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# What is Originality in the Humanities and the Social Sciences?

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*Drawing on interviews with peer-review panelists from five multidisciplinary fellowship competitions, this paper analyzes one of the main criteria used to evaluate scholarship in the humanities and the social sciences: originality. Whereas the literature in the sociology of science focuses on the natural sciences and defines originality as the production of new findings and new theories, we show that in the context of fellowship competitions, peer reviewers in the social sciences and humanities define originality much more broadly: as using a new approach, theory, method, or data; studying a new topic; doing research in an understudied area; or producing new findings. Whereas the literature has not considered disciplinary variation in the definition of originality, we identified significant differences. Humanists and historians clearly privilege originality in approach, and humanists also emphasize originality in the data used. Social scientists most often mention originality in method, but they also appreciate a more diverse range of types of originality. Whereas the literature tends to equate originality with substantive innovation and to consider the personal attributes of the researcher as irrelevant to the evaluation process, we show that panelists often view the originality of a proposal as an indication of the researcher's moral character, especially of his/her authenticity and integrity. These contributions constitute a new approach to the study of peer review and originality that focuses on the meaning of criteria of evaluation and their distribution across clusters of disciplines.*

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Research on peer review largely concerns how journal rejection rates, inter-reviewer reliability, review procedures, and turnaround times are affected by disciplinary differences in levels of consensus or paradigm development (see Braxton and Hargens 1996 for a review). Accordingly, we know a great deal about how much reviewers in a given discipline disagree, but we are no closer to understanding what it is that they disagree about. More generally, sociologists have yet to explore disciplinary variation in the criteria that peer reviewers use to distinguish between worthy and less worthy academic work. This is an important topic given the unparalleled centrality of peer review in the academic stratification system (Cole and Cole 1973) and the impact of conceptions of worthy knowledge on academic restructuring (Gumport 2000). Drawing on interviews conducted with panelists serving on five multidisciplinary fellowship competitions, this paper focuses on one of the criteria used most often to evaluate scholarship in the humanities and social sciences, namely, originality.

Existing research in the sociology of science on originality, which generally concerns the natural sciences, defines it as the production of new findings and new theories. We expand this literature by exploring the definitions of originality used by panelists in the humanities, history, and social sciences. We show that the peer reviewers whom we interviewed from these fields defined originality much more broadly: as using a new approach, method, or data, studying a new topic and doing research in an understudied area, as well as producing new theories and findings. Whereas the literature has not considered the relative salience of the various dimensions of originality between disciplines, we identified important variations: humanists and historians clearly privileged originality in approach, and humanists also emphasized originality in the data used. For their part, social scientists most often mentioned originality in method, but they also had more of an appreciation for diverse types of originality, stressing the use of an original approach, an original theory, or the study of an original topic. Whereas the literature tends to equate originality with substantive innovation and to consider the personal attributes of the researcher as irrelevant to evaluation, we show that panelists often equated originality with the moral character of the

researcher (especially his/her authenticity and integrity), and that this judgment plays a role in their evaluation. These contributions are theoretically significant. They constitute a new approach to the study of peer review and originality that focuses on the meaning of criteria of evaluation and their distribution across clusters of disciplines. Furthermore, whereas most research on peer review focuses on the evaluation of completed research, our main focus here is on a different phase in the process of knowledge production: the evaluation of research proposals. We proceed by first describing the literatures that ground the theoretical significance of our contributions. We then provide evidence for each of them after describing the data on which the study draws.

## THEORY

The canonical sociological literature on the place of originality in scientific evaluation has defined originality as the making of a new discovery that adds to scientific knowledge. Most notably, Merton (1973 [1942]) and Storer (1966) argue that rewards and recognition accrue to scientists who make original discoveries because such discoveries are functional for scientific progress (see also Gaston 1973; Hagstrom 1974). This literature links the importance of originality to its presumed role in knowledge building. After all, "it is through originality, in greater or smaller increments, that knowledge advances" (Merton 1973 [1957]:293). Accordingly, research on the topic has focused on the "priority disputes" that arise when scientists attempt to secure credit for being the first to make a discovery.

Kuhn (1970) expanded on the canonical definition of originality by arguing that, on rare occasions, anomalous new discoveries can lead to the invention of novel theories that challenge the reigning paradigm. Although such theories do not necessarily generate innovative scientific knowledge, they contribute to scientific progress to the extent that they help solve existing empirical puzzles. New discoveries that confirm the theories of "normal science" are the mainstay of scientific endeavor, while anomalous discoveries and consensus-challenging theories are usually ignored and seldom welcomed by a scientific community, which is conceived as resistant to paradigmatic shifts.

While numerous scholars have built on this literature or examined various aspects of the peer-review process (Armstrong 1997; Bakanic, McPhail, and Simon 1987; Bakanic, McPhail, and Simon 1989; Campanario 1998a, 1998b; Champion and Morris 1973; Gaston 1973; Hagstrom 1974; Hartmann and Neidhardt 1990; Kantorovich 1993; Mitroff 1974; Mulkey 1972; Wessely 1996), they have not questioned the specific assumption that originality consists of making new discoveries or producing new theories (though see Dirk 1999 for a somewhat different approach to the definition of originality). For instance, although Latour (1987) has criticized the literature's emphasis on priority disputes, he and others have not examined how academics define and go about assessing originality. And although the canonical definition arose from studies of the natural sciences and was not—at least implicitly—intended to apply more broadly, it has often been applied to the social sciences (for one of many examples in sociology, see Wagner and Berger 1985). Researchers have yet to study the extent to which this definition characterizes the understanding of originality in the social sciences or humanities.

Our analysis draws on interviews with individuals who serve on funding panels, people who have an institutional responsibility to make judgments about the quality, including the originality, of research. We analyze the way that these panelists described originality in the humanities and the social sciences. In interviews, we found that panelists described originality, for example, in terms of the novelty of the overall approach used by the researcher (who is “bringing a fresh perspective”), in terms of the data being used (she is “drawing on new sources of information”), and in terms of the topic chosen (he is “going outside canonized authors”). These statements point toward a much broader definition of originality than that posited by the available literature on originality.

For systematic inquiry, we first construct a typology to classify the various definitions of originality used by panelists to describe and evaluate winning and losing proposals, as well as their own work, the work of colleagues and students, and their definitions of originality in general. This typology includes all the generic categories that panelists used to describe which aspect of the work is original, as well as the spe-

cific subtypes they used to characterize more precisely the way in which that aspect is innovative. We present evidence on how often panelists used these various generic categories and specific types. Second, we investigate disciplinary variations in the way panelists described originality. We analyze the frequency with which humanists, historians, and social scientists referred to the various generic types of originality. We find that humanists and historians tended to define originality differently than social scientists: humanists and historians clearly privileged originality in approach, with humanists also emphasizing originality in the data used. For their part, social scientists mentioned originality of method most often, but they also had an appreciation for a more diverse range of types of originality, stressing also the use of an original approach or theory, or the study of an original topic. This diversity strongly confirms the need for a more multidimensional conception of originality, at least as far as the humanities and social sciences are concerned.

A third contribution concerns the place of substantive and nonsubstantive considerations in peer evaluation. Several recent studies in the sociology of knowledge have looked at the place of nonsubstantive factors, such as character and identity, in scientific and academic decision-making (Gross 2002; Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000; Lewis 1998; Shapin 1994; Tsay et al. 2003). For example, Shapin's (1994) study of science in seventeenth century England demonstrates that the moral virtues of scientists (defined in terms of honor, modesty, civility and courtesy) were taken as a sign that the results of their scientific experiments could be trusted. And Lewis (1998) shows how personality can be a decisive factor in academic hiring decisions. Scientists, as we noted above, are said to value and reward originality because of its role in substantive innovation—that is, its role in the accumulation of knowledge. Our analysis reveals that peer reviewers in the social sciences and humanities also value original work because they regard it as a sign of the moral character of the researcher. More specifically, scholars who were thought to produce original work were frequently viewed as having intellectual authenticity, integrity, and associated moral qualities that panelists valued and sought

to reward.<sup>1</sup> Thus, original work is valued for nonsubstantive as well as substantive reasons.

This last contribution prompts a reconsideration of key assumptions that guide much of the research on peer review more generally, which sharply divides “legitimate” evaluations about the substance of the work from “illegitimate” considerations about nonsubstantive factors. Indeed, according to Merton (1973 [1942]: 270), evaluation of scientific claims “is not to depend on the personal or social attributes of their protagonists; their race, nationality, religion, class, and personal qualities are as such irrelevant.” Accordingly, studies on peer review typically examine the extent to which judgments about nonsubstantive factors, like the authors’ reputation (Zuckerman and Merton 1971), institutional affiliation (Blank 1991) or gender (GAO 1994) affect the evaluation of academic work. In contrast, we show that some nonsubstantive factors are intrinsic to the evaluation process, at least in the case of the evaluation of fellowship proposals in the social sciences and the humanities: certain judgments about the person are intertwined with substantive evaluations, and are conceived as such by evaluators, as opposed to being viewed as necessarily “corrupting” and illegitimate. Below, after analyzing the typology of substantive definitions of originality, we show how frequently humanists, historians and social scientists discussed the moral meaning of original work. We then explore the vocabulary that panelists used to evaluate original proposals, and we demonstrate that they associated substantive originality with admirable moral qualities and viewed applicants whose work lacked originality as morally deficient.

## DATA AND METHODS

The paper draws on interviews conducted with panelists serving on one of twelve funding panels at five fellowship competitions in the social sciences and the humanities over a period of two years. The funding competitions were held by the following institutions: the Social Science

Research Council, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation; a Society of Fellows at a top research university; and an anonymous foundation in the social sciences.<sup>2</sup> These competitions were chosen because they cover a wide range of disciplines, and because they are all highly prestigious.<sup>3</sup> We focus on the social sciences and humanities because they have been neglected by research on peer review and in the sociology of science and knowledge more generally. While the SSRC and the WWNFF competitions are open to the social sciences and the humanities, the ACLS supports research in the humanities, and humanities-related social sciences. The Society of Fellows supports work across a range of fields, whereas the anonymous foundation supports work in the social sciences only. Moreover, the SSRC and the WWNFF programs provide support for graduate students, whereas the ACLS holds distinct competitions for assistant, associate, and full professors. The Society of Fellows provides fellowships to recent Ph.D.’s only, and the anonymous social science foundation supports research at all ranks. We did not identify any anomalies in the evaluation of the work of graduate students. Finally, although all the competitions have multidisciplinary panels, only some of them aim to promote interdisciplinary scholarship.

<sup>2</sup> The specific competitions studied were the following: the International Dissertation Field Research Fellowship (IDRF) program of the Social Science Research Council and the American Council of Learned Societies; the Women’s Studies Dissertation Grant Program at the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation; and the Fellowship Program in the Humanities of the American Council of Learned Societies.

<sup>3</sup> Panel members serving on these competitions often see themselves and are seen by others as setting disciplinary standards and embodying institutionalized definitions of excellence. Hence, their discourses on quality are both significant and informative of what is valued in their fields at large, even though they were not randomly selected and may present features that distinguish them from “average” academics. By studying the criteria of evaluation they use as gatekeepers, we are studying criteria of evaluation that *de facto* play a significant role in shaping academic fields.

<sup>1</sup> In line with Weber, we treat moral qualities as those qualities that are defined as important by the ethical standards of a particular religion, institution or any other “legitimate order” (Weber 1978 [1956]:36).

Panel members originated from a wide range of disciplines including anthropology, art history, classics, economics, English, geography, history, literature, musicology, philosophy, political science, sociology and Women's Studies. A total of 81 interviews were conducted for this project. This includes 66 interviews with 49 different panel members (17 panelists were interviewed twice, as they served on panels for the two years that the study lasted). Fifteen additional interviews were conducted with relevant program officers and panel chairpersons for each panel, who provided details about what had happened during the panel deliberation in the absence of direct observation. They were also questioned about general background issues, such as how panelists are selected and what qualities make for good panelists. Program officers are not included in our analysis, but the five interviews we conducted with three different panel chairs are included, since they also served as peer reviewers and were asked about their criteria of evaluation. We thus analyze here a total of 71 interviews, which lasted approximately 90 minutes and were generally conducted over the phone within a few days or a few weeks after the conclusion of the panel deliberations.<sup>4</sup> In three cases, we were able to observe the panel deliberations and use field notes to probe panelists about specific arguments they had made in the context of the deliberations.<sup>5</sup>

Many of our questions concerned the final deliberation, where evaluators convene to decide which fellowship applications will receive fund-

<sup>4</sup> The fact that the interviewer is a senior scholar who has served on several evaluation panels was essential in facilitating openness among interviewees. All respondents were guaranteed anonymity, and we made a commitment to the participating organizations to disguise all information potentially leading to the identification of panelists or applicants.

<sup>5</sup> This experience suggests a remarkable continuity in the criteria that panelists mobilized in the context of the deliberation, their account of the positions they took during the deliberation, and the epistemological positions they used while discussing various types of work in the context of the phone interview (see Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow 2002). A detailed assessment of the degree of overlap is beyond the purpose of this paper.

ing. As the process adopted by the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS) resembles that of most of the other funding organizations we studied, we can quote an internal document to describe this process:

ACLS has developed an intensive peer-review process to select its Fellows. The process combines screening by readers from the applicants' academic field with review by multidisciplinary panels. At the first stage of the outside peer-review process, each of the applicants is prescreened by two scholars in the general field (seventeen prescreening fields include anthropology, art history, archaeology, classics, English, modern foreign languages, etc.) The screeners' scores and comments are used to eliminate about 50 percent of all the proposals overall. The remaining applications are divided into groups of approximately 60 and are sent to four panels of five or six distinguished scholars, all of whom read the applications. These panels then convene at ACLS to discuss each application and to select awardees. (ACLS n.d.)

Each program has its own objectives and provides reviewers with a set of guidelines for judging proposals, which may affect the evaluation process. Program goals are particularly likely to influence the disciplinary background and substantive foci of the applicant pool: economists are unlikely to apply for an ACLS fellowship and students whose research focuses solely on the U.S. will seldom apply to the IDRF program at the SSRC. Although reviewers are made aware of the suggested criteria for judging the proposals, they are not required to apply them. Indeed, reviewers are given almost complete autonomy—they are only accountable to the other panel members to whom they must explain their judgments. Moreover, the guidelines are very general, and panelists are given no indication of the specific meaning of the suggested criteria (such as feasibility or significance) or the weight to be given to each one. For example, the ACLS suggests the following criteria: "1) The intrinsic quality of the proposal and the clarity with which it is conveyed; 2) The significance of the project for research in the humanities (both the general and specific fields in which it figures); 3) The plan of work for this particular project; and 4) The likelihood of successful completion of the project based on the training and professional experience of the researchers (considering the state in his/her career)" (ACLS N.d). Basically, these criteria concern clarity, significance, feasibility,

ty, and, in some broad sense, quality. Almost all the other fellowship programs also suggested that reviewers take into account clarity, significance and feasibility. Some of the programs added to this basic list (e.g., with concerns that the research design be “responsive to methodological and theoretical concerns” (SSRC) or that the candidate demonstrates a “grasp of relevant literature” (anonymous foundation)). Only one of our fellowship programs (WWNFF) specifically mentioned the “originality” of the proposal in their guidelines; yet it was of major concern to almost all the reviewers interviewed. In fact, the guidelines provided a baseline set of criteria for judging proposals that most reviewers had already internalized, and few of the reviewers expressed concern for or even ready knowledge of the institutional guidelines. In separate analyses not shown here, we did not detect significant differences in the criteria used by panelists in different funding programs.

The interviews concerned what happened during the panel deliberation, the criteria of evaluation panelists used to assess proposals, and how the funded and rejected proposals differed. Evaluators were asked to describe what they appreciated in the best proposals they reviewed; the arguments they mobilized against the top contenders that were not funded; and the process by which proposals that had a high ranking prior to the deliberation ended up not being funded. They were also asked to describe how they perceived themselves to be similar to and/or different from other panelists, both in terms of general orientation and in terms of the arguments they formulated in relation to specific proposals: we wanted them to specify their own criteria of evaluation by performing “boundary work,” that is, by contrasting their evaluative standards to those of others (Lamont 2000; also Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000). Finally, they were asked to describe their criteria of evaluation beyond the context of the panel: for instance, how they recognize excellence in their own work, in their graduate students, among their colleagues, and whether they believed in academic excellence and why.

To capture the full range of meanings that are attributed to originality by our panelists, our analysis of their evaluation of originality considers both the statements that panelists made concerning the originality of proposals under review, as well as their statements describing the

originality of other work (i.e., of their own work and the work of their colleagues and students) and how they define originality in general terms. While only some panelists provided such explicit definitions of originality in general (in response to the question, “How do you define originality?”), all panelists provided implicit definitions of originality in the form of descriptions of what they considered to be original about a proposal or other academic work. We analyze how reviewers define originality by examining both kinds of statements, especially since academics typically think about originality in the context of performing evaluations, that is, in reference to specific work. Here, then, our units of analysis are the implicit and explicit statements about originality made by the 49 panelists and 3 program chair-evaluators whom we interviewed. Of all the statements we analyze, 29 percent did not pertain to proposals. Because the way the panelists think about the quality of proposals is closely related to how they think about excellence more generally, and because we found very similar patterns between the way they talk about originality in proposals, originality in others and in general terms (in separate analyses not shown here), we include all descriptions of originality in the presentation of our results.

We compare the distribution of statements between the humanities, history and the social sciences. The humanities clusters include art history, classics, English, literary criticism, musicology and philosophy. The social science cluster includes anthropology, economics, geography, political science and sociology. We consider the discipline of history separately because historians alternatively describe themselves and are described by others as belonging to one of the clusters or the other, and also because they were included in large numbers in both the panels oriented towards the social sciences and the humanities (see also Katz 1995 for a discussion of the ambiguous position of this discipline located between the social sciences and humanities).

Interviews were content-analyzed by two coders with the assistance of Atlas.ti (Kelle, Prein, and Beird 1995). This software package enabled us to increase inter-coder reliability by standardizing the set of codes to be used, tracking the codes assigned by each coder and allowing each transcript to be coded by one coder and

then checked by the other. The codes were derived inductively, with each coder initially coding the same two transcripts and developing their own coding scheme. For the coding of originality, the coding was partially guided by codes derived from previous studies of peer review, which we describe below. The coding scheme was then standardized and the transcripts split randomly between coders. After this initial round of coding, the coders exchanged transcripts and verified and improved each other's coding. This content analysis shows that panelists use numerous standards to identify top proposals. These include originality, significance, feasibility and other more evanescent criteria. For this paper, we focus uniquely on the references that panelists made to originality. Most often, these references came in response to the questions such as "Why did you rank this proposal highly?" and "What do you view as the strengths of your own work?" Statements about originality that we coded did not always involve the word, "originality." In most cases where they did not, synonyms like "new," "innovative," "novel," "creative" or "doing something others have not" were used. On the few occasions when interviewers did not use the word originality or a synonym in their description (for example, saying that "this proposal makes a conceptual breakthrough"), it was clear that originality was implied because reviewers referred to something the applicant did that had not been done before. Ambiguous statements were coded only when consensus existed among all three authors as to their nature. The coding of originality led to the construction of the typology of the meanings attributed to originality, analyzed in the next section.

## DEFINITIONS OF ORIGINALITY ACROSS THE DISCIPLINES

Our typology was developed semi-inductively to classify all statements regarding the originality of academic scholarship.<sup>6</sup> The typology

<sup>6</sup> Although the panelists we interviewed mentioned originality most frequently of all criteria (240 times), it was not the only consideration, nor always the most important one. A preliminary count of the references panelists made to other criteria reveals that clarity was mentioned almost as often (212 times),

is anchored in five broad categories that the literature has shown to be salient in reviewers' comments and that emerged from our own classification of reviewers' responses. These categories concern which aspect of the work respondents described as being original.<sup>7</sup> They include the research topic, the theory used, the method used, the data on which it is based, and the results of the research (i.e., what was "discovered"). The typology also includes two previously unidentified categories. One, which we have labeled "new approach," refers to instances where panelists commented on the novelty of the "approach" or the "perspective," or on the innovative character of the questions or arguments formulated. The second previously unidentified category is labeled "understudied area," which includes instances where panelists discussed work set in a neglected time period or geographical region (generally non-western).<sup>8</sup> Thus, as shown in Table 1, there are seven mutually exclusive categories of originality that concern approach, understudied area, topic, theory, method, data<sup>9</sup> and results.

Each of these generic categories consists of more specific subtypes of originality, which are included in Table 2 and described and illustrated in greater detail in Appendix A. Whereas generic types refer to which aspects of the work

followed by social relevance (122), interdisciplinarity (110), feasibility (103), importance (68), breadth (62), carefulness (46), usefulness (35), and "exciting" (32).

<sup>7</sup> Most of these categories correspond to those identified by researchers who have examined which aspects of papers receive reviewers' attention (Bakanic, McPhail and Simon 1989; Champion and Morris 1973; Dirk 1999; Hartmann and Neidhardt 1990). Note, however, that these researchers are concerned neither with the deeper meaning of these categories, nor with their role in evaluations of originality.

<sup>8</sup> Comments on "understudied" areas are considered separately from the topic, because they concern the geographic or temporal setting of the research, as opposed to the topic of the research *per se*.

<sup>9</sup> "Data" refers here to the whole range of material that scholars take as an object of analysis in the social sciences and the humanities, including numerical datasets, written texts, archival documents, photographs, films, musical scores, and so forth.

**Table 1.** Generic Types of Originality

|                   | N   | % of Total |
|-------------------|-----|------------|
| Original Approach | 67  | 31         |
| Understudied Area | 13  | 6          |
| Original Topic    | 32  | 15         |
| Original Theory   | 40  | 19         |
| Original Method   | 27  | 12         |
| Original Data     | 29  | 13         |
| Original Results  | 9   | 4          |
| Total             | 217 | 100        |

are original (e.g., the topic or the methods), specific types distinguish between dimensions of these aspects. Where applicable, the first specific type listed next to each generic category refers to the most literal or nonspecific meaning that panelists attributed to this generic category, followed by other specific types in order of frequency. For instance, the first specific type for the generic category “original approach” is “new approach” and the other specific types are more particular, such as asking a “new question,” offering a “new perspective,” taking “a new approach to tired or trendy topics,” using “an approach that makes new connections,” making a “new argument” or using an “innovative approach for the discipline.” Table 2 includes the frequency distribution of the 217 mentions of originality we identified across the seven generic categories and their specific types.<sup>10</sup>

Table 1 shows that panelists most frequently described originality using a category that is not discussed in previous research: that of “original approach.” This generic category covers nearly one third of all the mentions of originality made by the panelists commenting on proposals or on academic excellence more generally. Other generic categories panelists often used were “original topic” (15 percent), “original method” (12 percent) and “original data” (13 percent). Originality that involves an “understudied area” was mentioned only 6 percent of the time.

While the literature in the sociology of science that deals with originality in peer review

in the natural sciences privileges new theory and the production of new findings, less than one in five descriptions of originality by our panelists pertain to “original theory.” Also, only four percent refer to “original results”—the least popular generic type. This suggests that these two generic types are far from being the predominant dimensions of originality, at least as far as the social sciences and the humanities are concerned. In part, the scarcity of references to “original results” can no doubt be explained by the fact that panelists were mainly evaluating fellowship proposals, rather than completed research projects. However, the relative lack of explicit concern even for the novelty of the *potential* results of the proposed projects suggests that “making a new discovery” is not the predominant form that originality takes in the social sciences and humanities. What is more, the specific types of “original results” and “original theory” that emerge from our analysis do not conform to the canonical understanding of these terms as found in the sociology of science literature. Indeed, when discussing original results, panelists called attention to “new interpretations” resulting from research more often than they highlighted “making a new discovery” or producing “new findings” (see Appendix A for a description). As we saw, Kuhn (1970) defined theoretical novelty almost exclusively in terms of the production of “new theories.” In contrast, we find that original theoretical contributions were most often defined as “connecting or mapping ideas” and as producing a “synthesis of the literature;” each of which received 30 percent of the mentions of original theory, while the production of “new theory” received just over 10 percent of all mentions of theory. Other less common meanings of original theory involve the “new application,” “reconceptualization” or “unconventional use” of existing theory.

The finding that taking an “original approach” is the predominant form of originality among our interviewees could be interpreted as an artifact of our coding frame: after all, what is an approach if not a theory or a method? To clarify this point, it is useful to specify how we distinguish between original approach, original theory, and original method. At one level, there are differences among signifiers: reviewers tended to use a distinct lexicon for each category, with the vocabulary used

<sup>10</sup> Note that this frequency does not include descriptions of unoriginal work. Including such descriptions brings the total to 240, as reflected in Table 4.

**Table 2.** Specific Types of Originality

| Generic Types            | Specific Types                       |                          |                             |                                    |                           |                              |                           | Total      |
|--------------------------|--------------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|------------------------------|---------------------------|------------|
|                          | New Approach                         | New Question             | New Perspective             | Tired/Trendy Topic                 | New Connections           | New Argument                 | Innovative for Discipline |            |
| <i>Original Approach</i> | 5<br>7%                              | 21<br>31%                | 11<br>16%                   | 10<br>15%                          | 8<br>12%                  | 6<br>9%                      | 6<br>9%                   | 67<br>100% |
|                          | Understudied Region                  | Understudied Period      |                             |                                    |                           |                              |                           |            |
| <i>Understudied Area</i> | 7<br>54%                             | 6<br>46%                 |                             |                                    |                           |                              |                           | 13<br>100% |
|                          | New Topic                            | Non-Canonical Topic      | Unconventional Topic Choice |                                    |                           |                              |                           |            |
| <i>Original Topic</i>    | 9<br>28%                             | 20<br>63%                | 3<br>9%                     |                                    |                           |                              |                           | 32<br>100% |
|                          | New Theory                           | Connecting/Mapping Ideas | Synthesis of Literatures    | New Application of Existing Theory | Reconceptualizing         | Unconventional Use of Theory |                           | 40<br>100% |
| <i>Original Theory</i>   | 5<br>13%                             | 12<br>30%                | 12<br>30%                   | 5<br>13%                           | 4<br>10%                  | 2<br>5%                      |                           |            |
|                          | Innovative Method or Research Design | Synthesis of Methods     | New Use of Old Data         | Resolve Old Question/Debate        | Innovative for Discipline |                              |                           |            |
| <i>Original Method</i>   | 5<br>19%                             | 10<br>37%                | 7<br>26%                    | 3<br>11%                           | 2<br>7%                   |                              |                           | 27<br>100% |
|                          | New Data                             | Multiple Sources         | Non-Canonical               |                                    |                           |                              |                           |            |
| <i>Original Data</i>     | 15<br>52%                            | 10<br>34%                | 4<br>14%                    |                                    |                           |                              |                           | 29<br>100% |
|                          | New Insights                         | New Findings             |                             |                                    |                           |                              |                           |            |
| <i>Original Results</i>  | 5<br>56%                             | 4<br>44%                 |                             |                                    |                           |                              |                           | 9<br>100%  |

Note: Some rows may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

for a given category having a “family resemblance.” At a deeper level, these categories also have distinct meanings if we examine more closely what it is they signify.

In speaking of “original theories,” panelists typically mentioned the use of particular theories, or else referred to specific “issues,” “ideas” or “concepts.” Thus for example, panelists talked of making theoretical connections via “the juxtaposition of ideas that normally one might not associate;” showed excitement about a candidate who had applied a theory in an original way by “bringing performance theory to bear on this [archaic] material;” detailed the way in which a proposal “suggested new ways of thinking about [agency];” or “brought together different concerns in different kinds of historical and other literatures regarding [collective memory].”<sup>11</sup>

When panelists referred to “original methods,” they referred to the tools associated with a discipline, to the research design of a project, or to the specific methodologies and research techniques used by a researcher. Hence they spoke of “inserting a comparative dimension . . . in a way that was pretty ingenious;” praised someone who combines “ethnographic work with historical work;” described a proposal as “bringing comprehensive datasets to bear on questions that are in current debate;” or lauded a social psychologist for “pushing the boundaries” of that discipline by “going out and checking in a few different locales.”

In contrast, a “new approach” refers to originality at a greater level of generality: the comments of panelists concerned the project’s meta-theoretical positioning, or else the broader direction of the analysis rather than the specifics of method or research design. Thus in speaking of a project that she felt took a new approach in her discipline, an art historian applauded the originality of a study that was going to “deal with [ancient Arabic] writing as a tool of social historical cultural analysis.” She was concerned with the innovativeness of the overall project, rather than with specific theories or methodological details. Whereas discussions of theories and methods started from a problem or issue or concept that has already been constructed, discussions of new approach-

es pertained to the *construction of problems* concerning established topics, rather than to the theories and methodologies used to study them. When describing a new approach, panelists referred to the work’s “perspective,” “angle,” “framing,” “points of emphasis,” “questions,” or to its “take” or “view” on things, as well as its “approach.” Thus a scholar in Women’s Studies talked of the “importance of looking at [Camus] from a feminist perspective;” a political scientist remarked on a proposal that had “an outsider’s perspective and is therefore able to sort of have a unique take on the subject;” a philosopher described his work as “developing familiar positions in new ways and with new points of emphasis and detail;” and an historian expressed admiration for an applicant because “she was asking really interesting and sort of new questions, and she was asking them precisely because she was framing [them] around this problem of the ethics of [empathy].” That “original approach” was used much more often than “original theory” to discuss originality strongly suggests a need to expand our understanding of how originality is defined (for a comparable finding concerning the diversity of “theory” in sociology, see Camic and Gross 1998).

Our analysis is also informative about other specific meanings attributed to originality. The other specific types of originality most often used by panelists to describe original work were asking a new question (21 mentions), finding a “noncanonical or understudied topic” (20 mentions) and using “new data” (15 mentions). We also observe that panelists often praised proposals that offered creative combinations of ideas, sources, or methods. Hence they valued work that offers an “approach that makes new connections” (8 mentions), or that “connects ideas” (12 mentions), synthesizes theoretical literatures (12 mentions), or creatively combines multiple sources (10 mentions) and multiple methods (10 mentions). New ways of combining is also a popular form of originality that has not been identified by the literature on innovation and originality in peer review. Often, these combinations were lauded because they were essential to innovative interdisciplinary work. It is possible that these specific forms of originality were especially appreciated by our sample of scholars because, according to the program directors we interviewed,

<sup>11</sup> Throughout the paper, we use brackets to denote details that were altered to ensure anonymity.

several of them were asked to serve as panel members because of their openness towards interdisciplinary work (in line with the objectives of some of the fellowship programs, which is to encourage interdisciplinary scholarship).

It remains to be determined whether our findings apply beyond the evaluation of fellowship proposals. Bakanic, McPhail and Simon's (1989) analysis of reviewer comments on submissions to the *American Sociological Review* found that all comments (not only those pertaining to originality) concerned theory and results in roughly 10 percent of the cases, respectively. This suggests that reviewers of submitted papers place only slightly more emphasis on findings and somewhat less on theory than do reviewers of research proposals, at least in the case of sociology. In our case, a comparison of the originality types used to describe proposals and those used to describe completed academic work, such as panelists' own scholarship, showed very similar patterns (tables showing these results are available from the authors). Future research will determine whether evaluators of submitted papers in the social sciences, humanities, and history place greater emphasis on different types of originality as compared to evaluators of fellowship proposals (e.g., stressing different dimensions of original theory—"new theory" more than "mapping ideas"—or placing less importance on the originality of the approach or the method). Focusing on the multiple meanings of originality, as we do, is a precondition for recognizing that the salience of definitions of originality varies across stages of research as well as evaluative settings. A more open-ended approach to studying the meanings of originality than the one used by the canonical literature is needed to identify and empirically assess these variations across the humanities, the social sciences and the natural sciences, for proposals as well as completed research.

### VARIATION IN DEFINITIONS OF ORIGINALITY AMONG DISCIPLINARY CLUSTERS

Can we detect variation among disciplines in the categories of originality that reviewers used when assessing academic quality? To answer this question, we analyze only generic categories of originality, because the specific types

include too few cases to be useful in examining disciplinary variation. We also aggregate across disciplinary clusters due to the small cell sizes that would result from the many disciplines relative to our sample size. Thus, we compare the generic categories of originality referred to by humanists, historians and social scientists. A key inference we make in this analysis is that panelists value the types of originality they used in their evaluations more than other types; and that reviewers tend to value forms of originality that are prized in their disciplinary cluster. Thus, to find disciplinary differences in the types of originality that panelists used most frequently is to detect variation in the types of originality privileged by different disciplines.<sup>12</sup>

Table 3 shows aggregate differences in the use of generic types of originality across these disciplinary clusters. A chi-square test ( $\chi^2 = 34.23$  on 12 d.f.) indicates significant differences between the disciplines in the way they define originality at a high level of confidence ( $p < .001$ ). The main finding is that a much larger percentage of humanists and historians than social scientists defined originality in terms of the use of an original approach (with respectively 33 percent, 43 percent, and 18 percent of the panelists referring to this category). Humanities scholars were also more likely than historians and social scientists to define originality in reference to the use of original "data," which ranges from literary texts to photographs to musical scores. Twenty-one percent of them referred to this category, as opposed to 10 percent of the historians and 6 percent of the social scientists. Another important finding is that social scientists were more likely than humanists and historians to define originality in terms of method (with 27 percent, 4 percent, and 8 percent referring to this category, respectively). Moreover, compared to panelists from other

<sup>12</sup> Whether this is because reviewers from a given disciplinary cluster are more likely to describe a proposal as original if it embodies a particular type of originality, or because the proposals that reviewers read are more likely to embody a particular type of originality (since they may tend to come from the same disciplinary cluster), we can still draw an inference about the types of originality valued in that cluster. Note also that the weight or importance that panelists attached to a given criterion relative to other criteria changed from proposal to proposal.

**Table 3.** Generic Definitions of Originality by Disciplinary Cluster

| Originality Type  | Humanities |     | History |     | Social Sciences |     | All Disciplines |     |
|-------------------|------------|-----|---------|-----|-----------------|-----|-----------------|-----|
|                   | N          | %   | N       | %   | N               | %   | N               | %   |
| Approach          | 29         | 33  | 26      | 43  | 12              | 18  | 67              | 31  |
| Data              | 19         | 21  | 6       | 10  | 4               | 6   | 29              | 13  |
| Theory            | 16         | 18  | 11      | 18  | 13              | 19  | 40              | 18  |
| Topic             | 13         | 15  | 6       | 10  | 13              | 19  | 32              | 15  |
| Method            | 4          | 4   | 5       | 8   | 18              | 27  | 27              | 12  |
| Outcome           | 3          | 3   | 4       | 7   | 2               | 3   | 9               | 4   |
| Understudied Area | 5          | 6   | 3       | 5   | 5               | 7   | 13              | 6   |
| All Generic Types | 89         | 100 | 61      | 100 | 67              | 100 | 217             | 100 |

Note: Some columns may not sum to 100% due to rounding.

disciplines, social scientists appeared to have a slightly more diversified understanding of what originality consists of, in that they privileged to approximately the same degree originality in approach (used by 18 percent of the panelists in this category), topic (19 percent) and theory (19 percent), with a slight emphasis on method (27 percent).

This suggests that the scholars from our three categories privileged different dimensions of originality: humanists valued the use of an original approach and new data most frequently; historians privileged original approaches above all other forms of originality; while social scientists emphasized the use of a new method.<sup>13</sup> Hence the significance of the typology. It is a heuristic tool that takes into consideration the full range of definitions of originality used by humanists and social scientists, and that avoids understanding these disciplines refracted through the lens of the natural sciences.

### ***MAKING SENSE OF DISCIPLINARY DIFFERENCES***

The disciplinary differences discussed thus far are couched at a level of abstraction that allows us to compare these disciplinary clusters accord-

ing to categories like “approach,” “data” and “methods.” This risks masking a deeper level of difference between the meaning of these categories for the humanities, history, and social sciences, to which we now turn. First, when humanities scholars we interviewed referred to original “data,” they typically referred to written texts, paintings, photos, film, or music and often used words like “text” and “materials;” historians usually referred to archival documents and used the word “evidence;” social scientists generally meant quantitative data sets.

Second, there were sometimes distinct ways in which humanists and social scientists talked about taking a new approach. For instance, humanists would often praise how an established approach (e.g., feminist analysis) was applied to a “canonical” author (e.g., Albert Camus) for the first time. In contrast, social scientists rarely described novelty of any kind in terms of how it related to the “canon” or was “noncanonical,” and as we have seen, relatively few described originality in terms of approach.

Third, humanists’ and historians’ references to “original approach” are spread more evenly across its specific subtypes than those of social scientists. One third of humanists (8 of 27) defined original approach in terms of taking a “new approach to a tired/trendy topic,” but referred to all the other types with nearly equal frequency. And although historians mentioned “new questions” more than any other specific type of approach (32 percent or 9 out of 28), they often mentioned other specific types as well. Social scientists, in contrast, talked overwhelmingly in terms of asking “new questions” about topics that have already been studied

<sup>13</sup> These findings should be understood as suggestive, rather than conclusive, for two reasons: first, because the sample size results in small cell sizes; second, because Table 3 aggregates multiple descriptions of originality from the same individuals, so the descriptions of originality are not independent of each other. To compensate for this, we conducted a variety of regression analyses, which corroborated the findings presented here. Results of these analyses are available upon request.

(accounting for 8 of 12 social science mentions of original approach).<sup>14</sup>

Fourth, while we have defined “methods” broadly to categorize the way that humanists, historians and social scientists described original uses of data, this should not be taken to mean that “method” meant the same thing to all of them. Reviewers in the humanities and history tended to provide less methodological detail than social scientists concerning, say, a research design. For example, an historian described vaguely someone as “read[ing] against the grain of the archives” and an English scholar enthused about how one applicant was going to “synthesize legal research and ethnographic study and history of art,” without saying anything more specific about the details of this methodological *mélange*. In contrast, social scientists went into more detail, like this political scientist who said that an applicant “inserted a comparative dimension into [his proposal] in a way that was pretty ingenious, looking at regional variation across precincts.” Social scientists also sometimes described innovative methods as those which would answer “unresolved” questions and debates (e.g., the question of why the U.S. does not have corporatism), whereas humanists and historians never mentioned this as facet of methodological originality.

Ultimately, the differences we find between disciplinary clusters are arguably linked to their distinct rhetorics (Bazerman 1981; Fahnestock and Secor 1991; Kaufer and Geisler 1989; MacDonald 1994) and epistemic cultures (Knorr-Cetina 1999). We do not wish to make sweeping generalizations about the individual disciplines that compose each cluster, since they are internally heterogeneous. Nonetheless, research on the distinct modes of knowledge-making in some of the disciplines can inform the patterns we find across clusters, if only in a speculative manner.

In her comparison of English, history and psychology, MacDonald (1994) shows that generalizations in English (especially in the New Critical mode) tend to be more text-driven than in the social sciences, which tend to pursue

concept-driven generalizations. History is pulled in both directions (also see Novick 1988). In text-driven disciplines, the author begins with a text, which “drives the development of interpretive abstractions based on it.” In contrast, with conceptually driven generalization, research is designed “in order to make progress toward answering specific conceptual questions” (MacDonald 1994:37). These insights appear to map well onto our findings: original data excites humanities scholars, because it opens new opportunities for interpretation. Since the existence of a text precedes the act of interpretation, focusing on new or noncanonical texts can constitute a major path of innovation for humanities scholars. In contrast, social scientists are more focused on answering or informing specific conceptual questions (e.g., the relationship between social movements and welfare state formation). As such, they tend to value original methods and research designs most highly, because these hold the promise of informing theories and contributing to progress in answering specific conceptual questions or “resolving old debates.” The emphasis of humanists and historians on original approaches is an indication that, while they are generally not as focused on the production of new generalized explanations (“original theories”) or on devising ways of answering specific conceptual questions (“original methods”), they tend to value an “original approach” that enables the researcher to study a text or an archive in a way that will produce new conceptual abstractions or yield novel interpretations. In a sense, then, making progress on a specific conceptual issue is less valuable to them than opening up new conceptual frontiers or revising current interpretations (for example, see McPherson 2003 for a description of revisionism as “the lifeblood of historical scholarship”). That none of the humanists and virtually none of the historians we interviewed expressed concern about a proposal’s hypotheses—in contrast to social scientists, who mentioned it frequently—is but one illustration of this difference.

## THE SALIENCE AND MORAL MEANINGS OF ORIGINALITY

The meanings of originality discussed in the previous sections were substantive in nature: they broadly concerned the ways in which research

<sup>14</sup> We do not attempt to draw confident inferences with such small frequencies, but merely point to patterns that emerge in the definition of an original approach.

was seen as making a new contribution to knowledge. However, closer analysis reveals that panelists valued originality for nonsubstantive reasons as well. As we show in this section, panelists associated substantively original work with personal moral qualities, which they valued and sought to reward. Conversely, they treated unoriginal work as a sign of moral failure, which met with opprobrium. And this connection appears to be true for some other criteria as well; producing work deemed socially significant, for example, was associated with caring about real-world problems as opposed to being solipsistic. These associations have gone entirely unnoticed by the literature on peer review, which remains focused on substantive judgments and the extent to which these are biased by nonsubstantive, personalistic considerations. To understand more fully the meanings given to originality in the social sciences and the humanities, it is imperative that its moral significance be considered closely.

First, we document the frequency of instances where panelists made a connection or association between substantively original (or unoriginal) work and moral qualities (or lack thereof). Table 4 presents the aggregated distribution of these associations in the humanities, history, and the social sciences. It shows that panelists referred to morality in about 40 percent of their discussions of originality, with no statistically significant differences between disciplines. Hence, Table 4 clearly demonstrates that panelists often connected substantive originality with morality.<sup>15</sup> When Table 4 is disaggregated at the individual level, we find that 81 percent

of panelists referred at least once to morality, and 50 percent made more than one such reference. Next, we examine these associations through qualitative analysis to gain a better understanding of the meaning these associations have for panelists.

Applicants' whose proposals were deemed original were often described with such adjectives as adventurous, ambitious, bold, courageous, curious, independent, intellectually honest, and risk-taking. They were also viewed as "going out of their way," "challenging the status quo," "thinking for themselves" and "having a passion for ideas." Likewise, the vocabulary used by panelists to describe scholars whose proposals lack originality has a clear moral tone. Such applicants were deemed to be unmotivated or incapable of independent thought and were described with terms that include: conformist, complacent, derivative, facile, gap-filling, hackneyed, lazy, parochial, pedestrian, rehashing, tired, traditional, uncritical, "spinning their wheels;" or alternatively, fashionable, trendy, "shambolic," slavish, "riding on the band wagon" or "throwing around buzz words."<sup>16</sup> At its core, this lexicon describes qualities that indicate whether or not one possesses intellectual authenticity. Scholars who do original work are independent, because they follow their own, authentic interests—whatever the cost. Conversely, lack of originality indicates a scholar who is lazy, disingenuous, eager to please, which shows that s/he possesses no authentic intellectual passion or interests. In short, independent and dynamic scholars are authentic, whereas phony scholars are lazy or worse, trendy. Individuals with such moral

<sup>15</sup> Like the analysis of disciplinary distributions in Table 3, this analysis aggregates multiple mentions of originality for each individual respondent. A regression of the likelihood of associating originality with personal qualities is consistent with the findings reported here. These results are available upon request.

<sup>16</sup> It should be noted again that the interviewer did not elicit the responses detailed below by asking direct or leading questions that might have prompted panelists to link proposal originality to personal virtue. Typically, she questioned respondents on what they meant when they said something was original.

**Table 4.** Associating Originality with Moral Qualities by Disciplinary Cluster

|                                       | Humanities | History | Social Sciences | All Disciplines |
|---------------------------------------|------------|---------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Total Mentions of Originality         | 103        | 68      | 69              | 240             |
| Associations with Moral Quality       | 41         | 32      | 26              | 99              |
| % of Times Moral Quality is Mentioned | 40         | 47      | 37              | 41              |

integrity were singled out by panelists for recognition, while applicants who were seen to lack this integrity were deemed unworthy of support. According to the panelists we interviewed, authenticity is achieved by successfully navigating the Scylla and Charybdis of academic life: avoiding a reproduction of the *status quo* while steering clear of the latest intellectual trends. This association between morality and originality is particularly limp. Hence, we can compare how panelists support courageous, “original,” risk-takers, and penalize lazy conformists.

### **COURAGEOUS RISK-TAKERS**

Being original is not just about coming up with something new; it is also about acts of courage and taking risks. This is illustrated by a political scientist who praised “a proposal that’s simply bold and brash,” a historian who remarked how taken she was by a proposal “that strikes me as being bold and daring,”<sup>17</sup> an English professor who liked “people to take intellectual risks, some kind of adventure,” a sociologist who appreciated a candidate’s “willingness to take on a very risky project,” and a musicologist who spoke vividly about the relationship between courage, independence, and authenticity. Discussing a proposal, she said:

Courage is important . . . to go against the received so-called consensus, to be suspicious of that, to ask interesting questions . . . none of us can be original, but certainly I think amongst all of us, and for myself as well, [what we are looking for is] a nose for a real passion for ideas, regardless of whether they get the grant or not, a real love of working with their minds. . . And somehow, it’s an aroma.

The “aroma” of originality emanating from original proposals gave the panelist an indication of the researcher’s authenticity (“a *real* passion for ideas”). To be courageous and take

risks shows that the author is pursuing his or her authentic interests, which is something that panelists valued a great deal. They often spoke explicitly of their desire to reward applicants deemed morally worthy. For example, a scholar working in the field of Women’s Studies explained that she supported a proposal, because “it was much more risky than some of the others and somehow I wanted to reward this risk-taking.” Rewarding “creative risk-takers” ought to be the panel’s primary objective, according to one program officer. Similarly, a historian argues,

It’s so important to appreciate that that guy, in the disciplinary context to which he is most closely connected, what he’s doing is really unconventional and is really likely to put him in considerable risk. And I just think that is worth rewarding.

### **LAZY CONFORMISTS**

Never hesitant to extol the virtues of original fellowship applicants, panelists were equally effusive about the moral failings they associated with unoriginal proposals. People who were viewed as reproducing the status quo were often regarded as lazy. As this historian remarked:

I don’t flop over for joy when someone comes in and says, “I use race, class, and gender as my categories.” That could be OK, that could be fine for a different project, but it’s what everybody does. It’s the line of least resistance now. When they do the line of least resistance and flow in that rhetoric of subversion, I tend to get very turned off.

Often, accusations of laziness involved judgments about originality in light of the author’s prior work: “if they’re just rehashing what they did as a doctoral dissertation, that’s probably where they’re going to be stuck for the rest of their academic career.” Doctoral students were sometimes the object of a particular kind of scorn when their work was seen in relation to their advisor’s work. An historian revealed that he reacts “very strongly when I see work that’s extremely derivative. When I see dissertation projects which are spin-offs of the advisor, I always say, ‘Oh, well, I’m not sure about this person.’” What she’s not sure about is whether or not this person possesses any genuine intellectual interests or passion.

People whose work was seen as lacking originality were often criticized, because they were perceived as following the latest trends. Note

<sup>17</sup> When discussing moral qualities, panelists often appear to use metonymy, which means using “the name of one thing for that of another of which it is an attribute or with which it is associated” (Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary 2002). Just as “the oval office” is often used to refer to the president, panelists will describe a proposal as risk-taking, for example, while they appear to be describing the author as taking a risk (since a proposal does not act by itself).

this historian's disdain for an applicant who "was trying to use what I think he thought were buzz words that were sort of trendy and would attract interest. I just thought it was very disingenuous" and "kind of intellectually pretentious." Originality indicates someone who is "not just on a kind of bandwagon of, 'Oh, let's learn about this, it's getting news headlines.'" The line between originality and trendiness is, however, very thin:

I'm always torn trying to balance creativity and newness with the fear of just supporting the fashion. Because so much of what we do is driven by essentially a fashion system . . . just whatever is there at the national conferences and whatever has the buzz attached to it. I try to see if there's some way I can both give scope to whatever is new and interesting and at the same time not be caught by just supporting a fad.

When in doubt, jargon is usually taken as a reliable indicator of trendiness, as this economist noted: "The idea of studying [that topic] was cool. Some of his cultural studies jargon that was from like page three through ten—that was extremely uncool, it was very faddish." Another instance is provided by an English scholar who explains the moral pitfalls she associates with jargon:

If I feel someone's using the jargon just to throw it around and say, "I read Homi Bhabha," forget it, you know? That dog's not going to hunt with me. I mean, I'm not hostile to jargon, but you do see a lot of slavishness to it. It's a kind of, now I don't think I want to use a word as strong as dishonesty, but it's a kind of trying to parade a supposed sophistication. It can also be a kind of laziness.

Drawing a link between reproducing the status quo and following the trend, a sociologist associated both of these with the same personal flaws:

There is a tremendous inertia in academic life to reproduce what's going on, to reproduce advisors, projects, frameworks, theories, or whatever. There is a tremendous self-imposed constraint about emulating what's considered hot, which obviously generates its own form of conformity. [It's] emblematic of a whole general intellectual orientation: not willing to take chances, not willing to think for themselves, not being reflexive.

The problem with trendiness, as with reproducing the status quo, is not so much that it reflects conformity, laziness, dishonesty, faddishness or disingenuousness. It is that these

qualities characterize people who are inauthentic, or scholars who lack "genuine" intellectual interests and passion. Otherwise, they would break free of the inertial forces of academia to pursue their ideas at all costs, instead of just going with the flow.<sup>18</sup>

These examples illustrate clearly how the reviewers we interviewed from a range of disciplines associated substantive worth with non-substantive worth: original scholarship was viewed as a sign of moral integrity and unoriginal work as an indication of moral failure. In addition to valuing original work for its substantive contributions to knowledge, reviewers also valued the moral integrity of scholars who produce original work. The moral judgments that reviewers make about the individual on the basis of his or her work are hence an integral part of their decision-making.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we take a "new approach" to the study of originality by analyzing inductively the criteria that individuals serving on funding panels used to evaluate proposals and by examining the various meaning they gave to originality. Similar to constructivists concerned with the content of scientific claims (Knorr-Cetina 1999; Latour 1988; Poovey 1998; Somers 1996), we are concerned here with the content of the judgments that peer reviewers make about the quality of academic work. The interviews we conducted with panelists in the social sciences and the humanities show great diversity in the way they define originality as well as important disciplinary differences. This enriched understanding complements the standard sociological definition of originality as the production of new theories and new findings. A more multi-valent understanding was invisible to the canonical approach to originality, because it ignored the way that scholars themselves define originality. Further, our results indicate that an under-

<sup>18</sup> Note, however, that working within one's area of expertise or extending one's past work can also be seen by panelists as strengths, since they indicate that the researcher will be able to carry out the proposed study. Thus, what might in some cases be considered a weakness can be constructed as a strength in others.

standing of originality modeled on the natural sciences would be inadequate when it comes to the humanities and the social sciences, if only because it fails to capture the centrality of the creation of “new approaches” as a highly valued form of originality. A widespread practice of taking the natural sciences as a normative model has generated problems in the theoretical cultures of the social sciences in particular (see for example Turner 1989; Wagner and Berger 1985; Wallace 1983). They have often been subjected to an artificial leveling when conceptions about the natural sciences—such as the functionality of originality for knowledge building—are taken as normative in the name of a scientific epistemology that does not characterize all social science fields (Mallard, Lamont, and Guetzkow 2002). Acknowledging the diverse forms that originality takes is an important corrective that can have implications for the practice of research and peer evaluation.

The study of peer review remains heavily influenced by the institutional paradigm associated with Merton and his concern with the norms of universalism (Merton 1973 [1942]). This paper has called into question the institutional imperative to dissociate substantive and nonsubstantive (or particularistic) dimensions in the evaluation of originality. It has shown that nonsubstantive, and particularly, moral dimensions, were central to the accounts that panelists provide of their evaluation of proposals, at least as it touches upon the question of originality. This finding resonates with a growing body of research on how moral standards shape evaluation in a wide range of non-religious institutional settings (Cleckak 1983; Jackall 1988; Lamont 1992; Lamont 2000; Lamont, Kaufman, and Moody 2000; Leidner 1993; Leinberger and Tucker 1991; Meyer 1987; Morrill 1995). It also dovetails with studies showing a general tendency among scientists to identify researchers with their object of investigation or favored theoretical perspective (Latour 1993; Mitroff 1974).

Of course, the specific moral qualities that the reviewers were concerned with are limited in scope; they pertain not to every dimension of individual morality, but to characteristics that are relevant to one’s conduct as a scholar. Being a courageous risk-taker with authentic intellectual interests appears to be a component of what

might be called “scholastic virtue.” Scholastic virtue includes all those aspects of moral character that reviewers may perceive to be relevant to producing scholarship: being serious; hard-working; committed to producing socially or politically “relevant” research (or alternatively, politically “neutral” research); enthusiastic; curious; careful; or caring about “giving voice” to subaltern groups. These are all moral qualities that reviewers associated with other substantive criteria they used in their assessments of what counts as “quality” scholarship. It is possible that reviewers look for signs in the proposals that the applicants possess these attributes, which they may take as evidence of the ability to produce worthwhile work.

Although originality is composed of manifold definitions and multiple dimensions, it is itself only one of many standards by which the peer reviewers we interviewed judged academic worth: significance, soundness, political relevance, interdisciplinarity and clarity, to name a few, are various standards that panelists invoked in their judgments. Sometimes, these criteria were applied in concert with originality to affirm a proposal’s quality. But often, they competed with and trumped originality—as when reviewers agreed that a proposal was original but found it unimportant or methodologically flawed. Or, a proposal would be seen as going overboard on originality, attempting to draw together too many theoretical concepts together in a way that was ultimately seen as “chaotic.” These other criteria—what they mean, how they are used, the virtues they imply, how they relate to one another and whether they apply to the natural sciences—are topics for further research. So, too, are the potential policy implications of our research, such as the possible impact of individual disdain of “derivative work” on the macro fragmentation of the social sciences and the humanities; and the privileging by public and private funders of social science research that follows a natural science model by claiming to contribute “new theories” and “new findings,” as opposed to new approaches.

## APPENDIX A: DESCRIPTION OF SPECIFIC ORIGINALITY TYPES

### *ORIGINAL APPROACH*

This code was used when panelists referred to a proposal as taking a new approach to a topic

that had been studied already. Descriptions pertaining to the use of “new approach,” “fresh perspective,” “making a new argument” and “asking new questions” are included under this category. See the section above on definitions of originality across the disciplines for a more detailed discussion of distinguishing original approach from original method and original theory.

**NEW APPROACH.** This type includes basic descriptions of a new approach, where panelists neither said anything specific about the approach nor evaluated the merit of the approach in relation to the topic (see “new approach to tired/trendy topic” below).

Example: “That was an original approach.”

**NEW QUESTION.** This type was used when the approach was described as original because it asked new questions. New questions are not considered a type of “Original Topic,” because they refer to new questions that are asked about topics that have been studied before.

Example: “He’d really worked out a very bold, fleshed out series of questions to ask about [that subject].”

**NEW PERSPECTIVE.** This type was used when the panelist referred to the “perspective,” “angle” or “take on” a subject.

Example: “That was actually looking at post-communist issues from a really fresh perspective.”

**NEW APPROACH TO TIRED/TRENDY TOPIC.** This type was for cases when panelists did not say anything specific about the approach, but evaluated its novelty in relation to a topic that would otherwise not be worth studying by emphasizing that the topic was tired, traditional, familiar, canonical or trendy. This is distinct from the more basic code, “new approach,” because this is reserved for cases when the reviewer described the topic being approached as having been over-studied or as part of a trend, sometimes derisively.

Example: “All of them took up problems that are familiar, but what they looked at was how a [binary] approach to them hadn’t worked, and they were going to revisit them.”

**APPROACH THAT MAKES NEW CONNECTIONS.** When panelists described how the new approach was a result of connecting different approaches or findings or insights together—sometimes from different disciplines—or linking the topic/approach to a range of broader issues. This subtype does not include references to theories or “literatures” being connected or combined (see “Synthesis of literatures” under “Original Theory”).

Example: “. . . putting individual topics into context with his whole philosophy...it’s really about connections between things.”

**NEW ARGUMENT.** This type pertains to cases where the approach was described as original because it made a new argument. This is differentiated from other specific types of “new approach,” either by use of the words “new argument,” or because the panelist described the proposal as contradicting existing approaches and/or claiming that existing approaches are simply wrong, as opposed to claiming that they need revision in some way.

Example: “. . . a unique argument about how concern for [social welfare] began a few years earlier and elsewhere in [Europe] than most people think.”

**INNOVATIVE APPROACH FOR DISCIPLINE.** This type was used when the approach was described as one that, although not new in general, was new in the discipline of the applicant.

Example: “[Aramaic] is usually treated in a new critical way or a philological way, and the fact that this person was going to deal with [Aramaic] writing as a tool of social historical cultural analysis seemed to me really wonderful.”

### **UNDERSTUDIED AREA**

This category pertains to descriptions of research that was original because it was conducted (or going to be conducted) on an understudied region or an understudied time period. This is distinct from the category “Original Topic,” because it does not refer to the topic of the study, but to the region or period in/on which the study is to be conducted.

**UNDERSTUDIED REGION.** This is for research conducted in an understudied geographic region, often non-western.

Example: "It wasn't an area where people studied the spread of [Buddhism]."

**UNDERSTUDIED PERIOD.** This is for when the research involved a topic set during an understudied time period.

Example: "People who are working on the late 19th century never look at the [literature of the] 1870s."

### **ORIGINAL TOPIC**

This category was used when a proposal's topic was described as being new in some way. This is distinct from "Original Approach," which refers to new approaches to established topics.

**NEW TOPIC.** This type was used when the topic was described as having never been studied.

Example: "... a topic that I was surprised hadn't been done."

**NONCANONICAL TOPIC.** This type was used when the topic was described as original, because it was noncanonical, unusual or subaltern.

Example: "... going outside canonized authors of that period" and "[it] was a little-studied topic that no doubt could do with some more work."

**TOPIC CHOICE IS UNCONVENTIONAL.** This type includes instances where the topic was described as original, because studying it flouted conventional standards or fashion. Typically, such instances occurred when a proposal was lauded for tackling a topic that others had not studied because it was considered boring or uninteresting or taken for granted; or it was a topic that had been studied at one time, but had fallen out of fashion, even though it was still "important." This is distinct from taking a new approach to a tired/trendy topic, because here the novelty arises from studying the topic *per se*, and not from the way in which the topic was approached.

Example: "Maybe the reason it's a cliché is because people think it's so old hat it's not worth studying, but often that's the reason to study something."

### **ORIGINAL THEORY**

This category was used when a proposal's theory was described as being new in some way.

**NEW THEORY.** This type refers to basic descriptions of a new theory being developed.

Example: "... makes conceptual breakthroughs that are convincing and that open up ways for other people to go on and build on that."

**CONNECTING/MAPPING IDEAS.** This type was used for descriptions of innovative theory conceived as connecting, linking or juxtaposing disparate ideas; or mapping or laying out existing theoretical issues in a new way.

Example: "... the juxtaposition of ideas that normally one might not associate to be in one project."

**SYNTHESIS OF LITERATURES.** This type describes theory that was original because it synthesized or brought together theories or ideas from disparate literatures, often literatures from different disciplines. This is distinct from a "new application," because the proposal created a novel theory out of this synthesis. It is also distinct from the "Original Approach" subtype, "making new connections," because this novel synthesis was valued in its own right and not in connection with taking a new approach to an established topic.

Example: "... the ability to basically pull together theoretical insights from different disciplines and combine them in interesting ways."

**NEW APPLICATION OF EXISTING THEORY.** This type pertains to descriptions of the original use of existing theory to study a topic/object/subject/problem that had not been studied using that theory. It often pertains to an existing theory that was imported to a discipline where it had not been used before.

Example: "He was bringing performance theory to bear on this [archaic] material."

**RECONCEPTUALIZATION.** This type includes instances when panelists described a proposal as “re-conceptualizing” theoretical concepts.

Example: “reconceptualizing the whole relation between [technology] and image during that period.”

**UNCONVENTIONAL USE OF THEORY.** When a theory was described as being used in an unusual or unconventional way, this type was used.

Example: “She uses theory and [choreography] and visual arts theory in the way other people don’t.”

### **ORIGINAL METHOD**

This category was employed when the method or *use* of data was described as new in some way.

**INNOVATIVE METHOD/RESEARCH DESIGN.** This type refers to the use of a wholly new or innovative method or research design.

Example: “Original in that she was trying to make a connection between [ethics and practice] by comparing two institutions.”

**SYNTHESIS OF METHODS.** This type was used when the originality resulted from the use of multiple, often disparate or interdisciplinary, methodologies; or when panelists described a method as original in the way it brought together, connected, juxtaposed or synthesized disparate forms of data or evidence.

Example: “[It brings] together ethnographic work with historical work.”

**New use of old data.** This type describes a method that was said to be original because it used existing data in a way that had not been done before; sometimes described as “ingenious” or “subversive.”

Example: “most of us ignored [those documents] because we were sort of trained to look away from them. So here he is . . . writing centrally about it. Even at his level of development, he grasps exactly why this is unbelievably subversive.”

**RESOLVE OLD QUESTION.** We use this type when originality was explicitly attributed to a method that would help resolve old or established questions/debates.

Example: “looking at new data sets and comprehensive datasets and bring them to bear on questions that are in current debate.”

**INNOVATIVE FOR DISCIPLINE.** This type was used when the method was described as being original for the discipline in question, although it is not original in general.

Example: “. . . to go out and check out in two different locales, and that was at least, as far as I know, pushing the boundary of that discipline.”

### **ORIGINAL DATA**

This category refers to descriptions of the data itself as original, as opposed to originality in the way that the data was used. Panelists referred to “data” as evidence, text, archives, materials or data. All of these were included in this generic type.

**NEW DATA.** This type was used for basic descriptions of the data as new.

Example: “. . . looking at manuscripts that haven’t been looked at before.”

**MULTIPLE SOURCES.** This type refers to data that were described as original because they were drawn from multiple sources, often across the disciplines. This is distinct from “Synthesis of Methods,” in that this type applies to instances where there was no reference to the way these materials were (to be) used.

Example: “[My work] uses many and different sources of data.”

**NONCANONICAL DATA.** This type describes instances when the data used in the study were described as original because they were non-canonical, unusual or subaltern.

Example: “[he could] identify texts about which other people haven’t thought much about.”

### **ORIGINAL RESULTS**

This is for descriptions of the (potential) outcome of a study regarded as original for some reason.

**NEW INSIGHTS.** This type is used in instances where the outcome was described as original

because it is a new insight, understanding or interpretation. This is distinct from the "Original Approach" subtype, "new perspective," mainly because this refers to statements about insights that the candidate had already made (either in previous work or in the proposal as evidence of their progress) or was likely to make. So, a panelist might think that someone who had, for example, a new perspective on a canonical text would be likely produce a novel interpretation of it.

Example: "She seemed to me to be doing very deft, elegant and nonobvious, nontrivial reading of [these texts]."

**NEW FINDINGS.** This type refers to an outcome that was described as original because of new results, findings or discoveries.

Example: "This is a major discovery."

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