



PANEL COMPOSITION AS PATHWAY TO IMPACT: DO WE NEED STAKEHOLDER EXPERTISE TO SELECT RELEVANT MISSION-ORIENTED PROJECTS?#

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ABSTRACT

It is often argued that the presence of stakeholders in review panels may improve the selection of societal relevant research projects. In this paper, we investigate whether the composition of panels indeed matters. More precisely, when stakeholders are in the panel, does that result in more positive evaluation of proposals of relevance to that stakeholder? We investigate this for the gender issues domain, and show that this is the case. When stakeholders are present, the relevant projects obtain a more positive evaluation and consequently a higher score. If these findings can be generalised, they are an important insight for the creation of pathways to and conditions for impact.

INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing awareness that to generate impact, focus should be on the relations between knowledge producers and knowledge users, on relations that can be seen as the pathways to impact. A main reason for this is it may take many years after R&D projects have taken place before impact becomes visible. If one wants to evaluate the possible societal impact of research, it makes sense to focus on the conditions that increase the probability of impact. Therefore, more retrospective research is needed to identify the conditions for contemporary impact of research done in the past.

One may argue that the nature of the relations between knowledge producers and knowledge users may help to increase utilisation of knowledge, which in turn may lead to impact. The term “productive interactions” has been suggested for these relations, and one of the objects of research within this topic is to identify the variety of interactions and how they are formed in different knowledge domains. Understanding

those interactions may help policy makers to stimulate the conditions for impact and through this increasingly open up for the probability that research projects do generate not only scholarly but also (and especially) societal impact (Spaapen et al. 2011; Eric 2010).

In the ERiC projectⁱ and in its successor the SIAMPI projectⁱⁱ, the concept of productive interactions was deployed to study research impact in a broad way, including societal impact. The approach was applied in several scientific and technological fields like information and communication technology (De Jong et al. 2014), architecture (De Jong et al. 2011), law (Van Arensbergen et al. 2010), electronic engineering (Propp et al. 2010); mechanical engineering (Van der Meulen et al. 2010), in biomedical fields (Prins 2010), and in the social sciences and humanities (Molas et al. 2011).ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of these productive interactions or “impact pathways” were found when the investigations were focused on the direct or indirect links between users and producers of knowledge. More recently, the concept of co-production of knowledge has become fashionable, pointing at collaboration between researchers and stakeholders in the process of knowledge creation. It is expected that such collaboration, in which stakeholders bring in local knowledge about the topic under study and knowledge about possibilities and constraints of applying knowledge, the dissemination and use of scholarly research output will be more frequent, easier and faster (see among others: Wardenaar 2014; Hegger et al. 2012; Hegger and Dieperink 2014; Djenontin and Meadows 2018). The model of co-production is mainly deployed in studying complex problems such as climate change and environmental studies, and many problems are still to be solved, such as resourcing knowledge co-production and the cultural differences between researchers and stakeholders (Djenontin and Meadows 2018). Furthermore, the role of stakeholders is often not so much in the co-production of the knowledge, but more in the start of the project when the research questions are formulated, and in the end when disseminating the new knowledge (Wardenaar 2014).

However, also other interactions may be relevant. As research is de-

pendent on increasingly scarce funding, an important pathway to impact may be the selection of the “correct” projects – projects that include the creation of impact pathways as discussed above, but also projects that directly or indirectly focus on the relevant societal issues. It is often claimed that the presence of stakeholders in the panels may increase the relevance and possibly the impact of research: extended peer review (Nowotny et al. 2001) through broadening panel and peer review by including practitioners (Cornell et al. 2013). In this paper we investigate whether this indeed works: does the presence of stakeholders influence the selection process? In this paper we use an innovative method to investigate whether this indeed works: does the presence of stakeholders affect the selection process? We do so for a case where selection panels differ in terms of membership: some include specialists on gender issues, whereas others do not. Are the former panels more positive about proposals that have a gender relevant dimension than the latter?

GENDER ISSUES IN RESEARCH

Research on gender and science has been focused on the position of women in science, such as on gender bias in grant allocation (Wennerås and Wold 1997; Van den Besselaar et al. 2018) and in academic careers (Brouns 2003; Benschop and Brouns 2003; Van den Brink 2006).

More recently, the effect of underrepresentation of women in science on the content of research has become a prominent issue. Biomedical research is a good example, as it has become clear that in much clinical research only male subjects were included. This has blinded the field for gender differences in symptoms, diagnosis and in medication and treatment (Chapman et al. 2013). At the same time, several studies have shown that female researchers are more inclined to take gender issues into account than male researchers do (Nielsen et al. 2017). If this holds

for research and research output, it may also hold for research input: grants. Are female panel members, and – more specifically for this paper – panel members that specialise in gender issues more inclined to select proposals with a gender dimension?

In this paper, we address the question whether the availability of gender expertise in grant selection panels does matter. Do panels with gender specialists and panels without gender specialists look differently at proposals? And, do panels with gender expertise have a more positive report on gender related proposals than panels without gender expertise on board? After having answered this question, the issue comes up in what respect gender expertise is relevant and is influencing the selection process. To answer that, observations of panels would be needed, and that falls outside the scope of this paper. However, the research question is also relevant from a practical perspective. If we find a positive effect of gender expertise on the selection process, this knowledge can be used for composing panels, even if we do not know how it exactly works.

DATA AND METHOD

DATA

We use a dataset covering 111 granted project proposals, and all were considered by the applicants as gender-relevant.^{iv} The projects were submitted in various calls in the Horizon 2020 programme, all with a two-stage procedure. Table 1 gives an overview of the *calls* the proposals were addressing.

Border security and external security (BES)

Table 1. Number of proposals in the sample by call.

Disaster-resilience: safeguarding and securing society, including adapting to climate change (DRS)	5
Energy Efficiency (EE)	5
Meeting new societal needs by using emergent technologies in the public sector (EURO)	3
Overcoming the crisis: new ideas, strategies and governance structures for Europe (Euro Society)	15
Fight against crime and terrorism (FCT)	2
RRI uptake in current research and innovation systems (Garri)	2
Information and communications technology (ICT)	11
New forms of innovation (INSO)	2
Energy transition (LCE)	1
Mobility (MG)	11
Nanotechnologies, advanced materials and production (NMP)	1
Health research and innovation (PHC)	19
Innovative ways to make science education and scientific careers attractive to young people (SEAC)	7
Small farms but global markets: the role of small and family farms in food and nutrition security (SFS)	3
A resource to recycle, reuse and recover raw materials (Waste)	9
Water Innovation: Boosting its value for Europe (Water)	6
The young generation in an innovative, inclusive and sustainable Europe (Young)	7

All these projects are “flagged” as gender relevant, which means that the applicants claim that their project has a relevant gender

dimension.^v However, an independent evaluation of the proposals – in terms of the “Cross-Cutting Monitoring Indicator” (CCMI) – indicates whether a gender dimension is really present in the proposals. Of the 110 projects in the sample, 60 get a positive CCMI indicator score by an “independent” project officer. This means that the sample consists of 60 gender relevant applications, and 30 applications that lack gender relevance. For 17 projects, the variable is missing. Obviously, many applicants try to sell their project as gender relevant – even if this is not the case. This is not unexpected, as they may hope that this improves the probability to get funded.^{vi}

Apart from information about the gender content of the proposals, we have information about the relevant panels.^{vii} We do know for each of the projects whether at least one expert on gender issues was in the relevant panel – which was the case for 71 of the projects. We also know the scores the proposals have received from the panels. Finally, we have the evaluation reports about the proposals in the second stage of the evaluation. All data were provided by the funder. The information available enables to distinguish four conditions which will be used for the analysis. These are shown in Table 1.

Table 2. Sample: gender expertise and CCMI*.

CCMI	Gender expert in panel	
	No	Yes
No	22	11
Yes	15	45
Missing	2	15
Total	39	71

* “Cross-Cutting Monitoring Indicator”

METHODS

In order to assess the evaluation of the project proposals, and the influence of (in this case gender) stakeholders in the panel, we perform a linguistic analysis of the review reports. The “Evaluation Summary Reports” (ESR) consist of (i) the project summary produced by the applicants and (ii) the review text (including the scores) produced by the panel. Summary and review were separated for the analysis. We use the summaries to check whether gender is mentioned in the content of the research. The review text was used to investigate whether the reviews explicitly relate to gender, and to analyse whether the reviews have a more positive or negative tone.

The ESR files are in PDF format, and we did split all files in a review part and in a summary part. Then, the PDF files were converted into plain text files and from these files the “standard text” was deleted, such as headings of sections. The remaining parts of the files were imported into the text analysis software CorText¹ for term extraction. For finding terms referring to gender and gender issues, we used both the summary and the review. For the linguistic analysis we used only the review texts (see below).

Finding terms that refer to gender and gender issues was done by manual inspection of the word lists produced by CorText. The review

parts were also used for a linguistic analysis in order to distinguish between negative and positive reviews. The latter was done using LIWC², a tool for linguistic analysis of texts. The tool works with a variety of predefined linguistic categories and has been applied regularly for the analysis of reviews (Kaatz et al. 2014a; Van den Besselaar et al. 2016, 2018b). Each linguistic category consists of a set of words representing that category, which have been validated in other studies (Abele and Wojciszke 2014). The LIWC programme counts for each of the categories how many times a word belonging to that category is present in a review report. As the reports are of different length, normalisation is needed: the number is translated into a percentage. In this case, we start with using those categories that are tested and used in previous studies on grant decision and panel deliberation (Kaatz et al. 2014a; Van den Besselaar et al. 2016, 2018b):

- *Ability words*, such as *gift**, *intell**, *skill**;
- *Achievement words* such as *creati**, *excel**, *compet**;
- *Agentic words* such as *outspoken*, *solid*, *risk*;
- *Negative evaluation words* such as *naïve*, *defect**, *lack**;
- *Positive evaluation words* such as *intriguing*, *compelling*, *commit**;
- *Research words* such as *laboratory*, *result**, *fund**;
- *Standout adjectives* such as *world class*, *outstanding*, *exceptional**.

The term extraction of the review reports resulted in a list of frequently used (stemmed) terms. This list was inspected in order to find additional review terms not included in the above-mentioned linguistic categories. Based on the term extraction, the following additional linguistic categories are added:

- *Negating words* such as *hasn't*, *don't*, *can't*;
- *Negative emotions words* such as *abuse**, *bitter**, *bad**;
- *Positive emotions words* such as *agreeable**, *benefit*, *helpful*;
- *Exclusion words* such as *but*, *either*, *except*, *just*, *not*;
- *Insight words* such as *define*, *reflect*, *idea**;
- *Certainty words* such as *fundamental*, *commitment*, *truly*.

Why were these additional categories selected? Firstly, as term extraction shows that the categories may play a role given the frequency they appear. For *negation* words, an additional argument is that the excellent applicants are the norm in science, and the others are measured against those excellent: “not excellent”. *Exclusion* words might be used biased because of the same argument. Positive and negative *emotions* are relevant to include, as one would want to see how strong *sentiments* play a role in panel deliberation.

Running LIWC gives for every review the percentage of words belonging to each linguistic category. We can now compare the average frequencies of the linguistic categories between those applications that have a positive CCMI score versus a negative CCMI score, and those evaluated by a panel with gender expertise or by a panel without such expertise. As there are some missing values in the CCMI variable (17) we actually can include 93 projects in the analysis. As we also have the scores the proposals received, we can also compare the scores for the four groups with the results of the linguistic analysis.

RESULTS

1 <http://cortext.risis.eu/login>

2 <http://liwc.wpengine.com>

ARE THE SUMMARIES OF THE PROJECTS GENDER RELATED?

Manually inspecting the words used in the project summaries shows firstly that words like sex, male, and female are hardly used. The word *gender* is used in the project summaries, in a different way in the four conditions (Table 2). In the two groups with proposals that were flagged as gender relevant, 40% uses the term gender, whereas this is only the case for 27% of the non-gender relevant proposals. In the reviews the pattern is similar. Comparing the two sets of proposals that have been evaluated by panels with gender expertise with the other two sets, show that panels with the gender experts more frequently evaluate in terms of gender issues (39%), whereas the other panels do this in only 14% of the proposals. As a tentative conclusion, panels including stakeholders do more often evaluate proposals partly from the stakeholders' point of view.

Table 3. "Gender" in the summary and in the review.

	CCMI	Gender expert in panel	
		No	Yes
"gender" in	No	5 (23%)	4 (36%)
summary	Yes	3 (20%)	21 (47%)
"gender" in	No	2 (9%)	2 (18%)
review*	Yes	3 (20%)	20 (44%)

* excluding "gender balance" in the team

More sophisticated approaches to this are possible. We only used the term *gender*, but one could think of producing ontologies (or structured thesauri) describing gender relevant topics in detail, and use these for analysing the content of the proposals (e.g., Van den Besselaar et al., 2017). This approach, however, is outside the scope of this paper.

ANALYSING THE REVIEW REPORTS

We use a linguistic analysis of the review reports, as described in the methods section. We compare the four groups of proposals, defined by the two core variables: (i) availability of gender expertise in the panel, and (ii) the CCMI score for gender relevance. We use group 4 as reference: gender expertise present and a positive CCMI score.

1. Group 1 (no gender expertise, negative CCMI) versus group 4 (gender expertise, positive CCMI): Compared with Group 4, Group 1 has a significant higher mean score on *negative emotions* (mean = 1.14 vs mean = 0.70, $p = 0.004$), *agentive language* (mean = 2.96 vs mean = 2.57, $p = 0.037$) and on *negative evaluation* (mean = 2.13 vs mean = 1.22, $p = 0.000$), and a significant lower mean score on *insight* (mean = 2.34 vs mean = 2.90, $p = 0.008$) and on *positive evaluation* (mean = 8.12 vs mean = 9.10, $p = 0.070$). As these scores are generally not normally distributed, we use next to Analysis of Variance (to compare the *means*) also a non-parametric test (to compare the *mean ranks*). This shows that compared with group 4, group 1 has a significant higher mean rank on *negative emotions*, *agentive*, and on *negative evaluations*, and a significant lower mean rank on *insight* and on *positive evaluation*. So, both tests give the same results.

2. Group 2 (gender expertise, negative CCMI) versus group 4 (gender expertise, positive CCMI): Compared with group 4, group 2 has a significant higher mean score on *negative evaluations* (mean = 1.79 vs mean = 1.22, $p = 0.061$), and a significant lower mean score on *positive emotions* (mean = 2.75 vs mean = 3.70, $p = 0.005$) and on *positive evaluation* (mean = 7.57 vs mean = 9.10, $p = 0.037$). Again, as these scores are generally not normally distributed, we use next to Anova also a non-parametric test. Compared with group 4, group 2 has a marginally (non-significant) higher mean rank on *negative evaluation*, and a significant lower mean rank on *positive emotions* and on *positive evaluation*. Both tests give similar results. The marginally/non-significance is due to the small number of cases in group 2. The conclusion of this analysis is that panels with *gender-specialists* are more positive on gender-related projects than non-gender-related projects.
3. Group 3 (no gender expertise; positive CCMI) versus group 4 (gender expertise, positive CCMI): Compared with Group 4, Group 3 has a non-significant (small N) higher mean score on *negative evaluations* (mean = 1.61 vs mean = 1.22, $p = 0.13$), and a significant lower mean score on *positive emotions* (mean = 3.16 vs mean = 3.70, $p = 0.056$). As these scores are generally not normally distributed, we use next to Anova also a non-parametric test. Compared with Group 4, Group 3 has a significant higher mean rank on *negative evaluations*, and a significant lower mean rank on *positive emotions*. Obviously, both tests give about the same results. The non-significance may also be due to the small N for group 3. The conclusion is that *proposals with a gender dimension* are more positively evaluated by panels with gender expertise than by panels without gender expertise.

PANEL SCORES

Comparing the evaluation scores for the different groups shows that in panels with gender expertise, "gender relevant" proposals (ccmi = yes) get a higher score than the "non-gender relevant" proposals (ccmi = no): 14.0 versus 13.6; and the panels with gender expertise score the gender proposals (ccmi = yes) higher than the panels without gender expertise do: 14.0 versus 13.1 points.

CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions are that (i) panels with gender-specialists are more positive about gender-related proposals than about non-gender-related proposals, and (ii) that panels with gender expertise are more positive than panels without gender expertise about proposals with a gender dimension. This difference in evaluation language is also reflected in the scores as we showed above. The overall finding would confirm the strategy of getting stakeholders into panels: it helps getting projects funded that work on issues relevant to the stakeholders. So we can tentatively answer the question whether gender expertise matter or not: our findings indicate that gender expertise in panels matter. If these findings can be generalised, stakeholder representation seems a good way for increasing research project relevance and impact.

Further work is needed, as this paper only is only a first modest step. Several improvements need to be addressed in the future. (i) First of all,

a better operationalisation is needed of what is “stakeholder relevant research”. This asks for ontologies that give a structured representation of the topics relevant to the specific stakeholders. With such ontologies, it becomes easier to identify relevant research but also to assess where there are white spots in the relevant research portfolio. (ii) The analysis was done using only the summary of the proposals. Using the full text may improve the analysis, although it is also more difficult to identify the relevant parts of the proposal and may introduce more noise. (iii) Only granted proposals are taken into account, but the analysis of the non-granted proposals is as important. (iv) Other aspects of the evaluation may be taken into account, such as the scientific quality of the consortium, and earlier work in relation to the stakeholders needs. (v) Since we only have access to projects in gender flagged topics, it is not possible to conduct a more refined analysis that focuses on the differences between flagged and not flagged topics: how good is the identification of stakeholder relevant projects? (vi) Field differences should be taken into account. This could not be done due to the relative small number of proposals. (vii) Last but not least, ex post evaluation is needed too. Do the proposals that were defined as stakeholder-relevant indeed produce more useful and more used output? And what is the quality in other dimensions, such as the scholarly quality?

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Endnotes

- i ERiC stands for "Evaluating Research in Context". It was a project of the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences, The Netherlands Research Council NWO, the Association of Universities, and the Association of Universities of Applied Sciences. The aim was to develop a method for research evaluation that takes into consideration all relevant quality and impact dimensions, scholarly as well as societal and economic.
- ii The SIAMPI project was funded by the European Commission under grant agreement no 230330. SIAMPI means "Social Impact Assessment Methods for research and funding instruments through the study of Productive Interactions between science and society". Partners were the Royal Netherlands Academy of Arts and Sciences (KNAW), CSIC (Spain), MSH (France) and University of Manchester (UK). The SIAMPI consortium developed methods to assess social impact of research projects, research programmes and research funding instruments.
- iii However, the social impact of the SSH may be strongest in interdisciplinary projects, where the social sciences are an important part as these fields focus often on the conditions under which the larger project can have impact. We cannot go into this issue here.
- iv What counts as gender relevant is not further discussed here: we take the classification of the proposals in terms of gender relevance as it was done by the funding organisation (the European Commission). It is necessary to more detailed define what gender (or other societal) relevance means, as discussed above.
- v Since we only have access to projects in "gender flagged" topics, it is not possible to conduct a more refined analysis that focuses on the differences between 'flagged' and 'non-flagged' topics.
- vi This is not uncommon, also in other domains. For example, organisations advertise themselves with fashionable labels ("Our company aims to empower the employees") even if they do not anything that could count as empowering. Research shows that this indeed has a positive effect on the reputation of those companies (Staw and Epstein 2000).
- vii As this are all funded projects, it would be possible to include more information about the partners, as these are in the proposals. Characteristics of the applicants, such as their earlier work on (in this case) gender relevant topics, might also influence the discussion and scores by the panel. This extension is also for further research.