



## THE CHRONICLE REVIEW

# Nutty Professors

By *MIKITA BROTTMAN* | SEPTEMBER 16, 2005 ✓ PREMIUM

Ask anybody what adjective goes best with the word "professor," and the answer will almost certainly be "absent-minded," or possibly "nutty." Popular culture is full of addlebrained academics, whether they be villainous madmen like Professor Morbius in *Forbidden Planet* or Sherlock Holmes's archenemy Professor Moriarty; crazy cranks like Professor Emmett Brown in *Back to the Future*, or well-meaning but harebrained eccentrics like Professor Brainard in *The Absent-Minded Professor*, Professor Branestawm in Norman Hunter's children's television series, Professor Pat Pending in the Hanna Barbera cartoon *Wacky Races*, or Professor Dumbledore of Harry Potter fame.

Like many stereotypes, that of the forgetful genius is grounded in real life: Think of Einstein with his crazy hair, or John Nash, the tormented mathematician portrayed by Russell Crowe in *A Beautiful Mind*. Eccentric characters seem particularly common in those departments known for the more abstract realms of thought, like mathematics, physics, or, most often, philosophy, the field of notorious oddballs like Ludwig Wittgenstein, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Bertrand Russell. It has often been observed that the more prodigious the intellect, the more it can compromise other aspects of the personality, such as self-awareness and social grace.

Indeed, many of us may have known, and possibly worked with, someone who fits the stereotype of the absent-minded professor -- the kind of person who can mentally calculate to three decimal points but seems unable to match her own socks. Talented thinkers with strange personalities often find a home in academe. On campuses, people are usually willing to overlook the odd behavior of their colleagues, or to accept it as part of the intellectual package; students generally find such characters quirky and lovable.

The absent-minded professor becomes more difficult to handle, however, when his

behavior verges on the dysfunctional. All vocations attract certain personality types; academe appeals particularly to introspective, narcissistic, obsessive characters who occasionally suffer from mood disorders or other psychological problems. Often, these difficulties go untreated because they are closely tied to enhanced creativity, as can be the case with obsessive-compulsive disorder, major depression, bipolar disorder, and the kind of high-functioning autism known as Asperger's syndrome.

According to the American Psychiatric Association's diagnostic criteria, those with Asperger's syndrome will often manifest "marked impairments in the use of multiple nonverbal behaviors such as eye-to-eye gaze, facial expression, body postures, and gestures to regulate social interaction," a "failure to develop peer relationships," a "lack of spontaneous seeking to share enjoyment, interests, or achievements with other people," and a "lack of social or emotional reciprocity." In addition, those with Asperger's may be preoccupied with "stereotyped and restricted patterns of interest" that are "abnormal either in intensity or focus"; they may stick to "specific, nonfunctional routines or rituals"; they may manifest "stereotyped and repetitive motor mannerisms," or a "persistent preoccupation with parts of objects."

Asperger's is most commonly found in people of above-average intelligence, who may have unusually good memories or a natural affinity with computers, and often have problems with casual social conversation. Apparently, in his 1944 paper identifying the syndrome, the Viennese physician Hans Asperger suggested that academe might well be the natural home for those who experience the disorder. If these symptoms sound familiar, it is probably because they are part of the spectrum of ordinary behavior that is accepted -- even rewarded -- in academic life. Consequently, like most character disorders, Asperger's is a controversial diagnosis.

As with other kinds of autism, there is no cure for Asperger's, although some of its more oppressive manifestations, such as depression and social anxiety, may respond to medication. But most people who have been diagnosed with Asperger's simply have to be taught, through years of counseling and therapy, how to conduct themselves appropriately in social and public situations. In most academics, I would imagine, the syndrome goes undiagnosed. Like other professionals who pride themselves on their intellectual acumen, academics may have difficulty accepting that they are in need of

clinical help, and prefer to cast themselves as the victims of jealous rivals or narrow-minded opponents.



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Such quirky individuals are often exceptionally talented in their field, and initially -- in an interview situation, for example -- their dysfunctional behavior may seem no more than everyday nerves, or social discomfort. In my own academic career, I can recall two instances where candidates were hired who, in retrospect, appear to have had many of the characteristic personality traits of Asperger's. Both had stellar résumés and impressive lists of publications; they were dedicated and professional teachers, with superlative references. Both were midcareer with a history of short-term positions, but in today's humanities market that is not unusual, even for those with the strongest credentials, and it's no longer considered a reason for doubt. Both candidates gave wonderful interviews and tremendous presentations, and were hired with unanimous support.

Neither lasted more than a year in the job. In the first case -- and I'm disguising some details to protect their identities -- the new hire turned out to be dismissive of any student incapable of meeting her impossibly high standards, disturbingly fastidious, bad-tempered, and intractable in meetings. She was also arrogant, petty-minded, and obsessed with such matters as the relative size of her office and quality of its furniture. In the second case, the new star revealed himself to be an abstemious hermit and hypersensitive to imaginary slights; he was also a compulsive hoarder, and frugal to an unusual extreme. He was discovered to be actually living, *Bartleby*-like, in his office.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, neither candidate's referees mentioned their asocial habits, emphasizing instead publication records and certain exceptional student evaluations. We all tend to request references from those who like us, or who are familiar with our strong suits. It's hard to imagine any midcareer candidate so completely dysfunctional, or so universally disliked, that he is unable to get decent recommendations. The difficulty is not getting hired, but remaining in a position once the flaws become obvious.

In the case of a candidate with real personality problems, however, it seems ethically wrong to pass on the difficulty to another university, even when the candidate will not

accept that there is a difficulty. Wrong, but perhaps understandable. Colleagues who write glowing recommendations for problematic candidates are not only expiating their own guilt, but may genuinely believe -- or may have persuaded themselves -- that the candidate was simply a bad "fit," and that a different kind of department might be better equipped to deal with unusual behavior. There is also the legal question: Could the author of a negative letter of recommendation, especially one that mentions a candidate's personal characteristics, become the subject of a lawsuit?

Much to the relief of those involved, neither of our problem hires requested letters of reference, since they both seemed to believe they were leaving institutions that were not important enough for them, and of their own free will. And with recommendations from some of the top names in their field, neither had trouble securing another position elsewhere.

While strengths in teaching, research, and publications are what initially qualify one for an academic career, when it comes to finding a permanent job, the lack of collegiality -- that nebulous quality -- can, on occasion, outweigh even the most superlative record. However impressive someone may be on paper or in the classroom, that is not where their colleagues have to meet them. Nothing is more demanding than the day-to-day grind of dealing with a consistently exasperating co-worker.

In the situations outlined above, it was easy enough not to renew the contracts of professors on first-year probation. But in cases in which a person has been in a job for a long time -- when, for example, a colleague's eccentricities develop into an obvious mental illness -- it must be far more difficult to justify a refusal or retraction of tenure.

Moreover, Asperger's syndrome is a "neurological disorder." It is classified as a disability, along with difficulties in hearing, vision, and mobility, that most universities are required to accommodate. If our hires had permitted themselves to accept a diagnosis of Asperger's syndrome (assuming that was, indeed, their condition), would we have been expected to adapt ourselves to the neurological differences that make them obsessive, miserly, rude, and truculent? Would we have been considered rigid and inflexible for failing to be open to their rigidities and inflexibilities? Would we have been expected to allow our new hire to live in his office, if his disability made it painful for him

to spend money on rent?  
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I don't put those questions glibly. Candidates' disabilities should not prevent them from getting hired. But, at the same time, we are all affected by our experiences. And if I am ever put in the position of casting my vote in the hiring of a midcareer candidate with no previous record of tenure -- especially if he or she seems ... well ... just a little bit odd -- I might, like Bartleby, prefer not to.

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<http://chronicle.com> Section: The Chronicle Review Volume 52, Issue 4, Page B7

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