

## Re: Sociological/Psychological Phenomenon

**Source:** <http://www.derkeiler.com/Newsgroups/sci.crypt/2005-06/0018.html>

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**From:** Mailman ([mailman\\_at\\_anonymous.org](mailto:mailman_at_anonymous.org))

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Date: Wed, 1 Jun 2005 00:27:22 +0200

On 31 May 2005 08:15:33 -0700 "Pubkeybreaker"

<[Robert\\_silverman@raytheon.com](mailto:Robert_silverman@raytheon.com)> wrote:

- > *I am curious about something.*
- >
- > *What is it about math and crypto that makes an amateur*
- > *believe that he/she can actually come up with a new theorem*
- > *or algorithm that has somehow been miraculously missed by*
- > *large numbers of previous (or current) mathematicians???*
- >
- > *I am sure that these same people would not post their ideas*
- > *for (say) a new neuro-surgical technique. They do recognize*
- > *that they have no competence.*
- >
- > *What is it about math in particular, as opposed to other*
- > *technical fields of knowledge, that amateurs are unable to*
- > *recognize their lack of competence? People are certainly*
- > *able to recognize that they know nothing about surgery.*
- > *Why do they fail to recognize the same thing with regard to*
- > *their mathematical knowledge?*
- >
- > *We also see the same thing in sci.physics-- Amateurs (and cranks)*
- > *who post their own (mostly mistaken) 'ideas'. These people*
- > *do not seem to similarly pollute medical newsgroups.*
- >
- > *Clearly these people are looking for fame for solving some famous*
- > *problem. But they do not seem to look for fame by (say) semi-serious*
- > *efforts to cure disease.... They know they lack skills for the latter.*

Your comparison doesn't really work. There is an essential difference between mathematics and surgery – namely that surgery requires practical, hands-on training and experience before it can be performed competently. Mathematics is a purely abstract endeavor that can be done by anyone. Just consider the fact that you find wunderkinder in only three areas that I know of: music, chess and mathematics.

Even worse for your case: quite a few major theorems were discovered by completely unknown or obscure people, some of which were not even

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professionals (Fermat was a lawyer, Newton was a priest and alchemist) and some of which were extremely young (Galois was 19 when he died, Lebesgue revolutionized the field with his doctor's thesis). Sometimes even formal education of any kind is not necessary (Ramanujan), and sanity can be dispensed with (Cantor).

Finally, it seems to be the distinguishing mark of many amateurs that they are unable to recognize their incompetence. This happens in all professions I know of (watch carefully the mechanics the next time you take your car for service and you'll see what I mean). The real question is: are you competent enough to tell the bumbling amateur from the brilliant mathematician? For my part I hope we won't dismiss out of hand the next Gauss or Hilbert just because they posted on this group.

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Mailman

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