

# **Expert' as a social category and expertise as a relational phenomenon**

by Michael Lynch

(Department of Science & Technology Studies, Cornell University)

## **Abstract**

This paper addresses expertise as a sociological phenomenon. It begins with the following assumptions about experts and expertise.

The first assumption is that 'expert' is a social category with normative implications: to be an expert is to have a valued status that sometimes confers special entitlements.

The second assumption is that the definition and significance of 'expert' status varies from one social practice to another. In some institutionalized practices, such as litigation, 'expert' is a formal status that is subjected to codified rules, tests, and procedures. 'Expert' status can be likened to, though it is not identical with, 'professional' as opposed to 'amateur' status. Some activities (such as Karate) have a more refined set of graded levels and tests that articulate standing in the activity. In many other activities, expert status is informally claimed or assigned in relation to others who practice the activity.

The third assumption is that an individual's standing as an expert depends upon the social context. In other words, to claim to be an expert, or even to demonstrate rare skill in the performance of an activity, does not make one an expert, though it can of course be relevant. Similarly, what counts as expertise is relative to procedural evaluations in a practice and of that practice. These assumptions should seem obvious, although of course they can be criticized. This paper works out the implications of these assumptions for social theories of expertise, and particularly for theories that define expertise abstractly as skill or tacit knowledge possessed by individuals.