejours, this recognition focuses on the quality of the work rather than the individuals themselves.

It would be interesting to further analyze whether existing alternatives for research assessments, especially driven by the Coalition for Advancing Research Assessment (CoARA) integrate, align or diverge from this perspective. The CoARA principles, in line with DORA’s, reject quantitative assessment and emphasize the importance of qualitative judgement. Therefore, we can assume that a judgement of beauty is implicit there.

While we do not necessarily agree with all the elements presented or even the objective of scientific knowledge production and scientific expertise (for instance informing public policies or innovation), we believe that the practices described in this paper can inspire alternative, situated practices to assess research careers and works in other disciplines and institutions. We also believe that profiles do not need to meet all criteria in the analyzed multicriteria framework, as the injunctions of being “all things to all people” (Parker &

Crona, 2012) become unbearable. Rather, this framework allows to account for varying profiles (see Tagu et al. 2024, Figure 2) depending on personal preferences, gender, life evolutions, etc.

What remains unclear to us is whether and how both the judgement of beauty on the one hand and the assessment developed at INRAE on the other hand may generate new or amplify existing inequalities and (re)create hierarchies and relations of domination. Tagu et al. (2024) allude to some such hierarchies when it comes to junior and senior researchers. We wonder what this may mean from an intersectional lens, when one considers race, caste, gender, or ethnicity – known to create epistemic hierarchies in knowledge production (see Kravets & Varman, 2022; Muzanenko & Chowdhury, 2023).

This perspective paper also provokes us at PCI Organization Studies to consider what INRAE's mode of assessment would imply for changing the existing academic system. What systemic tweaks or transformations are necessary so that a PCI recommended preprint is valued for a researcher to the same extent as a journal article? INRAE provides an inspiring exemplar for those asking similar questions. More comparative work is needed, across fields, institutions, countries and disciplines. We encourage and welcome such endeavors at Peer Community in Organization Studies, as a site of resistance.

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