

# Trying to please everyone: taxonomies, politics, and objectivity

## INTRODUCTION

Taxonomy work is highly political, involving the mediation of differing viewpoints. Information professionals talk about this in terms of requirements gathering, needs analysis, and change management. Underpinning this are the epistemological concepts of subjectivity and objectivity. If everybody's subjective viewpoint is valid, how do you create an objective taxonomy to please everybody? Is there **a framework for managing and assessing objectivity?**

## Background

The US philosopher Helen Longino in *Science as Social Knowledge* (1990) proposes that the subjective/objective distinction is a false dichotomy in scientific inquiry, arguing instead that objectivity depends on a process of intersubjective creation of meaning.



Similarly the creation of a taxonomy depends on negotiating an agreement on terminology choices and categorisations within a particular socio-cultural context. Longino asserts that for scientific inquiry to be objective, it must satisfy four criteria:

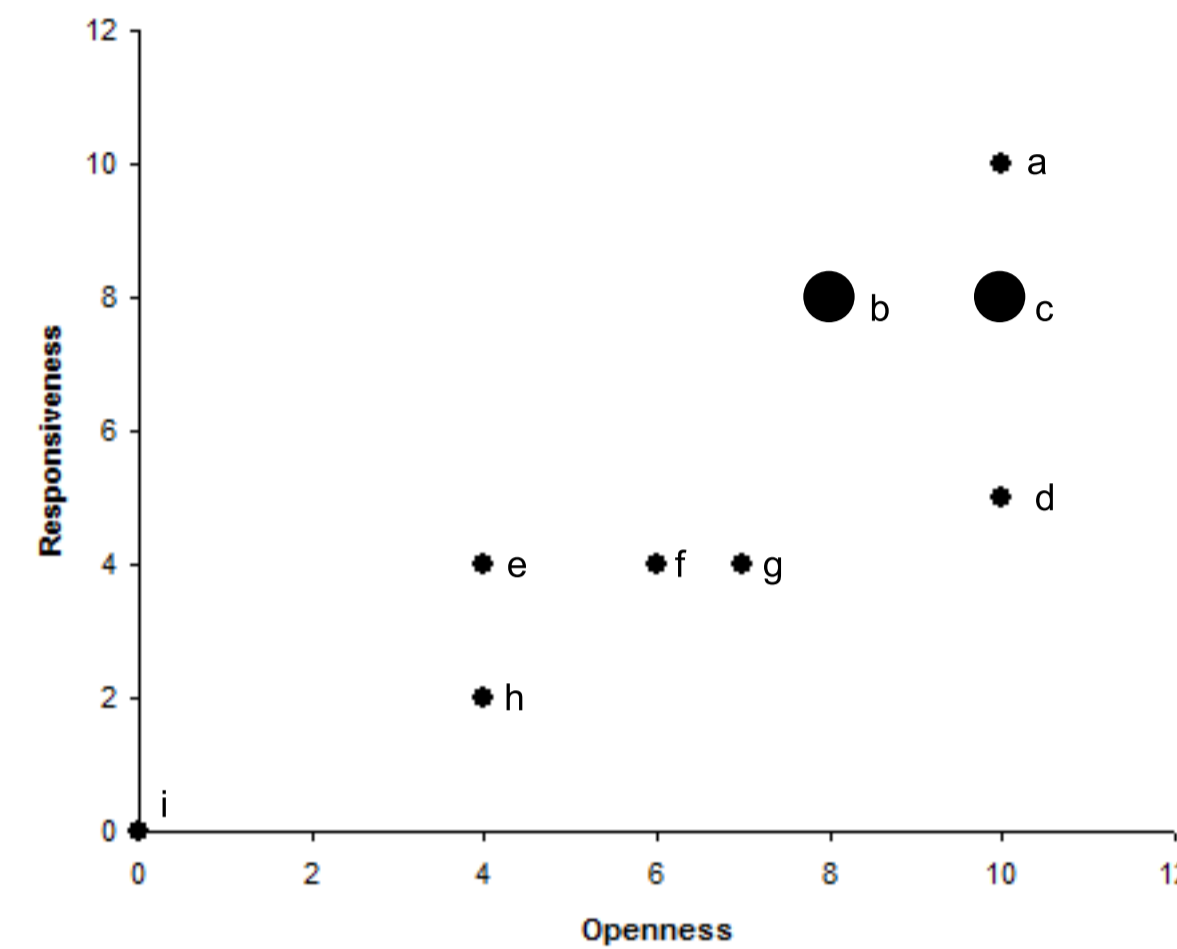
1. **Openness to criticism**
2. **Responsiveness to criticism**
3. **Public accessibility of standards**
4. **Equality of intellectual authority of contributors.**

## Methodology

Fourteen taxonomy professionals were interviewed about 15 diverse taxonomy projects and their responses scored against a set of five questions exploring each of Longino's four criteria. The projects were ranked and results plotted on scatter charts. Large-scale public projects scored higher than projects in the commercial sector and small-scale or specialist projects scored lowest.

## Results

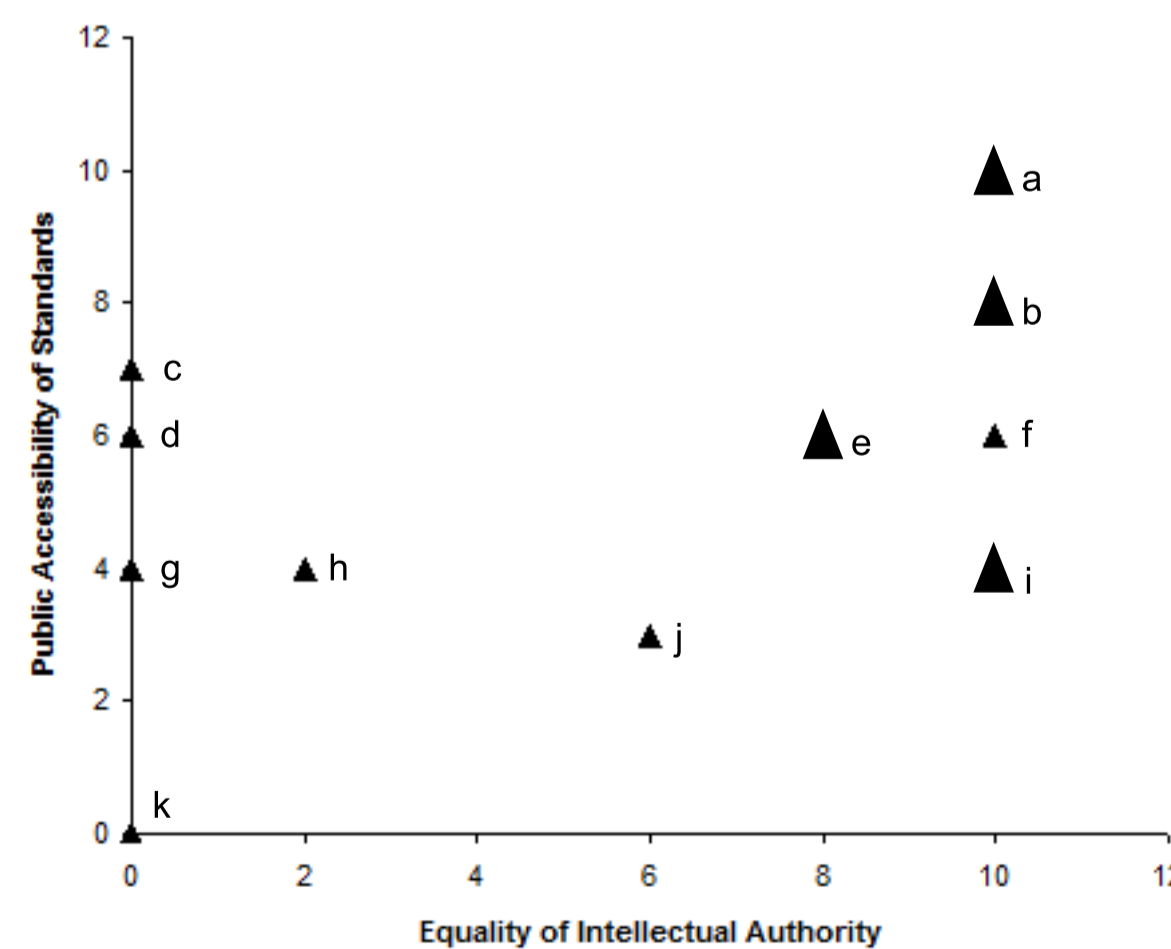
Scatter chart - openness/responsiveness



- Project
- a Biomedical
  - b Bank; IT company; commercial medical; law firm
  - c National parliament; academic library; US-based media company; legal publisher
  - d News publisher
  - e Specialist medical
  - f UK-based media company
  - g Local government
  - h Lone librarian
  - i Lone indexer

There appears to be a correlation between openness and responsiveness to criticism, with the large-scale projects appearing to be more open and responsive than the smaller-scale ones.

Scatter chart - public access/equality



- Project
- a Biomedical; academic library
  - b National parliament; IT company
  - c Local government
  - d Lone librarian
  - e Bank; commercial medical
  - f Legal publisher
  - g News publisher
  - h US-based media company
  - i UK-based media company; law firm
  - j Specialist medical
  - k Lone indexer

Equality of intellectual authority scores tended to be high or low, with few middling scores.

## Rankings

### Bureaucratic\*

- 1st Biomedical
- 2nd Academic library
- 3rd National parliament

### Feudalistic

- 4th (equal) Legal publisher; IT company
- 5th (equal) Bank; law firm; commercial medical
- 6th (equal) US-based media company; UK-based media company
- 7th News publisher

### Charismatic

- 8th Local council
- 9th Specialist medical
- 10th Lone librarian
- 11th Lone indexer

- Bureaucratic:** taxonomist works within well-established procedures
- Feudalistic:** taxonomist has to justify and defend procedures
- Charismatic:** taxonomist has to create and pioneer procedures

\*Weber, M. (1919), *Politics as a Vocation*.



## CONCLUSIONS

The mediation of subjectivity/objectivity is becoming increasingly relevant in a "user-centric" age. This research intends to show that Longino's framework is a useful way of highlighting the degree of "objectivity" of a taxonomy project, and that this is related to the political nature of the project and how the role of "taxonomist as politician" is formally supported.

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