(Gender) Bias in grant attribution

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Agenda

Bias in grant attribution

• Why gender bias?

• Bias in process of grant attribution: research funders

• Bias before / while application: applicants/universities

• Discussion: your experiences, questions....
Bias in grant attribution

Bias may refer to very different dimensions:

• Affiliation/host institution (Oxford vs Linz): reputation, infrastructure, tacit knowledge how to apply, network ties (reviewers, citations), resources for support
• Country/language: English natives vs non-natives
• **Gender**: different success rates of female and male applicants
• Bias dimensions are inter-related
ERC: Lower success rates of female applicants

StG 2014, Life Sciences (LS) panels

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<td>Step 2</td>
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Absolute differences in success rate for female applicants vs. male applicants.
Research approach

Study commissioned by European Research Council (ERC): *Why do women have lower success rates? = Gender bias from a research funder’s perspective*

- lower success rates ≠ gender bias: control for past performance
- analyze processes and practices: gender as social dimension in the evaluation process:
  - How does gender affect evaluation process?
  - What is excellence? (How) Is excellence gendered?
Data, methods

• Multivariate model to identify gender bias:
  • Applications: personal data, evaluation data (3,030 applicants’ with IC) incl evaluation report: linguistic analysis, scores
  • WoS data: past performance, cognitive distance
  • Interviews: reviewers (n=32), ERC staff (n=16): criteria of excellence, decision making process
  • Online survey applicants (response rate > 40%): perception of excellence, support for application
We found that gender bias may occur at different levels:

• Research funders’ sphere:
  (1) Definition of excellence, evaluation criteria (applied)
  (2) Process of grant awarding
  (3) Composition of decision making bodies/panels

• Applicants’ sphere:
  (1) Encouragement for career / to apply
  (2) Support in application process
1) Criteria for excellence are not clearly defined: What is meant by ‘independence’?

We need to get independence and new ideas and new ways in science. Reviewer 12, W

I think it is important to show some mobility, to become independent from previous advisors. Reviewer 6, M

Females’ independence is questioned more than males’ is. Reviewer 19, W

Reviewer 6, M: independence is about publications, funding and group composition. Reviewer 21, W
5 dimensions of independence

Analysing reviewers’ discourses (Grounded Theory, Glaser/Strauss 1967) on excellence we found:

5 sub-dimensions of independence:

- Independence depends on dependence
- Independence needs to be negotiated
- Independence requires topical emancipation
- Independence requires a new developed network
- Independence is linked to mobility

⇒ Better definition of criteria and indicators needed!
(2) Gender bias in evaluation criteria

• Evaluation criteria themselves may be gendered: Criteria reflect imbalances (power structures) in science system: Women have less time, team support, networks = less excellence indicators: citations, co-authorship

=> Deploying indicators equally to female and male applicants may reinforce gender imbalances!

• Evaluation criteria may be used in a gendered manner: Reviewers refer to own gender stereotypes and gender roles: “Women fight less, are less confident, oversell less ...”

=> More gender awareness needed (funders, reviewers)
(3) (Gender) Bias in grant awarding process

• Assessment criteria are **not applied systematically**

• Assessment criteria/indicators are **applied differently to female and male applicants**
  
  • Masculine criteria are assumed as 'naturally given' and **dropped for men**: independent, mobile = **double standards for male and female applicants**

  • Male behavior is the norm: "*Soon she [sic!] will also learn to oversell...*"

=> Better decision making process needed!
Illustration of unsystematic use: scores for research project step 2 by step 1
(4) Gender bias due to panel composition

Gender bias may be due to composition of decision making bodies (review panels):

• The higher the share of female reviewers, the lower the share of female grantees.
• Women share gender stereotypes and high pressure for loyalty in the panel.
• Gender awareness/competence is not (necessarily) linked to sex of the reviewer!

=> Gender competence is relevant, not sex of reviewer!
Interacting levels for gender bias

- **Panel composition**
- **Gender stereotypes**
- **Gendered criteria**
- **General suboptimal evaluation practices**
- **Gendered evaluation practices**
Applicants’ concerns

- Unclear what excellence means: how to prepare best?
- Women face **double-bind**—challenge: when behaving/performing like men (= the norm) they are not assessed equally, but with double standards: overselling / being self-confident is not equally accepted for women: how to prepare best?
  “*men are confident, women are bossy*” (female applicant)
- Perception: ERC looks for a type of researcher that is more often found among men: competing, selling, mobile
How applicants/universities can tackle bias

Be aware that (the demonstration of) excellence is linked to processes in research teams and to support structures:

• Career development / empowerment
  • Who is first author?
  • How are members of a research team supported to become independent (“Independence needs to be negotiated”)?

• Application process:
  • Who is encouraged to apply?
  • How is support organized? Seminars in Brussels difficult for applicants with care obligations...
Conclusions

To guarantee that grants are awarded to the best/most excellent researchers we need more ...

• more precise definition of excellence/indicators, as they:
  • facilitate work of reviewers
  • enable applicants to prepare in the best way
• more gender awareness among:
  • decision makers (ERC unconscious bias video)
  • professors/university management: encourage women specifically, organise support
  • coaches: how do male/female applicants best present themselves?
Thank you!

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