
Practicing excellence in European Research Council (ERC) panels

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Outline

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- ERC grants: success rates
- Methodological approach
- Practicing excellence (sub-element ‘independence’)
 - general practices
 - gender practices
 - gender stereotypes
- Gender awareness in the construction of excellence
- Conclusions

Starting point

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Female ERC grant applicants have lower success rates than male applicants! = lower career chances: grants shape scientific careers

Starting Grant 2014:

■ differences by domain/field:

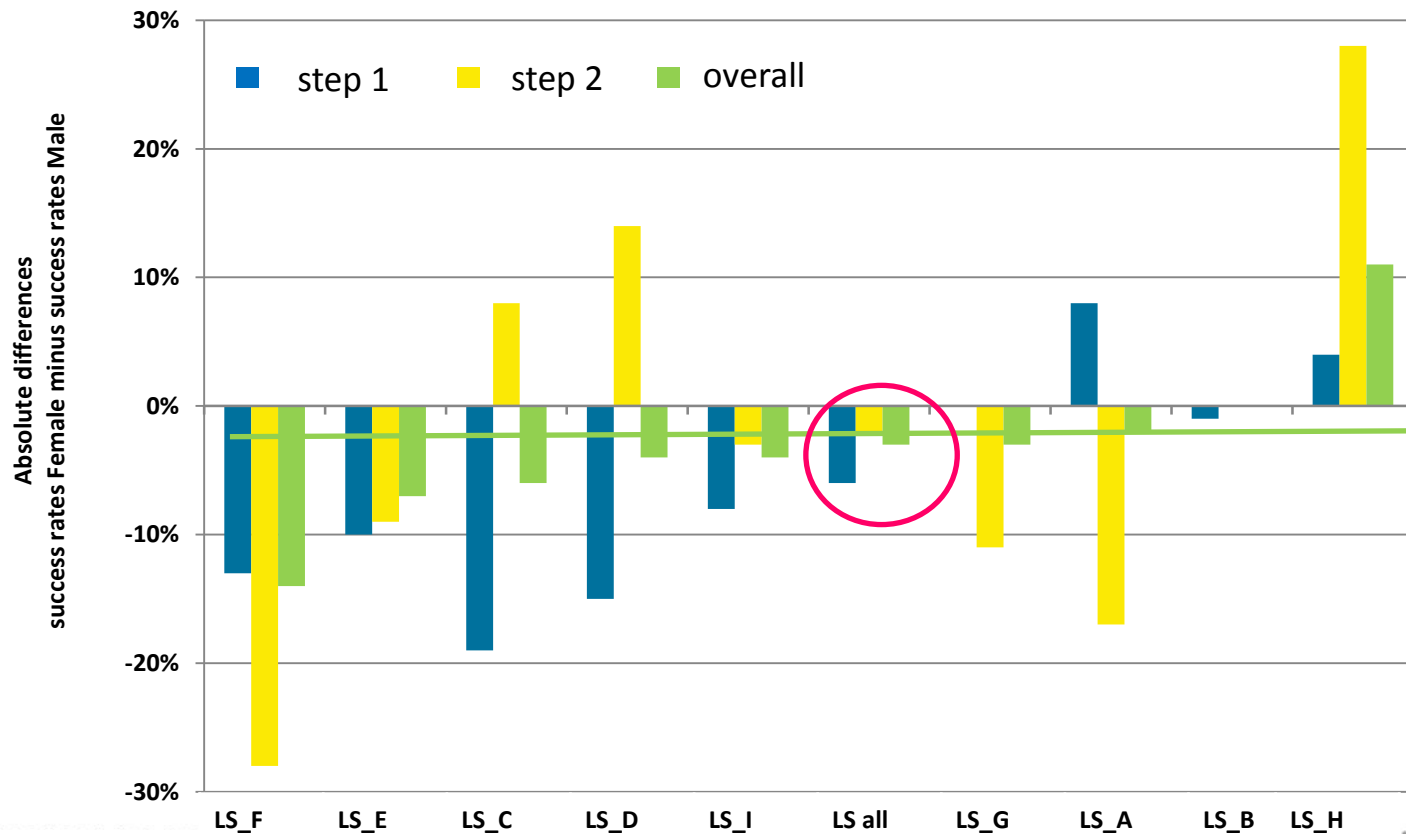
PE: ♀ 12,32 ♂ 10,85

LS: ♀ 11,92 ♂ 15,36

■ differences also between panels

Starting point

Female PIs have lower success rates than male PIs!



Methodology

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Aim: better understand what is relevant/ going on in grant selection process to be better able to mitigate bias

- past performance: Are women less excellent?
- panel composition: who evaluates?
- evaluation process: is it (gender) biased?
- excellence: What is seen as excellent? How is it defined? How are criteria for excellence applied in practice?
- Are female and male applicants evaluated differently?

Methodology

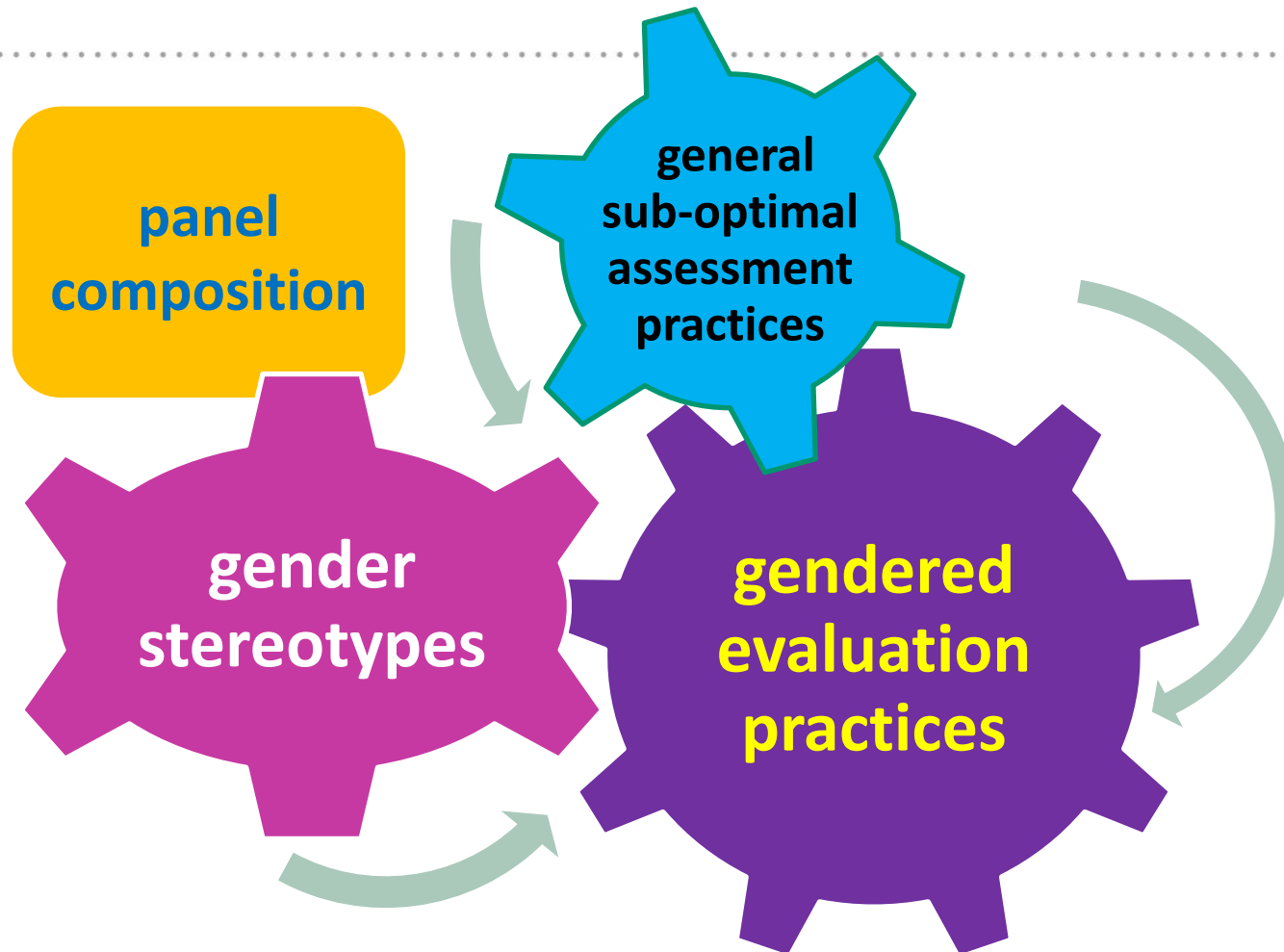
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Starting Grant (StG) 2014 as case

Mix of quantitative and qualitative methods

- Multi-regression model: Which factors explain success?
Where does bias occur (step1 vs step2)?
- **Interviews with reviewers (n= 32)** and ERC staff (n=16)
- Linguistic analysis of evaluation reports
- Policy analysis

Findings: different levels enable gender bias



practicing excellence: independence

The ERC documents mention ‘independence’ as one element of excellence:

- “A competitive Starting Grant candidate must have already shown the **potential for research independence** and evidence of maturity”. (EC 2013: 20)
- Remote assessment: “To what extent does the PI provide evidence of creative independent thinking?”

practicing excellence: independence

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“I think [panel members] bring up independence more as an issue with females and they tend to oversee it for males.”

(Panel member 12, female)

general suboptimal practice: criteria are not applied systematically

gender practice: double standards for ♂ vs ♀: dependent men benefit

practicing excellence: independence

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*“Women don’t move as soon and as long as men to another country to make part of their research there. At the same time I noticed that some **men have never moved out** of their university (...). They start their PhD at the same university. And they also become professors at the same university. And everybody finds that they have an **excellent CV.**”*
(Panel member 32, female)

general suboptimal
practice: informal
criteria (mobility)
emerge

Gender practice:
double standards for
♂ vs ♀: immobile
male applicants
benefit

*“In my experience, **women** are much more satisfied when they can **collaborate** with someone they know well, that gives safety. While **men have the ambition to kick-off**, to start their own thing as early as possible.”*
(Panel member 31, male)

Gender stereotypes

stereotypes = attributions, assumptions about ♀ & ♂

- Perceived (= not real !!) differences
- un-conscious and by this even more relevant in evaluation process
- facilitate fast decision making => more relevant under work pressure

Gender awareness in ERC peer review process

“You know, it [Gender] is the elephant in the room. Everybody knows it is there. We should be paying attention to it.”
(Panel member 3, LS, female)

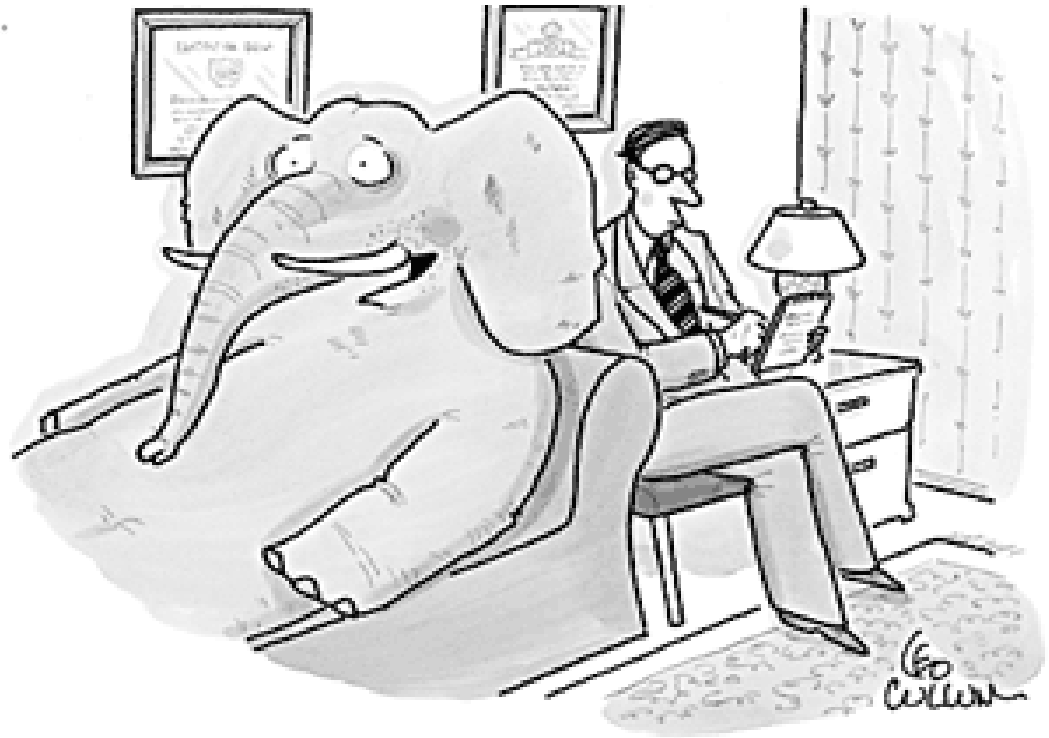


Gender awareness in ERC peer review process

‘Elephant in the room’:

*“A significant problem or controversial issue which is **obviously present** but **ignored** or avoided as a subject for discussion, usually because **it is more comfortable to do so.**”*

(Oxford English Dictionary)



“I’m right there in the room, and no one even acknowledges me.”

conclusions

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- **Panel members lack awareness** how to pay attention to gender when constructing excellence
- Panel members lack guidelines / knowledge / practice how to acknowledge gender in the peer review process!!

Conclusions

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Addressing gender in peer review process is a **complex issue** and needs to be addressed at different levels:

- Standardize process to give less gives room to individual concepts of excellence
- specify criteria/indicators for excellence to optimize peer review process and increase transparency
- Raise gender awareness by making unconscious stereotypes more aware: see cerca.cat/en/women-in-science/bias-in-recruitment

Thank you!

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