

## Can't Get No . . . Satisfaction!

You might think that scientific meetings are mainly for exchange of scientific information, but if that were the case, then developments in communications technology would have reduced the number and size of such meetings. Instead, they seem to grow. People just need to talk to each other face to face. Fran Leibowitz said that language evolved mainly to allow people to complain, and the exchange of complaints is certainly one of the things people do at meetings. This is not a bad thing; we feel better hearing that others are in the same (or a smaller) boat. Most of the complaints I hear at meetings seem to be about the struggle to do one's work, but I think they're often about getting recognition.

One myth about scientists is that we are self-contained loners. There's even a book by the scientific hero Richard Feynman entitled "What Do You Care What Other People Think?" I think such people are pretty rare. Instead, scientists are like other people: everybody's sensitive to criticism and "nobody gets enough praise." In this regard, modesty in touting one's own work is compensated for by others' speaking up on one's behalf. Our right to criticize is balanced by the obligation to praise.

The means to satisfaction chosen by scientists is achievement—usually not wealth and not power. Doing science is often hard work, and frustrating. We suffer when we feel nobody notices and nobody cares. Achievement brings its own satisfaction, but we also want recognition, respect, even admiration. (It's important, however, not to confuse respect, even admiration, with affection, or to confuse achievement with the size of your lab.) The drive to achieve comes in different forms. Some of us are competitive, wanting to get there first, to be Leader of the Pack; others want to bring back wondrous news from unexplored places. Some of us want wide, even public, recognition, glory, adulation, superstar status; others seek the respect of a chosen few, the cognoscenti.

For better and for worse, however, there doesn't seem to be much correlation between scientific achievement and satisfaction. It seems strange, at first, to meet people whose achievements you envy who are still unsatisfied and hungry. Some of these people, having proclaimed, "Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and compare!" struggle vainly to stave off the encroaching sands (almost as Shelley's Ozymandias). Many others do achieve satisfaction but, as is true for other things that people want, material and social, scientists often want just a little bit more achievement and recognition, or just a little bit more than their peers. But our peers and aspirations keep shifting. Postdocs want a real job, then, as assistant professors, think they'll be content once they have tenure; stars want to be members of the National Academy, and on and on. It's all so open ended that there's no agreed-upon point at which one can surely say "Enough." Consequently, even those who have reason to be content with their status, contributions, and recognition sometimes are disappointed, still feeling, like Marlon Brando's character in *On The Waterfront*, "I could'a been a contender."

What comfort is there to provide? For the most part, we can still do what we like, with taxpayer support, and we are judged by our peers, not by whether we keep our customers (ultimately, the public) satisfied. We pretty much take this all for granted and feel entitled to it, as if the Enlightenment had triumphed. Talk to someone from a less wealthy country at the next meeting you attend. Those of us who live and work in the United States, and other relatively wealthy countries, are lucky to be able to do science as a profession. "It's not whether you win or lose. . . ." Well, actually, it is, but more important is just getting to play the game.

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