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Chapter 3:

Rules for Identifying the Cream while Producing the Sacred Or Pragmatic Fairness: Producing the Sacred by Playing by the Rules

It's just very pragmatic. You put twelve pretty smart people in a windowless room in [some city] for two days and you expect them to remain sane. They're pretty professional people, so they do their best. They have very different tastes so there's a lot of potential for conflict. They stay cool-headed and they have to make these heroic efforts to agree across big disciplinary differences on what constitutes a good proposal . . . We spend so much time on it and that there's so many people focusing at once on this proposal. . . . This year particularly, there was a lot of movement: You had a lot of situations where something was ranked relatively high [prior to the meeting and], weaknesses were discussed and people in favor were convinced [not to fund]. And conversely, something [ranked] quite low, the more you talked about it, the more it looked like you should give it a chance, that it had some promise . . . It would be sort of self-congratulatory to say that cream rises to the top and that we picked exactly the right set. I don't think that happened. But I think we chose on average the better proposals, and maybe they're one or two here or there that maybe someone could say, "Well, you really shouldn't have missed this," or "You shouldn't have funded that." – Economist

Within that competition, I think on the whole we do a pretty good job of identifying, not individually but collectively, identifying really quality research that could be considered 'the cream.' It's possible that there's quality research that we missed and it's possible that some people have pulled the wool over our eyes, but I think that's the exception. On the whole we've done an incredible job of working with the applicant pool that we had." – Art Historian

The consensus candidates were consensus at a high level, not compromised candidates—you know how that term is used in academia . . . I mean all the ones that won, won. I mean *all* of them . . . So I think the process works very well. It's just hard to articulate what it is. I have this gut feeling because I've been working for this for three years . . . I can tell a marked difference between those cases [that won] and the people who are finalists. I look at them and I go right away, "these aren't finalists." There's a marked difference in quality... You just know it. Sorry to put it that way, but you just know it.... There's a certain sophistication of the togetherness about the proposal... They're dealing with things that are genuine intellectual issues. They're not just aping things. They're

integrating them in new ways. They're expanding the realm of knowledge and that they're real research projects. --Panel Chair

With *no* exception, the panelists I talked with consider their deliberations fair and their panel able to identify the top proposals. Like the economist cited above, they do not believe that their panel did a perfect job at identifying all the most meritorious proposals, but they do maintain that they were able to identify the best proposals “on average.”¹ It seems panelists believe that meritocracy guides the process of selection and that the invisible hand of the evaluation process determines the outcome of the competition. They may qualify their views by referring to the “role of chance and passion” in the process and state that “mistakes are made,” and as the next chapter will show, panelists also differ on the residence of excellence in the project itself or in “the eye of the beholder” (i.e., in the intersubjective agreement among panelists). However, they are generally confident that panels succeed in identifying high-quality proposals, and that peer review “works” as a mechanism for quality control. This belief resonates with their broader investment in a “culture of academic excellence” that precludes panelists from framing the outcome of the deliberations as an expression of cronyism. In fact, the absence of reference to self-interest is one of the reasons that panelists offer for why they enjoy serving on panels (“officiating as priest” as one of them puts it). For instance, in reference to a panel he served on, a historian says:

the discussion was the highest quality. [It was] some of the highest quality sort of interdisciplinary academic discourse and exchange. It was really good.... I'm really impressed when people can step outside of their own interests and out of their own interest groups and look at something from another perspective.”

The most otherworldly aspects of academic life are at the center of panelists' talk about their experience as evaluators. One historian expressed pride in the collective work produced by his panel, while many extolled their experience. We will see how much they enjoy seeing a brilliant mind at work and how much they appreciate reading a perfectly crafted proposal. Their commitment to the distinctive pleasures and virtues of academic life cannot be underestimated as a factor that shapes how they think about their responsibilities as panel members. However, this commitment does not come “naturally.” Nor can we take for granted that their belief in academic excellence or in the fairness of the process is an expression of false consciousness or requires debunking.² Instead, what is needed, and what this chapter offers, is an analysis of the conditions that produce their

¹ Panelists cite a relatively high level of consensus around the top proposals as evidence that “cream rises to the top:” “There's very little disagreement at the top or the bottom . . . But basically [in] the middle it becomes difficult with some people; different people have different views of the particular merit of proposals. But there's such agreement on what makes a really good proposal.”

² It is characteristic of the Bourdieusian approach to academic discourse to show how disinterested positions are in fact interested (e.g., Bourdieu 1984). This sociology is described as a critical sociology because it adopts a critical posture toward how individual understandings and denounces hidden interests (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992). In contrast, in line with Goffman's analysis of frames (Goffman 1974; Polleta and Ho 2005), I am interested in the competing frames that individuals use to give meaning to their action and how these hang together. For a similar approach and critique of Bourdieu's work, see Guaspere, Breviglieri, Lafaye and Tom 2005. Also Boltanski and Thévenot 1991.

collective belief in the legitimacy of the process.³ At the same time, I elaborate further on the panel mechanics described in the last chapter by providing a detailed response to the puzzlement of the panel chair concerning the functioning of evaluation process (“it is hard to articulate what it is”).

Both Max Weber and Emile Durkheim, two of the founding fathers of the field of sociology, wrote on the production of belief. Weber was largely concerned with the production of legitimacy, suggesting that rational legal legitimacy requires belief in the use of impersonal, abstract, and consistent rules, which requires the bracketing of individual interest.⁴ Durkheim wrote about the production of religious feelings and on the mechanisms by which people come to invest in the sacred. He suggested that the sacred is defined by its separation from the sphere of the profane through rituals.⁵ We will see that the work of panelists is very much in line with the processes described by Weber and Durkheim. We can identify a number of rules that panelists abide by, rules that lead them to assign great legitimacy to the outcome of their deliberations. Some of these rules are meant to standardize procedures and lead to the bracketing of personal interest (concerning the funding of one’s students for instance), while others operate as ritual to separate the “sacred” (the identification of excellence) from the “impure” (e.g., self-interest, idiosyncratic preferences, narrowness, disciplinary parochialism).⁶ I describe

³ This contrasts with a large literature on peer review which concerns the fairness and reliability of the process, as opposed to the panelists understanding of the conditions that lead to a fair process. See for instance Bornmann and Daniel 2005, who examined if a swiss foundation gave awards to the “best” scientists.

⁴ Weber 1978 [1956]. For Weber, kinds of legitimacy vary according to the “type of obedience [it claims], the kind of administrative staff developed to guarantee it, and the mode of exercising authority.” p. 213). The legitimacy of panels rests on rational-legal grounds, i.e. on the “legitimacy of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands.” (p. 215). However, it also borrows elements from traditional authority, where obedience is due to the person who occupies the position of authority (in contrast, legal authority is impersonal). The authority of panelists is determined by their formal technical training (as PhD holders), and by their reputation, and is thus attached directly to their person. Thus, not all panelists have the same degree of legitimacy *de facto*, although they do as a matter of principle. Their relative authority within panels is determined by their behavior and their display of expertise, according to the rules spelled out in this chapter.

⁵ Durkheim 1965, chapter 7. The distinction between the sacred and the profane extends to the whole universe of objects and people in which it take place. For instance, the status of members of a community is defined by the types of relationship they have with sacred objects (e.g., Roman Catholic women cannot celebrate mass). In this sense, religious systems provide a cosmology, i.e., a general interpretation of how the world is organized and how its elements relate to one another and to the sacred. This cosmology acts as a system of classification and its elements are organized according to a hierarchy (e.g., high/low, pure/impure, us/them). The belief invested in this “order of things” structures people’s lives to the extent that it limits and facilitates their action. In Durkheim’s words, “the power attached to sacred things conduct men with the same degree of necessity as physical force.” (p. 260).

⁶ The existing literature on peer review has often focused on the values and norms of the scientific institution (“culture,” in functionalist parlance) that support fairness in evaluation (Armstrong 1999; Bakanic, McPhail and Simon 1987; Chubin and Hackett 1990; Cole 1978; Cole and Cole 1981; Cole, Rubin and Cole 1978; GAO 1994; Liebert 1982; Roy 1985; Zuckerman and Merton 1971). Of prime has been the norm of universalism (defined in opposition to particularism), which, along with the norms of disinterestedness, communalism of results, and organized scepticism, ensure that no one is excluded from scientific debates due to purely subjective and social factors (Merton 1973 [1957]). This functionalist vision of culture appealed intuitively to the notion that funding (or publishing) decisions in scientific fields should be based on the evaluation of research projects (or research results) *independently* of the social

these rules as customary because they are not formally spelled out and are instead learned by panelists during their immersion in collective work.⁷ In the first part of this chapter, I discuss these customary rules as well as the process by which panelists come to believe in the sacredness of their collective work. We will see that panelists implicitly follow the rules of deliberative democracy, which require deferring to expertise and to disciplinary sovereignty. Because evaluation is contextual, panelists can engage in strategic voting and horse trading while maintaining a belief in the fairness of the process. In the second part, I discuss the violation of the rules and factors that corrupt the process, such as lack of collegiality, inconsistency, gossip, personal influence, and chance.

1) Producing Legitimacy, Producing the Sacred

Collective belief in the legitimacy of the outcome of the deliberations is the result of panelists abiding by rules that are not explicit in any document or spelled out by the panel chair, but rules that academics have been socialized into in the process of doing their jobs, i.e., while serving on recruitment and graduate admission committees and reviewing the work of their colleagues and graduate students. What distinguishes the assessments they perform on grants and fellowships panels from departmental evaluations is that, as we saw in Chapter Two, the context in which the former is conducted is fairly distant from their daily life. In general, panelists are not engaged in a sustained relationship with one another outside the context of deliberation. Nor do they have to share the lives of awardees, as they do with newly hired colleagues or graduate students who have been admitted to their department. As a consequence of the limited personal stake in the outcome, they are not likely to mobilize their networks to gather information on the personal qualities of the candidate, as they might do (in some instances) when serving on recruitment committees.⁸

At the same time, as we will see, universalism is essential to the legitimacy of the process, which means that panelists deploy considerable energies to bracket personal connections and idiosyncratic preferences when making funding decisions. They also have to establish their own intellectual credibility or claims of expertise among their fellow panelists, and earn a reputation for collegiality and reasonableness.

characteristics of the researchers. Subjectivism, cooptation, and in-group favoritism stood in opposition to open scientific debate, free inquiry, and unbiased discussion of results and scientific quality of proposals. The empirical literature found that reviewers follow universalistic norms more often than not (Cole 1978; Cole and Cole 1981; Cole 1978; GAO 1994; Zuckerman and Merton 1971). In contrast to this literature, and building on the rhetorical approach of Gilbert and Mulkay (opening Pandora's box), I am concerned not with norms tied to institutions, but with the actual frameworks or meaning systems that individuals use to understand their action and the environment in which they operate. This is in line with Aaron Cicourel's (1974) point that rules and norms are not "things for definitions by sociological analysis but are available for definition by actors in everyday life. My approach is also embedded to science studies scholars who examine the cooperative pursuit of tasks in science, and the role of claim-making in this process. For instance, Fujimura 1988; Gerson 1983; Clarke 1990; Clarke and Gerson 1990; Star 1985. I borrow the notion of customary rules, see Burbank 2004.

⁷ How academics learn to do their job is a topic that has not been systematically studied, beyond the question of the acquisition of pedagogical skills. On the accomplishment of research training, see Gumpert 2000.

⁸ In contrast, see the work of Christine Musselin (1996) on the recruitment of colleagues in French academia. See also Fournier, Gingra and Mathurin 1988 for an analysis of tenure promotion.

A) What Defines a Good Panelist

I interviewed panelists, program officers, and panel chairs on their definitions of a “good panelist,” and alternatively, a “bad panelist.” I also questioned them concerning the person who impressed them most and least on their respective panels, or asked them to engage in “boundary work”, so as to tap contrasts in the cultural templates and categories they take for granted when involved in evaluation.⁹ When describing these colleagues, interviewees often expressed enthusiasm, confirming that sheer pleasure and intellectual enjoyment is one of the motivations that lead academics to agree to add to their already considerable workload by serving on funding panels. The wonderment of discovering new domains of knowledge by interacting with smart colleagues was often palpable as they described their experience serving on panels. Seeing a beautiful mind at work has an aesthetic dimension to which many of these academics are very sensitive. However, their answers frequently pointed not only to the intellectual strengths of their colleagues, but also to their interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence. This is apparent if one reviews the list of traits or behaviors needed to qualify as a “good panelist”.

1) *Show up fully prepared and ready to discuss the files.* A sociologist measures her co-panelists by how extensively they had prepared beforehand, and whether they had read carefully all or only a subsection of any given proposal. She explicitly states that she puts most weight on the opinions of those co-panelists who are best prepared and best informed. Preparedness and command of details determine one’s ability *to think on one’s feet* when advancing arguments that are convincing to other evaluators. Demonstrating a strong sense of responsibility and work ethic is central to widely shared cultural schemas concerning what defines a good panelist. This is stressed by a political scientist who describes the best evaluator on his panel as a historian “who always had very thoughtful commentary on the proposals. He had clearly engaged the proposals themselves, he did not get swept away by fluff or anything. And because he was thoughtful in the discussion itself, he could change his mind and he could persuade.”

2) *Demonstrate intellectual breadth and expertise.* A strong panelist is expected to command large literatures within her field, to have passive knowledge of several areas beyond her field, and to be able to assess quickly the strengths and weaknesses of proposals in these areas. Thus, one panelist describes a notable colleague, an architectural historian, as follows: “I remember being really impressed by the amount that she knew. When she was an expert about something, she was completely convincing about it. I remember being perhaps even more impressed with the American historian’s range of knowledge. He seemed to have been teaching sort of the intellectual history of the world because he kept talking about varying courses that he taught in which he had become expert on x, y, and z, and it seemed an enormously broad range. He’s one of these people who read very widely and retained everything that he read and I was tremendously delighted by that; he was very helpful.”

⁹ In other words, I had them perform “boundary work” in the context of this interview. This technique is useful to reveal through behavior the taken-for-granted categories with which interviews operate. For other applications of this technique, see Lamont 1992 and 2000.

3) *Be succinct.* It is crucial not to abuse collective time by talking too much or too slowly, making unnecessary remarks, or providing too much detailed information. This is particularly important because the work of panelists is conducted at a fast pace, as they generally have to accomplish much in a very limited amount of time. Thus, for a historian, the worst panelist was an anthropologist who “talked way too much about proposals that he hadn't read, had to make his views known about everything.” About this same panelist, a political scientist points to the same arrogance and noisy irresponsibility when he said: “This guy was just so full of himself. For me, I sort of lost my tolerance when at the end [the chair] keeps saying “let's move along,” and he keeps on name dropping on these proposals, and [the chair] was having to talk over him as we get going.” Panelists who are not succinct lose points and credibility. “Being smart” also means knowing how to use one’s time. The quality of a panelist is defined not only in cognitive terms, but also in terms of “presentation of self” and in moral and emotional terms.¹⁰

4) *Speak across disciplinary boundaries.* This skill is essential if one is to explain to other evaluators what are the strengths and the weaknesses of a proposal. An English professor equates this with “smarts” and explains that in her view the other panelists all exhibited this trait because “each of the people in the panel made remarks at different points that taught me something that was new and that was not just a person's opinion about a proposal. I felt like I was in a classroom learning something important about history or about music or whatever it might be. I felt that I learned some things about philosophers' points of view that I didn't know before. So I don't know if it's smarts as much as pedagogical ability.” Of course, interdisciplinary breadth is a more valued asset for those serving on multidisciplinary, as opposed to uni-disciplinary, panels.

5) *Respect other people's expertise and sentiments.* A historian explains why he felt closest to two women co-panelists in these terms:

We did not always agree and they sometimes, both of them I would say, corrected impressions that I had of particular proposals. But I felt most comfortable with them in the following ways: I liked the way they interacted with other people on the panel, always respectful. Their interpersonal skills, I felt comfortable with them, I felt that I could say what I wanted to say and it would be heard respectfully. I thought that they had read the proposals very carefully. I guess I felt sometimes that the other guy's readings did not seem to be as detailed, although that may have not been the case. But in addition to that, the women I thought also commanded a kind of intellectual respect. And I suppose our assessments were often similar, but in truth I'm not sure that was the case because, a lot of times as I say, I modified my views and I think I pulled up some of their assessments by mine. I'm not sure that [the third guy] and I, for example, much changed one another's mind on much of anything.

Appreciation translates into willingness to listen and to be convinced by another person's assessment. Being genuinely open to other people's opinions and willing to defer on substantive grounds is the ultimate mark of respect. Conversely, the most

¹⁰ On “presentation of self,” see Goffman 1959.

negative comments made about other panelists often concerned how they interacted with others, handled differences of opinion, and contributed to the shared goals. Although expressing differences of opinion is deemed acceptable, avoiding open confrontation is viewed as essential. Indeed, a humanist describes a co-panelist as follows: “John could be a little, I mean just a hair’s bit contentious and confrontational in ways that seemed to be a little unnecessary. [He] made pronouncements, expressing his contempt for this or that.”

Respecting other panelists’ sentiments by adhering to basic courtesies is also valued. The humanist describes how the group reacted to another panelist:

This other one had a kind of flaky irreverence that I think grated on us a bit, but they were gracious enough that they kind of let that go. He made any number of odd jokes of borderline sensitivity and appropriateness. . . . And, you know, there was this moment where we would all sort of rolled [sic] our eyes a little bit and then kind of not said anything. And then he also would kind of go off on tangents that were irrelevant and tell sort of anecdotes, and we had an agenda, [proposals to go through]. We were sort of surprised at that.

Expertise, preparedness, breadth, common sense, and sensitivity to others: these traits and skills all go into the equation that defines a good panelist and establishes one’s credibility. The ideal personality for a panelist is captured by a sociologist who has developed a great appreciation for his panel chair: “[He is a superlative chairman because he has] a very good sense of [the field], smooth, agreeable, charming, and very much blessed with a sense of reality, up on the literature, very well informed . . . he listened, brisk, efficient, everything a chairman could be.” Yet this list is very much at odds with most of the literature on peer review that emphasizes exclusively cognitive factors, and downplays the role of morality and emotions.¹¹ This hints at the importance of considering evaluation as a social process, as opposed to focusing on final outcomes, as has often been the case. We now examine in greater detail the rules that panelists should respect if they are to view the outcome of their collective work as legitimate.

B) Deliberative Democracy: Stacking a Territory, Deferring to Expertise, and Respecting Disciplinary Sovereignty

Political theorists have written in abundance on the rules that should guide democratic deliberation and the criteria by which it should be judged. While some recognize that different rules should apply to different contexts of deliberation, others advance general conditions for democratic deliberation that pertain to reciprocity (mutual respect), publicity (as opposed to secrecy), and accountability. They suggest that participants should be free, have an “equal voice,” be rational (as opposed to emotional),

¹¹ On the role of morality and emotion in the functioning of peer review, and how they have been ignored in the literature on peer review in favor of cognitive factors, see Guetzkow, Lamont and Mallard 2004 and Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review.

and that the deliberation be consensual and focused on the common good.¹² In many ways, panel deliberations follow principles analogous to those of deliberative democracies. The standard of reciprocity applies, as does an overall orientation toward the production of consensual decisions and the realization of the common good. Moreover, panelists are expected to convince one another with the force of reason, while following democratic principles of decision making. Although the panels are conducted in secrecy, evaluators are accountable to the funding organization, not to mention morally accountable to the wider academic community. The requirement that panels make specific, informed decisions necessitates that each participant be given full liberty to express her opinion without any reprisal, and that they be provided opportunity for full and equal voice. The meeting is deliberative to the extent that it involves the airing out and free confrontation of opinion.

However, the reality of committee composition puts limitations on this equality, which is in some way fictive even from the beginning. Panel members vary in age, race, and gender, and they represent institutions of uneven prestige. Although they are formally equal, these characteristics influence how much weight their opinions have in collective decision making—a topic to which we will return later. More importantly, each of the panelists claims expertise on a specific subset of topics covered by the proposals. Thus, in line with Weber’s analysis of the role of expertise in providing rational legitimacy, their opinion is given more or less weight depending on the subject of discussion, and panelists often choose not to exercise their right to make their opinions known when they think they do not have enough expertise to discuss a proposal.¹³

One of the most important rules that are at the foundation of the collective belief in the fairness of peer review is that panelists *defer to expertise*. This means that when they want to advocate a position regarding a proposal, they invest energy in staking their claim to evaluate it – or in marking their territory.¹⁴ In other cases, they draw on previously established proofs of competence; otherwise they remain silent. A historian explained how this is accomplished, in the context of the discussion of a proposal on modernity and the media in the United States. He mentioned to the group that he had done work on the period covered by the proposal, and that for this reason he was particularly well positioned to assess whether the proposal was proposing anything new. He concludes, “I think I had expert advice here and I think that’s why she got [the funding], because I had expert advice.”

While in some cases, panelists openly claim authority by providing evidence of their familiarity with specific topics, in general, their opinions are given more weight regarding proposals emanating from “their” field. This is what I call the implicit rule of *respecting disciplinary sovereignty*. Another historian spells out this culture of disciplinary deference:

¹² Gutmann and Thompson 1996. See also Cohen 1989, who is concerned with how one might judge the democratic legitimacy of deliberation, i.e the degree to which suitably structured deliberation generates the legitimate authority to exercise power. For a discussion, see Mansbridge and Karpowitz Forthcoming.

¹³ Weber 1978 [1956], vol. 2, pp. 998-1001.

¹⁴ There exists a large literature on cultural authority and on how scientists go about establishing their expertise. See for instance Shapin and Schaeffer 1985, who focus on alternative cultural universes of Hobbes and Boyles and the collective accomplishment. Also Abbott 1988, on how occupational groups lay claims to legitimate knowledge and jurisdiction. On the negotiation of authority between science and politics, see Jasanoff 1990.

For a couple of proposals, I had to “explicate” a research strategy that wasn’t fully explained. Historians would say “It’s an obvious approach, no problem!” but didn’t realize how other disciplines would not take for granted what the writer was taking for granted. There was a case where it had to do with the historiographic tradition that was not sufficiently explained. In another case, it had to do with the kinds of archival records that are found. [My historical expertise] on the whole had a lot of weight. Sometimes I almost felt uncomfortable about the deference that was given to my responses as a historian.... [I thought] I’m the only one here and I hope I’m doing this right. There was a lot of credibility given to the way I responded to historical questions in particular. And I, of course, returned the deference to people in the other fields.

A significant portion of panel deliberation consists of panelist competition to make a particular labeling, or definition, of a proposal “stick”, or again, to mark a territory of expertise, since alternative framings are possible for many proposals. Is a proposal well-written or glib? Is it broad and daring or dilettantish? Is it current or trendy? Painstakingly focused or disappointingly obscure? Panelists formulate interpretive frames and attempt to convince one another that theirs is most adequate. This is the context that gives rise to “deferring,” and whether or not one defers depends on horse-trading, personality, the center of gravity of the opinion about a proposal, and other factors to be discussed below. An English professor provides an example of this as she describes her feeble attempt (or interpretive work) to prevent the label of “dilettantish” from sticking to a proposal:

There was something about his project that I was very taken by, but everybody else thought [the applicant] was too dilettantish [without offering some sort of satisfactory explanation]. I work in 20th century, but I’m not an expert in post-war, post-modern literature [the field of the candidate]. I think I know enough. I didn’t find it dilettantish. So I was interested that so many people did and I was sort of willing to defer. I [should have] pushed it a little further, even just to sort of clarify why is it dilettantish in this area. How much of this really is disciplinary intimidation? Are you willing to go to bat for this person? I would, if I think I knew a little bit more about the field. It just seemed to me that he wrote very compellingly and I know that, that is often looked down upon ... that [people think] there could be glibness there. . . I think they thought there was too much theory, that there was an element of sort of name dropping, where I wondered whether a lot of this was a kind of inexperienced way of indicating what the critical literature might be. And maybe [the applicant] hadn’t sorted it out yet. . . I just didn’t know enough to counter. If there was just another voice that was a little more enthusiastic, I would have, could have. I think if it is not completely clear, I’m better to err on the side of “this person is reaching me, it’s worth discussing or at least worth putting this person in contention.”

Panelists defer to the expertise of others because the situation requires that they take positions on topics that they know very little about. This is spelled out explicitly by an anthropologist who says:

Philosophy, I didn't feel at all as if I were competent to evaluate those proposals. Either to say this is good or this is not good, I just did not know what was up with them. And in those cases I always deferred to the people who did have some kind of expertise in that field, with the exception of the controversial one. There he was, I thought, stepping outside of his field and into mine.

Hearing the opinions of experts is essential if one is to compare proposals that speak to a wide range of unfamiliar topics. An English professor explains: "I tended to give high marks to some proposals that I had no education about the field but just sounded exciting. And then some other panelist would be able to say very quickly 'This is not original work,' you know. There'd be no way for me to know that in advance." Similarly, a historian explains why she deferred to a Russian historian (Joan): "There were times where I really wanted to contest what Joan had to say about some proposals, but when she comes in extremely expert and careful and a person I respect a lot, and says 'No, there are eleven books on this in Russian and this is really a fairly banal proposal,' then I just sort of say that must be true. So you know it looks good until somebody says there's a whole literature that you cannot reasonably be expected to know, and then you just sort of say OK, no problem." In both cases, novelty is a criterion where deference to expertise is the norm.

Breaching the rule of deference to expertise and respect of disciplinary sovereignty is the most frequent source of conflict among panelists. The rule is breached when a panelist is viewed as not upholding reasonable standards, despite suggesting relevant expertise. The historian explained how an art historian "got no place trying to sell [this one proposal] to the rest of us. This proposal was just not put together very carefully and she tried to argue that this is really a good person and that even if the proposal wasn't put together perfectly, that this really deserves us to think about it ... you can throw your expertise out, but you do wind up having to convince at least two other people." Other panelists say that they refuse to defer to narrow expertise ("I don't bow to the white lab coat") if the specialist is too focused on detailed considerations beyond the general quality of the proposal. Too much expertise can be a handicap if it prevents one from differentiating what is important from what is obscure.

The rule of deference is also breached when more than one person claims expertise.¹⁵ In the next chapter we will see that this challenge is particularly acute in the evaluation of truly interdisciplinary proposals, where multiple panelists really do have relevant expertise.

Because the rules of deference to expertise and respect of disciplinary sovereignty are generally followed, the tone of the panels tends to be very amicable.¹⁶ Indeed, many

¹⁵ See Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review for an illustration of competing claims of expertise.

¹⁶ An anthropologist describes her panel thus: "It was almost a little too collegial. I was a little like "Gee, aren't we supposed to..."—and that could have been just the nature of the proposals that we were doing that didn't really shoot off a lot of sparks for us, in most cases. It was very deferential." This deference may

panelists mentioned being surprised at how friendly panels were, given the level of conflict that is customary in their respective departments. One person serving on a Women's Studies panel noted: "I thought we were all listening to each other. I felt very listened to and I hope the other two did as well because I felt like they both listened carefully. I also felt like they asked good questions. And felt respected when I was speaking to something in my field." Whether this congeniality is attributed to the program officer's careful selection of like-minded (or personable) panelists, or to the absence of diversity among finalists, it is certainly taken to be indicative of a "well-functioning" panel, even if this culture of deference at times limits the extent to which panelists are willing to engage in a vigorous discussion while comparing proposals.

C) Forming Alliances, Strategic Voting, and Horse-Trading

Weber would argue that investment in the fairness of the deliberation process also requires the belief that the playing field is level: that consistent and universalistic standards of evaluation are applied, which means that without regard to inessential differences, all proposals have an equal chance of being funded.¹⁷ This belief constrains how panelists think about alliance formation, strategic voting, and horse-trading, processes that can interfere with the notion that the cream rises "naturally." In other words, panelists do engage in alliance formation, strategic voting, and horse-trading, but frame these in such a way that they are understood as compatible with universalism and the natural rising of the cream.

In the spirit of deliberative democracy, many interviewees stated that they did not witness strong alliances among their fellow panelists, and that they themselves felt close to different panelists at different times, as opposed to generally voting in sync with one of them or engage in *qui pro quo*. Their understanding of legitimate panel interactions uses the imagery of independent actors who interact with one another on a case-by-case basis. However, when probed further, most panelists revealed clear personal, intellectual, or theoretical affinities. For instance, a historian confessed feeling close to an English professor because

She clearly had a good deal of critical and literary theory in her background. So that to some extent she and I over the years would have been reading similar work and we happen to be sympathetic towards it. [She was] also concerned with social significance, concerned with the voices of the other, evaluating proposals on questions of originality. [She was paying attention to] subaltern voices, in other words, the non-elite, you know, voices that haven't been widely heard. [I believe that this is important] because if you believe in liberal education and you

very well define in large part the essence of collegiality: intellectual sovereignty is divided into various spheres and areas of expertise and peacefully shared.

¹⁷ The term "universalism" is used differently across literatures. The functionalist literature in sociology compares cultural orientations cross-nationally along a number of dimensions of the "universalistic/particularistic" pattern variable. A universalistic orientation consists in believing that "all people shall be treated according to the same criteria (e.g., equality in before the law)" while a particularistic orientation is predicated upon the belief that "individuals shall be treated differently according to their personal qualities or their particular membership in a class or group" (Lipset [1963]1979, p. 209). This is the definition adopted here.

believe that education has a role in the formation of the citizen, then it seems to me you have to pay some attention to the plurality of what constitutes citizenship.

These elective personal *qua* intellectual affinities are not conceptualized as corrupting or illegitimate:¹⁸ panelists have no other choice but to assess proposals using the more or less diverse intellectual tools they have at their disposal, which generally converge with those used by at least some of the other panelists. Particularism is unavoidable given that the value that is given to proposals as cultural products depends largely on their embeddedness in the context of evaluation, as defined by the other proposals under consideration and by affinities and differences among reviewers.¹⁹

Given the centrality of universalism in the framework used by panelists to interpret their collective work, it is not surprising that they downplay the importance of strategic voting and horse-trading in the process. Strategic voting means giving a low ranking to some proposals (low-balling) in order to increase the likelihood that other proposals win. It may also mean boosting the ranking of a mediocre or controversial proposal to improve the likelihood that it gets funding. Horse-trading means enabling the realization of other panelists' objectives with the hope that they will reciprocate when given a chance. These two strategies are accepted and are even viewed as standard practices, although some construe them as non-meritocratic, because the horses being traded are not necessarily equivalent, and one of them may "win" because of "politics" as opposed to its intrinsic strengths (one of the panelists describes these awards as "false positives" as opposed to "true positives," that are truly meritorious winners).

Strategic voting is discussed as part of the normal course of deliberation, to the extent that panelists confessed explicitly calibrating their vote in anticipation of those of the other evaluators. An English professor, for instance, recalls:

I remember ranking this feminist theorist high, partly because I knew that the other panelists would be put off by her style and I knew that I would want to argue very strongly in her favor. . . I've read her other work and I really admire it. She does something very close to what I aspire to do so I know her work. I've referred to it, although her tendency is to be somewhat self-indulgent and autobiographical. I think that was what was alienating to some of the other panelists . . . Her style is very informal and very mannered, it's not standard academic prose by any means. I guess I knew who the other panelists would be, it turned out I only knew one of them beforehand. I just thought her style would be so annoying that people wouldn't be able to see past it to the value of what she was doing. The other reason is, she takes psychoanalysis very seriously, and psychoanalysis is beloved only by a small remnant of literary critics. I figured that would probably turn some people away.

This panelist describes her voting in strategic terms, but it is entirely legitimate for her to rank highly a proposal when the quality of the proposal justifies it in her eyes.

¹⁸ On the notion of elective affinity, see Weber 1978 [1956].

¹⁹ On embeddedness, see Granovetter 1985, who argued, against economics, that human beings are embedded in networks. On the relationship between the production of value and embeddedness in the economy, see Uzzi 1999.

What is condemned is not so much “high-balling” but “low-balling.” One of the philosophers was suspected by a historian to be doing just that:

I was a little bit concerned about [this guy]'s rankings because he gave a lot of “3s.” The problem with “3s” is they pretty much end a proposal. My sense in reading the instructions that we received is that all of the proposals had already gone through pre-screening and between 50-60 percent had already been eliminated so that this was really the kind of *crème de la crème*. I felt that to give a proposal a three at this stage, I gave them rather more sparingly I think. . . I was a little bit concerned sometimes that these threes were really, in a sense I can't impute intention, but the effect was three simply meant the end of a proposal. At a certain point I guess I began to feel, you know, “Is this a sort of political evaluation?”

Low-balling is the only form of strategic voting that panelists described as illegitimate. In fact, it is difficult to draw the line between normal voting and strategic voting, to the extent that all voting is strategic. In every case, a vote aims to support or prevent the funding of a proposal. It becomes strategic when it is guided not only by an evaluation of the proposal itself, but by a desire to facilitate or hinder the funding of another proposal or to affect the behavior or impact of other panelists. The opposite of strategic voting is voting in a vacuum, or taking into consideration only the proposal itself. While some panelists pride themselves on aiming at such a stance, abstracting proposal from the context of evaluation is a social anomaly, and not easily achieved.

Strategic voting and horse-trading are particularly crucial at the end of panel deliberations, when panelists are parceling out the last available fellowships between proposals that each present a different type of flaw, and thus are not easily made commensurate. This is when extraneous considerations are factored in, at the 11th hour, when many choices have narrowed the list of potentially fundable proposals, precisely at the point where fewer awards can be made. This context forces panelists to engage in calculation and *quid pro quo* to a degree that may be unnecessary or unthinkable at an earlier point in the process. An English professor reflects on how such calculations went into her decision-making concerning how to rank the various projects that contended for the last spots on the list of awards. Of one project she says:

What I decided about two-thirds of the way through the meeting is that there was one file I was going to go to the mat for around these issues [of applied knowledge]. I decided it was going to require me to figure out what I'd have to lose in order to get this one . . . I think that the process of these committee meetings is about negotiations. And at the end of the day it seems to me one may need to think about these files in terms of categories. If one has a certain kind of agenda, you know, you kind of got to figure out which of these files in these particular categories is going to be the one that I can win. People aren't going to want to concede everything, everybody has their thing they want to win. And so if I'm going to try to win on these two fronts, I'm going to have to put my weight behind the strongest one and kind of lose the others. You know, we had so few to give.

Horse-trading is described here as part of the ordinary order of things, except for the awards generally made early in the process to consensus proposals. A historian provides a very similar view while stressing the importance of negotiation in making cases for proposals. “There was one [proposal] that I didn’t like and argued against a couple times earlier in the day. At one point I realized that the other four people liked that and so I said ‘Look, ‘I’m probably wrong. I still don’t like it but I’m probably wrong, so let’s put it on the list.’ And I think to some degree, just politically, that gave me some credibility when I wanted something else... because I showed good will.” Later he adds: “one of the reasons I honestly don’t mind making compromises is because [when] you’re dancing through all these [deals], you realize your judgment, to say the least, isn’t perfect.”

Again, except for low-balling, most panelists appear to think that strategic voting and horse-trading are legitimate and unavoidable characteristics of the social process in which they are involved. The dynamics of ranking are such that many of the judgments that are made are relational and conjectural, and it is in this context that panelists come to think strategically about what they can realistically accomplish in the negotiation process. This is evidenced by another historian who had felt frustrated that his evaluation of a historical proposal was overruled by the positive letters of senior people in his field. This panelist decided not to veto this decision with the hope that a wait-listed proposal he was supporting would be funded.

I said to myself, “you win some, you lose some.” . . . One of the reasons I pulled back from vetoing is because we were quite sure that not all of the fellowships would be accepted, and that there would be an alternative source of funding. We were quite convinced that a person who I supported and ended up on the wait list would nevertheless be funded. And that trade-off ultimately made it seem acceptable.

Being simultaneously high-minded and practical, he believes that ultimately, the panelists apply the Golden Rule when allowing proposals favored by other evaluators be funded. Thus they support a pragmatic understanding of fairness that is at odds with an idealistic understanding which would abstract proposals from their contexts of evaluation to consider only their intrinsic qualities. In this respect, panelists appear to be acutely aware that scholarly quality is relationally defined: that the proposals under consideration are the universe of comparison and that contextual ranking is at the heart of the art of evaluating.

D) Bracketing Self-Interest and Personal Ties: Networks, Clientelism, and Particularism

As compared with strategic voting and horse-trading, the influence of self-interest and personal ties on the outcome of the deliberation is viewed as entirely illegitimate, in accordance with Weber’s view of rational legitimacy which requires the application of impersonal and consistent rules. One of the panel chairs expresses this clearly. I asked

him how panelists were to react if a panelist stated: “This is a student of a close colleague of mine and I’d love to see his work funded.” He responded:

It’s just not a consideration. It can’t be a consideration. You probably noticed that the panel rejected quite roundly a student of [the president of the funding agency], who described him as the best student he’d had in 25 years . . . Nobody thought about that. And the same thing [for the student of another panelist]. There are other types of biases that other people bring to the meetings, but they tend to be well camouflaged . . . I hear criticisms from colleagues that say, “Oh man, you’re just funding Chicago anthropology, it’s because you have all these Chicago anthropologists on your panel.” That’s the most primitive kind of interpretation! They have no idea what’s inside the black box and they make these primitive assumptions about interest. And what I can tell you is that in my experience it looks the opposite. The more specialists you have on the Middle East, the fewer Middle East proposals are going to get through. Because people tend to be really tough on their discipline, to the point where they’re too tough and we have to think of ways to make them mellow to get them to say yes.

This same panel chair explains how his particular funding program tries to minimize the presence of panelists from Ivy League universities given the large number of graduate students from such institutions who apply:

[We]’re looking for people who are not gatekeepers, and for policy reasons we actually almost always exclude people from the type of institutions that are more gatekeeping institutions. We’re not allowed to have people from the Ivy League. . . . I’m not sure how formal the policy is, but you did notice there was nobody from Harvard, Yale, Princeton, Chicago . . . And we definitely do not include people from those institutions [that produce] large numbers of area studies types of applications. No Michigan, no Berkeley. It’s almost an unwritten rule that we’re looking for people who have the same intellectual level as [people in the] Ivy league, but are not connected to the networks. We look for people who will decide applications on the basis of their intellectual merits, and not on who did it, where they’re coming from.”

Thus, following Durkheim, self-interest can be understood as the “impure” juxtaposed against the sacrality of academic excellence, which is defined through a number of rituals that panels follow to insure that there is no corruption. The funding agencies provide clear guidelines delineating the obligation to abstain when the work of close colleagues, friends, and direct advisees is being discussed. Although there is no explicit requirement to do so, panelists also volunteered information on indirect ties in a number of cases (“this student’s mentor is a close collaborator of mine” or “I know this student’s advisees very well and trust her letter”). When asked to describe his favorite proposal one historian said, “That’s a little bit difficult because to be completely honest about it, the one that I liked the most was by a student who quoted me at length. I recused myself. I didn’t enter the discussion on that. She’s not literally my student. She did some

independent work with me because she had no one else who could guide her work on Canada.”

Disclosures of indirect or informal ties are a customary rule or unwritten convention that certainly sustains a shared belief in the fairness of the outcome. Panelists are aware of the importance of limiting the “corrupting impact” of personal relationships. For instance, a sociologist told me that she chose not to offer an opinion when the work of a former colleague, which she does not appreciate, was discussed. However, she was relieved upon discovering that the other panelists had given it a low rating, just as the historian quoted above was pleased that his favorite proposal that cited him abundantly received high ratings without his intervention.

At the same time, in all the cases where panelists had written letters for applicants who were not funded, those panelists said in interviews that they were upset about the outcome and felt awkward about it, as if their fellow evaluators had given them a vote of no confidence. In all cases, they did not ask other panelists for an account of the deliberations, nor did the other panelists provide such information, thus upholding confidentiality—even in their relation with other “insiders.” This behavior helps everyone involved in the deliberations uphold the notion that the process is universalistic and fair. The “slighted” parties also said they did not appreciate that no one volunteered information, as if they had expected such a breach.

The most otherworldly aspects of academic life – as opposed to self-interest – are at the center of how panelists talk about their experience as evaluators. When I asked one of them pointedly whether he thought about this experience in sacred terms (echoing Durkheim), he responded: “I think it has to do with almost sacred value, with value that transcends institutions, individuals, networks and things like that. And I would agree that what you’re trying to achieve is something that goes beyond individual interest and perspective. Whether that puts me into the role of a priest or just a true believer is a question in my mind . . . A priest feels entitled to have his or her voice [or] authority. I don’t claim a priori authority; I would rather take on the responsibility of making responsible judgments and then let the judgments speak for themselves.” This panelist appears to understand his role as only one of many actors involved in the movement of the invisible hand that determines the outcomes of a market for excellence.

Disclosures about indirect personal ties are not done on a systematic basis. This is perhaps because such ties are not uncommon. Panelists are asked to form a judgment on the work being conducted in their areas of expertise. Given the degree of specialization in American academia and the relatively small size of networks within many areas of specialization (to varying extents), panelists are likely to know personally or by reputation most of the scholars whose areas closely overlap with their own, especially if they are very active in research circles, as are most evaluators. It can be expected that some of their acquaintances will be letter writers for applicants or applicants themselves. Thus it is impossible to totally eliminate the impact of interpersonal relationships, including clientelism, on the evaluation process, particularly because scholarly expertise is not entirely independent of, and is in fact superposed onto, the social networks of those who produce the knowledge.

Discussions proceed as though panelists were abstracted from social networks and operating as free agents without any personal agenda and as if clientelism and particularism could not influence the decision making process. Panelists’ individual

preferences are usually construed in universalist terms. Of course, evaluations of proposals are framed at least in part by what panelists believe are important topics, which is tied to their own view of the appropriate directions for a particular field. They are also shaped by letters of support that are more or less trusted, and this level of trust is affected by network connections.²⁰ Furthermore, as we will see below, references to idiosyncratic preferences are viewed as acceptable by some of the panelists.

E) Managing Idiosyncrasies and Self-Reproduction

According to Weber, rational legitimacy comes from the application of impersonal and consistent rules. Thus, the collective belief in the fairness of deliberation is also maintained when panelists try explicitly to bracket their idiosyncratic tastes while evaluating proposals. In line with Weber, an English professor argues that one needs to establish a distinction between one's personal preferences and criteria of competence, and to privilege the latter when the two are in conflict. Speaking of a particular proposal, he comments:

It was a completely chaotic proposal; it was dropping amazing names all over the place. The art historian and I both liked the kind of effervescence of the thing and thought it was probably worth thinking about, but I think others felt he was just too chaotic. What I found with these things, you need to use two sets of criteria. One is a sort of criteria which is your best professional judgment in as neutral a way as you can manage it, independent of your taste. And the other one is allowing for your tastes, if they don't get in the way of each other. I think one should always give up the personal one, if the arguments of other people seem sound, and not give up the other one.

This scholar subordinates personal preferences to more neutral standards while acknowledging that they are intrinsic to the evaluation process. Thus, he protects the legitimacy of the process while recognizing the role of individual subjectivities in evaluation. Similarly, a political scientist establishes a clear distinction between evaluating choice of topic, which is not "objective," and evaluating the quality of the proposal, which is more unambiguously object of expertise, "amenable to the canons of academic excellence." Judging approaches and research design requires expertise, whereas judging the importance of a topic is often more a matter of taste.

These two panelists are somewhat exceptional. In general, panelists uphold the legitimacy of the process by framing their idiosyncratic preferences and tastes, not in terms of self-interest, but in universalistic terms: these are seamlessly folded into the formal criteria of evaluation and used to put flesh on these criteria. Thus, we find that panelists tend to define originality in ways that are in line with the type of originality that their own work exhibits.²¹ They tend to like what speaks to their own interests, as one of them acknowledges:

²⁰ On this topic, see Burt 2005; Cook 2005

²¹ Guetzkow, Lamont, and Mallard 2004. This paper details various types of originality and shows that the types of originality that panelists attribute to their own work tend to overlap with the types of originality

I see scholarly excellence and excitement in this one project on food, possibly because I see resonance with my own life, my own interests, who I am, and other people clearly don't. And that's always a bit of a problem, that excellence is in some ways is what looks most like you.

Multiple examples of how panelists' idiosyncratic interests shape their vote can be found in the interviews: A panelist who loves modern dance could confess in an interview (without flinching): "The one on dance [I liked a lot]; I'm an avid dance person . . . in terms of studying dance, the history of dance and vernacular dance in particular. So I found that one really interesting, very good." Similarly, an anthropologist supported a proposal on songbirds, which she explains by the fact that she had just come back from Tucson where she was taken by songbirds. An English scholar supports a proposal on the body, and ties her interest to the fact that she was an elite tennis player in high school. A historian doing cross-cultural, comparative work is very explicit in stating that he favors proposals with a similar emphasis. Another historian doing research on non-Western societies gives extra points to proposals that are looking beyond the West. Yet another panelist ties her opposition to a proposal on Viagra to the fact that she is a lesbian: "I will be very candid here, this is one place where I said, OK, in the way that I live my life and my practices, because of who I fell in love with, I have ended up living my life as a lesbian, and is there a bias here that I have . . . I'm so sick of hearing about Viagra. . . Just this focus on this men, whereas women, you know, birth control is a big problem in our country. So I think that's what made me cranky. So in this case would you say my personal preferences affected those choices?"

It is worth noting that while congressional debates about the National Endowment for the Humanities and other funding agencies are very concerned with political correctness biases, the above example is the only one that emerged in our interviews that could be interpreted as explicitly reflecting an "identity politics" bias, the other biases being truly idiosyncratic, like the appreciation for dance or songbirds.

That panelists do not generally frame their preference in terms of self-interest is illustrative of the codes they use to understand how they "produce the sacred" or identify the cream. Liking what resembles oneself leads to self-reproduction, which remains acknowledged by them. [meaning unclear- what exactly remains acknowledged and by whom?] This distancing of personal interest may be present in part because it is difficult or even impossible to think of a system of evaluation that would entirely bracket personal preferences; panelists cannot spell out what defines an "interesting" proposal in the abstract, irrespective of the kinds of problems that captivate them personally. They behave as if they have no alternative but to use their own personal understanding of what constitutes a fascinating problem in order to do the work that is expected of them.

they attribute to other proposals. However, they are also open to recognizing and valuing other forms of originality as well. Liking what resembles oneself is a social phenomenon that sociologists label "homophily."

The "homophilic principle" states that similarity breeds connection. "Homophily limits people's social worlds in a way that has powerful implications for the information they receive, the attitudes they form, and the interactions they experience." (McPherson, Smith-Lovin and Cook 2001)

Some disciplines and scholars may be more open to making room for personal idiosyncrasies, in part because their members are more committed to an anti-objectivist epistemological culture according to which personal identity influences all aspects of scholarly work, as is the case for feminist standpoint theory (this question will be explored in Chapter 5, which concerns disciplinary differences).²² However, regardless of intellectual position, it is the rare panelist who is not warned against the dangers of rewarding proposals because they aim to do “something very close to what I aspire to do so.” An anthropologist who is explicitly aware of the need to avoid idiosyncratic judgment, sums up:

Excellence is in some ways is what looks most like you. It's very hard to not do that and I've tried not to do that, because one of the lessons that we learn immediately as anthropologist is, there's a lot of different ways of being in the world. So if you can apply cultural relativism to proposal writing, then you're OK. But you never fully escape from your own interests, your own position, and so on, and so that is bound to have some impact. I don't know that that's necessarily a bad thing when you have a panel that's sufficiently balanced in all sorts of ways, including academic discipline, areas of expertise, the kind of schools that you come from, and then the obvious, race, ethnicity and gender. So I do think it is important to bring all of those factors into play in creating the panel, because you aren't going to be able to get rid of those influences that come in.

Precisely because these panels bring together social scientists and humanists, reflexivity and self-reproduction is at times explicitly discussed, at least in the context of the interviews. Such discussions would be less likely on a natural science panel or in a field where epistemology, inequality, and social processes are not the object of study of any of the panelists.

F) Methodological Pluralism and Cognitive Contextualism

In answering the question “What defines a good panelist?,” we saw that respondents put a premium on deferring to their colleagues’ expertise and sentiments and the importance that they attach to disciplinary sovereignty. These imperatives point to the value of broad-mindedness and tolerance of differences in evaluation. An extrapolation of these rules indicates that panelists should be pluralistic in matters of methods. Panelists are strongly committed to evaluating proposals according to the epistemological and methodological standards that prevail in the discipline of the applicant – what we have called elsewhere “cognitive contextualization.”²³ This principle is summarized by an evaluator as he described the dynamics of his panel:

²² Smith 1990; Marcus and Fischer 1986. See Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review on the association between disciplines and epistemological styles, including the constructivist styles, which is more popular in the humanities than the social sciences.

²³ Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review.

“I noted [. . .] the differences between people who work with large data sets and do quantitative research. And then the very polar opposite, I suppose, folks who are doing community level studies in anthropology. There are such different methodologies that it's hard to say that there's a generalizable standard that applies to both of them. We were all, I think, willing and able to understand the projects in their own terms, fortunately, and not try to impose a more general standard, because it would have been extremely difficult. . . . I wouldn't hold a candidate in political science responsible for what seemed to me to be having overly instrumental or diagrammatic ways of understanding what they're going to do because they have to have those. They have to have a certain clarity, they have to have a certain scientism, so I am not going to sit there and say “Well, where's the fluidity, where the self-reflexivity, where the hermeneutical content.”[we need to evaluate them] for the forms that they are compelled to observe within their discipline.”

Thus, panels are not a forum for challenging other methodological or disciplinary traditions. The rules of the game require that methodological equality be recognized as a matter of principle, and that for the duration of the meeting, panelists bracket methodological boundary work, the process by which members of disciplines try to one-up one another to gain prestige and professional jurisdiction.²⁴

The customary rule of methodological pluralism is further described by another political scientist who explains how he was accused of showing a lack of methodological pluralism: “I was basically being accused of being a positivist. No one ever said that because obviously that's like calling somebody communist. But there was a sense in which I was imposing my disciplinary bias inappropriately on another disciplines. That's what I was picking up. And my responses was “no I actually am holding [the applicant] to her own standards and I'm not trying to be hegemonic on this.” The premium put on “cognitive contextualization” acts as a counterweight to idiosyncratic tastes and pushes panelists to downplay the latter and to assess proposals through the lenses that are distinctive to the applicant's field of origin.

Panelists value this diversity, even if it may not seem to be in their interest, so as to bolster the legitimacy of collective evaluations. For instance an hermeneutically inclined historian says that he “even liked” the political scientist on his panel and argues that “that committee always needs one fairly tough minded, empiricist, scientific, social scientist who can hold up that banner and articulate why his standards why they are where they are.” Diversity produces universalism and consistency in criteria, one of the conditions for rational legal legitimacy.

When describing the panelists who in their opinion were the least impressive, evaluators mentioned lack of methodological pluralism as a salient trait. A geographer expresses her frustration at a political scientist who refused to evaluate a proposal focusing on meaning with the most appropriate tools. She says: “This [proposal] is not about how many people are actually sick in a population, but rather how many are saying they're sick in a population, which is about discourse. So it's not going to fit into nice little number crunching. It's about how people use issues to mobilize protests, and he was not willing to hear that or entertain that, and it made me mad.” A historian who also

²⁴ On disciplinary boundary work, see Gieryn 1995. Also Gieryn 1983.

appreciates creativity and “solid” work says: “When I'm trying to judge quality . . . I want to make decisions . . . that sort of allows for the maximum diversified Eco-system, you know, the most kinds of sort of models of doing work possible. Because that seems to be a positive good.” Another panelist, a political scientist, supports a proposal inspired by rational choice although he is very critical of the paradigm:

Because I am just a wonderfully secular individual, I evaluate [proposals] on their own terms . . . This guy was clearly so smart that if he wanted to do this, he should be allowed to do it. He knew what he was trying to do, he was likely to be influential with folks working in his wing of political science, and it should have been supported. It just seemed to me crazy, unethical virtually, not to support this proposal even though you don't agree with it methodologically.

Similarly, a historian was critical of another historian who lacked disciplinary flexibility: “She sort of has this one standard, the hypothesis, you know, how's the hypothesis. Some things you're not necessarily hypothesizing about. I mean, she always had this one little test that she seems to be applying to everything. That just seemed to me to be not the most productive way.” Finally, comparing two years when he served on a panel – the second being more successful than the first – another historian explains the difference by noting about the second year “It was more that people were dedicated to a sort of necessary “*menschiness*” of the whole thing. I mean that sort of idea that there is a appreciative form of generosity towards what is good work in multiple traditions It's more a kind of imaginative projection into work that is in a very different tradition than your own, you know, that is good work in its own terms. And it seemed to me everybody was to varying degrees committed to doing that.” These quotes illustrate clearly how methodological pluralism is essential to the good functioning of funding panels. They also show how morality and emotions are intrinsic to the process of evaluation, rather than extraneous and corrupting, as previously suggested by the literature on the topic.²⁵

G) Bracketing Disciplinary Prejudices

A particular manifestation of the customary rules of methodological pluralism, disciplinary sovereignty and respect for expertise and sentiments is the fact that panelists keep their disciplinary prejudices in check during the course of deliberation. The chair of one of the panels, a historian, describes the managing disciplinary prejudices thus: “I think people try to be polite to other disciplines in the sense that, unless you're from that field, nobody's going to say, “I can't stand electoral studies.” Or “This is just your typical French historiography put on to. . .” You're not going to say things that other people might find offensive because you're not going to win any points by doing that. And most of the people who are on the committee are the type of intellectuals who realize that almost every tradition, almost every genre has poor and excellent practitioners.” Disciplinary boundary work, just as methodological boundary work, is deemed a polluting factor, entirely out of place in the context of the panels.

²⁵ For a critique, see Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review.

In interviews, a significant number of panelists expressed feelings of proximity or distance toward other disciplines and toward the types of scholarship that are associated with them. However, in the context of panel deliberation, these feelings are muted; evaluators know that they would destroy their reserve a collegial good will by stereotyping a discipline. The climate does not favor the kind of insider jokes that sociologists, anthropologists, or economists make about other fields when they are “entre-nous.” This was made clear when a philosopher rebuked an historian for rejecting philosophy as a “sterile enterprise.”

As we saw, the legitimacy of the process depends in part on people bending backward for disciplines or topics that they don’t know very well. A sociologist describes the situation thus:

Say it's an identity proposal, and I give it a low score because it doesn't stand up to the sort of criteria that I've laid out, but somebody else give it a high score, maybe an anthropologist, or maybe an historian with more expertise and familiarity with the literature on identity. The typical pattern in these meetings is for the low score to listen very carefully to what the higher scores are saying, particular if the higher scores are from areas where they have certain expertise in that area. So there's a certain give and take and compromise, which is quite nice.

This same panelist explains how he manages his disciplinary prejudices:

As I was scoring these proposals I started to be suspicious that I was giving lower scores to anthropology and history proposals than from the other social sciences. In part, because the criteria that I think are important are somewhat discipline-specific. But, you know, keeping this in mind, trying not to let that influence me too much, I went through and scored all the proposals that I had to read through. And then at the end of that I went through and did some calculations to find out whether I did have a disciplinary bias in scoring, and I did, as I expected. It wasn't extreme, but it was there, you could see it in the confusion of scores. And so, when we met I just fessed up. I said, “You know, I think I have a bias in terms of scoring lower for anthropology and history” . . . This particular panel for whatever reason, could be just the luck of the draw, seems very open-minded and willing to accept the possibility that we each have our particular disciplinary process we use . . .

This honorable attitude, which requires that scholars hold themselves up voluntarily to the highest standards, is essential to the collective belief in the fairness of the process and is illustrative of the rituals that Durkheim describes as essential for the production of the sacred. These standards facilitate a give and take that is also discussed by a historian who says: “I generally try to give disciplines very far from me the benefit of the doubt. Maybe if there’s something I like but don’t understand, I’ll boost it up and not always successful, but also sometimes I am a little bit harder on ones in my own discipline going in . . . a plus or minus easier or harder because I just don’t want to just be

bowing to people in American History one hundred percent of the time . . . But again History does very well, it's a luxury I can afford.”

Disciplinary differences in the extent to which panelists will “push their disciplines” are very obvious when comparing the attitudes of historians with those of philosophers, classicists, or art historians whose disciplines gather awards much less frequently, in part because these are small fields that generate far fewer applicants. Two philosophers who served on panels were described by other panelists as very eager to see their own discipline represented on the lists of awardees – philosophy proposals tend to receive few awards, according to a program officer. Conversely, historians take so much for granted that their field will be represented that their concern for diversity often focuses on which geographical areas and period of history the proposal covers. A panel that makes many history awards may be defined as diverse if it includes proposals that concern non-western as well as western topics. The inverse relationship between generosity toward other disciplines and scarcity may suggest important differences in the degree to which members of different disciplines engage or can afford to engage in disinterested behavior.²⁶

Some panelists acknowledge that they favor their own disciplines unintentionally. According to an historian, if individuals tend to favor proposals from their disciplines, it is only because they know much more about their field and are better able to form an opinion. However, others, like this musicologist, believe that panelists end up being most critical of proposals in their own field. She acknowledges: “People were particularly critical or cast a particularly eye on work from their own field, in part because they knew the field and could evaluate the claims more effectively than a non-specialist.” Moreover, panelists often lose points by pushing their own field, as noted by a French historian who describes the panelist he liked least as someone who is “very interested in pushing her own field and is not as open to other fields. As she said herself, she’s pushing time periods, you know, that she’ll sponsor anything in the middle ages, kind of thing.” Being able to sway colleagues’ opinion and gain support for a proposal depends on the overall amount of credibility that one has accumulated, and respecting all the rules described above contributes not only to maintaining the conditions for fair decision-making, but also to accumulating credibility with colleagues.

H) Evoking Institutional Mandates (I am not sure that I need this subsection. Cut?)

At times, panelists referred to the guidelines they received from the funding organizations when deliberating proposals. Institutional mandates are part of the toolkit of arguments that evaluators can evoke to bolster their argument against or in favor of proposals and to resolve a disagreement. For instance, they appealed to rules when discussing whether to fund a project that appeared to be almost fully completed, or whether the group of awardees was sufficiently disciplinary diverse. This also serves to strengthen the overall legitimacy of the deliberations by associating them closely with the legitimacy of the funding institution itself.

²⁶ Contra Bourdieu, scarcity introduces important variations in the degree to which disinterested behavior is interested.

Guidelines are taken seriously by the panelists, but it is rare that panelists forefront the institutional mandate in their discussions. One exception was a historian who spelled out his criteria of evaluation at the onset of the meeting. He explained to other panelists that his goal was not to assess the worthiness of project, but to be able to distinguish between the A+s, As, and A-s based on a set of consistent criteria that reflected the funding organization's priorities as well as his own inclination. Such early formalization of criteria is unusual given the usual back and forth required for a panel to develop a shared understanding of what defines a good proposal.

In general, panelists can maintain a certain distance toward the institutional mandate: program officers give them full sovereignty and generally do not enforce the mandates, with the result that a competition aiming to support research with social policy relevance may reward proposals that have no such ambitions. Thus, a sociologist noted that a proposal that did not have the kind of focus specified by the competition, but which everyone judged to be excellent, was funded, demonstrating the flexibility that panelists are given. Concerning the guidelines panelists receive, another sociologist says: "I doubt that most people read them all that carefully. And therefore, as far as I can tell [panelists] just bring the kind of intellectual outlook that they had before and try to reproduce their visions." Nevertheless, institutional mandates constrain the kinds of argument that panelists make, since they affect the likelihood that specific criteria will be evoked against or in favor of a proposal – whether a proposal is excessively or insufficiently humanistic, comparative, policy-oriented, etc. Their mere presence influences the likelihood that certain kinds of proposals be funded (or not).

2) The Limits of Legitimacy: Violating the Rules

The taken-for-granted nature of customary rules that panelists follow in making funding decisions is evidenced when these rules are broken.²⁷ Reactions to the breaking of the rules reveal their existence. Only three panels of the twelve panels were studied were the theater for an important disagreement and required that program officers and some panelists repair relationships among evaluators.²⁸ When interviewed about their experience on these panels, scholars described them as "disappointing," "nerve-racking," or as "a panel that turned into a two day faculty meeting, which is not my idea of fun." Evaluators are particularly sensitive to the respect of rules pertaining to collegiality, the use of consistent standards, and the exclusion of academic gossip from the deliberations. Again, evaluators are the most angry when they feel that others did not defer to their expertise – this was salient in the three most conflict-ridden panels. Failure to defer is a particularly sensitive topic for academics because so much of their self identity is tied to their role as privileged expert.

A) Conflicts and Collegiality

²⁷ Focusing on the breaking of rules as a means to reveal the taken for granted of the social order is one of the main contributions of ethnomethodology to the sociological tradition. See Garfinkel 1967.

²⁸ For a detailed description of these panels, see Mallard, Lamont and Guetzkow Under review.

We saw earlier that the respect of other panelists' sentiments is one of the essential qualities that defines a good panelist. Program officers uniformly stress the importance of collegiality when describing what they are looking for in a panelist. Evaluators themselves uphold the customary rule of collegiality which requires that they address one another with a tone of respect. Violations of this rule are resented, as described by this anthropologist:

I had a disagreement near the start over proposals [that we were not sure were eligible]. He did not buy [my argument] for a minute. It seemed to me that was a perfectly reasonable thing to disagree about. I was a little taken aback because his response to me on that was very direct and kind of in your face, I found it... offensive is a little too strong, but I thought it was inappropriate, I guess. It came at a time very early in the panel where everybody's still sort of feeling one another out and, you know, it made me a bit uncomfortable.

The respect of the customary rule of collegiality is not only a matter of gentlemanly courtesy echoing a long-gone era when academia was the private domain of honorable men of independent means. It is the oil that keeps the wheels of deliberation turning. It is a style of interaction that diffuses potential for frictions and tensions that could hinder the decision process, and in the worst case, could result in open conflict. Such a conflict is described vividly by an evaluator in reference to a panelist who was unable to convince others to fund a proposal in his own field (again, also illustrating the importance of disciplinary deference):

He ate by himself. I mean we broke after that [discussion]. I remember saying something to him just a way of breaking the ice and he was not in the mood to talk. He was extraordinarily upset. It took until pretty close to the end of the meeting for him to . . . get back into the swing of thing, and we sat directly across the table from one another, so he was what I saw when I looked up from my materials [. . .] This was his top proposal that I recall, and so he had a huge stake in this. He couldn't get anywhere with any other members of the committee . . . He did not hear the criticisms that we were offering and they were quite substantive and detailed . . . There was a kind of an undertone that [he thought] we really weren't up to his speed on this.

Such conflicts have to be managed with great care, to insure that collaboration remains possible until the collective task of the panel is completed. Program officers, panel chairs, and some panelists engage in "emotional work" to insure that their colleagues are able to save face even after defeat and to reintegrate them into the group.²⁹ The rules of collegiality do have a concrete impact on the deliberations and their outcome, which is why they are taken very seriously, even if panelists are not always in the mood to accommodate one another. A panel is described as a "good panel" or as "working well" when collegiality is high, and when panelists listen carefully and are influenced by one another. Conversely, a bad (or polluted) panel is one where collegiality is low. When describing why his panel did not function well, a historian explains:

²⁹ On emotion work, see Hochschild 1979.

[Normally], if people have the outlying score, unless it is on a point of unbelievably crucial principle, they just sort of back off after making their case. Most of the people really dug in their heels on that... it was strange that people weren't quicker to get out of the way when they were the only person with a negative opinion . . . Some of it is precedent. If the first five or six that you discuss happen by accident to be ones where there really is a matter of principle at stake that the person objects to, then in a way it forms a model of how you talk about others. There were people enforcing a strong methodological vision, or a strong vision of what constituted quality of a particular vision. So they weren't backing off in a hurry on things.

In this context, silence is often telling. A muted expression of enthusiasm is often perceived as signaling disapproval. The more damning criticisms are often expressed in very few words and may be made allusively; not necessarily being fully articulated, they are not amenable to contestation.

B) Consistency of Criteria, Gossip, and the Struggle for Greater Universalism (perhaps this section should be in the first part of the chapter, after Idiosyncracies section).

As we saw, panelists' concern for idiosyncratic tastes is tied to a desire to use consistent standards in evaluation, so as to aim for the most universalistic standard possible. This point is made by a Chinese historian who states that she works hard to be a good panelist because:

Some would just say "Well, I don't like this kind of thing, I don't like that kind of thing." . . . Professions are only a set of codes and standards, so if everything is going to be completely spontaneous and just according to your own whims, there isn't going to be a profession. Plus, I just think the people out here submitting proposals to us should be able to understand what they're aiming for, and if it's just sort of the likes and dislikes of the people.

Like this woman and in accordance with Weber, several panelists struggle for greater consistency and explicitness about the criteria they apply to proposals. In particular, an art historian opposes the use of idiosyncratic preferences in evaluation:

Everyone brings their own baggage. Certain people would say, "Well I think this should be funded in part because it's something that interests me, because it relates to my research, because it's something I would like to see published, because it deals with the period prior to the period I'm [working on]. . . and that says a great deal. One has to remain open to a degree and not get quite so personal. So I was struck often about how personal people did get . . . I don't know if you felt it, but if a topic just didn't really interest anyone, I think for very personal reasons they would not engage it.

Similarly, an economist praises another panelist because “he had the whole game in mind. I mean he was like viewing the whole set of proposals and trying to be consistent and saying, “Well, if we said this two hours ago, we should still say it now...” If we're willing to let an anthropologist sit around and just gather data “embryonically,” we can't be too hard on a political scientist who haven't quite got their econometrics written out exactly.” This economist values attempts to bracket “subjectivity” and to make “objective” evaluations as often as possible. He believes that “interesting” or “sexy” are not appropriate criteria of evaluation – counter-posing himself with the panelists who willfully use idiosyncratic standards. At the same time, an English professor explains that a proposal was not funded by its lack of emotional appeal for panelists: “I don't remember anybody having anything negative to say about that file. It may just have been there wasn't a sort of passionate support. I mean at the end of the day it seems that there almost has to be kind of passionate support or an advocacy for a file.” In the next chapter, we will see that “interesting” is indeed one of the main criteria that panelists use to evaluate proposals.

Consistency in criteria for qualitative and quantitative proposals is particularly crucial to panel legitimacy, given that tensions between the two types of methods are found in several social science disciplines, and that positivism and hermeneutics (or explanation and interpretation) are fault-lines separating the social sciences and the humanities. Consistency across the methodological divide is stressed by a political scientist:

I really do [my] best to judge the proposals on their own turf. If someone says “this is an ethnography,” I still want to know something about the methods that goes beyond “this is an ethnography,” because that's not any more specific than saying “I'm going to use statistics.” And so if I evaluate a quantitative proposal, I'll dig a little deeper than simply statistics. I want to get beyond place-markers. I don't know whether that comes off or not, but I think I try to be consistent in asking the same kinds of questions whether it was somebody who's going to build a formal model about corruption in Russia, or somebody who was going to access how changes in international legal standing [. . .] changes the perception itself . . . What I look for first, is a research design that's fairly explicit about the nature of the kinds of calls and claims that are being made, OK. Because all of them, even the ones that are saying “I'm trying to generate understanding and have more humanistic claims” in some sense pull on what we might call a descriptive understandings of causality, or sort of less positive notions of causality. I want to know the exact relationships they're trying to map out. I want to know something about the alternative explanations, which ones are being considered, which ones have already been rejected.”

Consistency is complicated by the fact the general evolution of criteria as the work of the deliberation proceeds, because panelists compare different subsets of proposals (defined by shared topics, comparable relative ranking, or proximity in the alphabet) at different times. The characteristics that are shared by any one batch of

proposals vary and may make different criteria of evaluation more salient. This is describes by the same Chinese historian:

It does sometimes happen that we get some that are very close to each other, and I always go back again and look at the ones that I thought were really the best and really the worst and see if they're really all that much different. It's like working yourself through any batch of applications or papers or whatever, your standards kind of evolve as you go through it. I don't sort mechanically. . . . Until I've read the whole batch I don't even know exactly what the standards are going to be.

Maintaining consistency is also often at odds with the imperative of cognitive contextualism discussed earlier, which requires that the most appropriate disciplinary criteria be applied. This is pointed out by a sociologist who reflects on the challenge of consistency in criteria:

[We were taking different disciplines and trying to make the rules up as we went along, really. We were saying, well, what counts as ethnography in sociology isn't what counts for ethnography in anthropology. It was quite hard really . . . to remain consistent given that everybody had different consistencies, you know, we were all trying to be consistent *in our own ways* [my emphasis].

To respect cognitive contextualism may mean adopting different criteria of evaluation for different proposals, which makes them truly incommensurable, as they cannot be located in a single matrix. Thus different standards may be used to explain the awards that are made, as all of them may shine when looked at through very different lenses. This is very much at odds with a social science epistemology that would suggest that the same standards (about falsification for instance) should be apply to all types of research.³⁰

The application of consistent criteria generated one of the three main conflicts that emerged on the panels I studied. A scholar describes a proposal that some thought methodologically unsophisticated, yet grandiose and overambitious. [both grandiose and overambitious are fairly negative adj- it seems like you want something more positive, ie impressive, striking, highly ambitious] It is worth quoting him at length:

It was an absolutely wonderful idea and the people who liked it, at least some of them, were swayed by the idea. They saw a different book coming out than the one that was actually going to come out. But when you applied the criteria we often use for proposals to this one, it failed and it failed miserably. The fight was about do we overlook these criteria or not because we like the topic so much. I couldn't help but think there was like some sets of extrinsic things going on too, like personalities, and there was a political, or ideological [dimension] . . . This applicant was a lefty, and being a lefty myself . . . It was a kind of anti-globalization lefty who was pretty naïve about testing, assuming

³⁰ Lakatos 1974.

those assumptions are true and then running with them in the proposal as opposed to trying to defend any of them against their counters, basically. . . His supporters would go, “this is a cultural history, and that’s really interesting so...” But the proposal actually says, “I’m going to do a social and economic history [...] and test whether or not it supported American’s hegemonic ambition.” . . . It was the centerpiece of American hegemony in [this area of the world], and he was going to test its economic impact. So [the economist] quite rightly said, “Well, I don’t think he has a clue about how to go about doing that” [Proposals often] fail on those grounds . . . a person states he’s going to do something and you take it on face value. The supporters were going, “Well, no, he didn’t really mean that,” and that seemed to me you can’t really [do that].”

This particular panelist expressed anger and disappointment about the process, voicing concern that standard rules were not applied in this case. He also wondered whether the panel chair had some reason to want the project funded, hinting at a possible failure in the legitimacy of the decision process. Another panelist shared a similar concern, noting that the panel on which he served had a clear bias in favor of more humanistic social sciences, such that the application of multi-causal model was penalized, and familiarity with languages was favored, which meant that anthropologists were more likely to be funded than political scientists. Here again, the legitimacy of the deliberation process may depend on achieving a proper balance between cognitive contextualism and consistency while avoiding biases.

Two of the panelists who were most insistent on the use of consistent criteria are African-Americans. As highly successful scholars of color, their own experience with biases and with being stereotyped and underestimated by professors and colleagues due to the stigma of race is likely to have made them particularly sensitive to the application of consistent criteria.³¹ One of them, a senior scholar in his sixties, observed that considerations such as whether a proposed project seems to be already completed, or whether the candidate had already received several fellowships, were raised as objections for some cases, but not for other equally problematic cases, without specific justifications. And indeed, our observation of panels suggests that all criteria do not remain equally salient from one proposal to the next and that the saliency of criteria varies in part with what the proposal evokes and how it primes evaluators.³²

Another African-American panelist, a younger woman, was also adamant that panelists consider only the evidence comprised in the dossier and abstract disciplinary gossip and other extraneous factors. She expressed her dismay at the fact that a proposal by a prolific and well-known scholar was ranked fairly low prior to deliberations, which she could only attribute to widely shared negative views about the applicant’s reputation that she, the panelist, was not privy too. She was disturbed that other panelists were not eager to take a further look at the proposal and took for granted agreement that the

³¹ On anti-racist strategies developed by elite African-Americans, which may also apply to black academics, see Lamont and Fleming 2005.

³² Reference needed (was Blink)

proposal should not be funded. Reflecting on this episode, she describes how the norms of collegiality concretely limit what can be said in the context of panel deliberations:

The one thing that I could not do is what I want to do sometime when I'm more familiar with the people, [that] is, to just challenge . . . But having just met all four of these people for the first time I didn't want to question their integrity. So I did [what] I thought was a somewhat eloquent appeal based on the standard kinds of rationales. I said well, first I admitted maybe I had been duped and all of you have seen through this hoax that he's trying to pull on us, but I saw this as a very interesting theme, and they admitted that, but they said "It's a cliché."

Referring to an allusion made by a panelist that the applicant was able to secure large advances from publishers, she added:

That kind of innuendo I thought was unfair. They know about the proposal and what's going on sort of behind the scenes and so on, but they didn't even want to discuss it. We never even discussed it, and I didn't push it. First of all, I didn't want to say "Look, I'm the only [person in the applicant's field] here and although this is treading on everybody's turf, it seems like to me you should [have] at least, you know, talk about this for five minutes."

She concludes: "Maybe the only thing that might be done would be to try to encourage people to make their decision on the basis of the materials before them as opposed to going beyond that. But you know, human beings will find ways to bend rules, so the only thing that can really help is just to try to get people to have high level integrity and a sense of fairness." Nevertheless, she was satisfied with the competition's overall outcome, concluding that "Nothing is perfect."

C) Pecking Order and Power Dynamics (Including those Pertaining to Race and Gender)

The last quotes evoke the level of uncertainty with which panelists operate, not being very familiar with one another. But they also evoke the impact of uneven influence and power dynamics on funding outcomes, including on their fairness and legitimacy, which is a measure of the extent to which factors extraneous to the proposal influence these outcomes. The racial identity and gender of panelists certainly influence what can be said by whom, to whom, when, and how, as we will see below. Beyond the impact of ascribed characteristics, panelists develop a common sense of an emergent order of authority within the group in the very process of deliberating. Although the pecking order remains implicit, it manifests itself quite concretely in who is most listened to and whose opinion is swayed by whom – as a sociologist puts it, it is measured by "the number of times the proposals Mary gave "1s" to were funded. It was a lot lower than the amount of times that the ones Peter was in favor of were funded." It is also measured by how forthcoming other panelists are in providing support for a proposal that one promotes, or

conversely, by whether an implicit request for support is left unanswered.³³ Differing degrees of influence can be conceived as disrupting the fairness of the process if they are viewed as extraneous factors that temper the extent to which the cognitive content of the proposal is the sole determinant of evaluation.

When debating, panelists are not only giving opinions about proposals; they are also performing their identity as a group of colleagues who are institutionally labeled as highly esteemed, having been asked by the funding agency to serve due to their good reputation as academics and as impartial evaluations in the distribution of scarce and coveted resources that affect academic prestige to their peers. How one performs on a panel, i.e., whether one is able to argue successfully in favor of a particular proposal, is important to the evaluators' self-identity, as the panels provide a context to measure oneself against one's colleagues.³⁴ Thus, it is not surprising that when asked how they thought the meeting went, many panelists spontaneously discussed how much they believed they influenced others versus how much they were influenced by others.³⁵ Also, when asked their opinion about other panelists, interviewees often compared degrees of influence. For instance, one woman describes a co-panelist whom she thought was making inconsistent judgments in the following terms: "He often seemed to make arguments that no one else would pick up on, and that often seemed irrelevant . . . He seemed to value some proposals for very odd reasons that were more like personal taste than any kind of other criteria."

Many of the conflicts that surround expectations about deference are triggered by perceived slights that signal positioning or challenges to positions in a pecking order. Again, panelists consistently expressed anger when they felt they were not listened to in discussions of proposals about which they believe they have particular expertise.

If pecking orders affect the outcomes of the deliberations and trigger conflicts, it is important to understand the determinants of one's positioning in a panel. One of the

³³ A panelist who describes herself, and was described by others, as particularly powerless describes the situation thus: "The panel chair said to me "Please let's try to bring one of these folders out that deal with history because we really want to sort of set a precedent for this year that we are interested in this. So I actually turned to him and said "Look, this one is kind of low in terms of rankings and maybe we could reenter Z's application. And I actually asked [this other panelist] about doing that. He didn't say anything, he just looked away at that point, which I found, you know, just hard for me to deal with. He was very dismissive and maybe he was tired. But I think that the problem was that I'd been encouraged to try to reinsert it, and then when I went about reinserting it, I didn't find much support from anyone. Even toward the end, [the chair] was too tired, he just said, "Sorry I'm too tired to even try to bring this up." [Another panelist] looked away, he denied the possibility of engaging in that discussion."

³⁴ See Deborah Gruenfeld's work on the psychology of power. In particular, Gruenfeld, Martorana and Fan 2000.

³⁵ The power dynamics of a panel could be studied by analyzing questions mentioned by a historian interviewed on how she would go about understanding the pecking order of her panel. For her, power dynamics have to do with: "Did anybody dominate the [deliberations]? Did everyone have a chance to express [themselves]? Was there any scholarly point of view that really didn't get a hearing? Were there times when people felt that their own academic field or standards or values were being challenged indirectly? Directly?"

prime determinants of influence is institutional affiliation. Ivy League universities continue to loom large, despite repeated criticisms of their elitism and arrogance and the considerable competition offered by other elite private universities and top public universities. Ivy Leaguers are still often perceived as favoring particularistic criteria related to who studied with whom where, as we saw above. Some Ivy League faculty members defined themselves, and are defined by others, as undisputed authorities. One faculty member who taught in a Southern college commented on the patronizing tone used by an Ivy League professor reacting to his assessment of a proposal they both had competence to judge. The Southerner said being surprised by this tone because he had more detailed empirical knowledge of the case in point than his co-panelist. Nevertheless, he did not challenge it. He concluded by simply stating “I guess he is used to being an authority.”

A second factor affecting pecking order is personality. In one panel, an anthropologist was singled out as having a particular strong impact on the outcome of deliberation. A sociologist says of him: “within anthropology anyway, there are so many different approaches. Inevitably, these things often come down to strong characters who have very specific agendas.” Of the same person, an art historian says: “In terms of the dynamics, he had a lot of power. I noticed also that he was the one who often employed such terms as, “Well this is hardly innovative! This is hardly new! This is being done here, there and everywhere! And he would name all the other locations where it was being done. If he decided he didn't like something, he would just simply say, “Well that work's all been done and he would list the literature and then everyone was silent. So he did have a very powerful influence.”

How knowledgeable and well-prepared panelists are has an impact on their relative influence as we saw, but so do their aggressiveness, stubbornness, and determination. Thus, a sociologist notes that “in some cases [funding] really depends on an individual held out. If that person didn't hold out, it did get funded.” This person mentioned that she herself did give way on a case where she was the best qualified person to judge, and points out the impact of personal attitudes. Being European, she perceived some panelists as “too American,” by which she meant that they talk to show off their knowledge as opposed to elucidating the merits of the proposal. “I think more is said than would be said in similar kind of meeting” in Europe. This speaks to the broader issue of “group style” that defines the emotional rules which come to be taken for granted within a panel, and that are likely to vary across panels and funding agency, perhaps even across disciplines. Indeed the “take no prisoner” style of debating favored by economists is legendary across the social science.

Some evaluators downplay the power dynamics within their panel, framing the role of all the participants as a consultative one. This is the case for an economist who says: “I didn't feel like it was gladiatorial combat, I wasn't there to fight to the death for my proposal. . . . I was there to try to give input on stuff that was closest to what I'm knowledgeable on.” He adds “It's not like Capitol Hill [where you have to] bring home the bacon for your constituents.” Yet a certain amount of posturing can be deployed to affect the symbolic politics of a panel and enact and make visible the pecking order. This

is the case when panelists extensively trash proposals that they know others like, in order to flex their muscles and openly assert their position in the committee. While some view this type of behavior as wholly inappropriate, a political scientist who appreciates real politics recognizes that other panelists “get interested in the games that are played around these things,” as though they were watching power matches and following who marks points.

Of course, characteristics such as seniority, gender, and racial identity strongly facilitate or hinder the gaining of influence, independent of personality and motivation. Social psychologists have shown that people bring clear expectations about the kinds of performance and contributions members of different gender and racial identities will offer to a group. Low expectations for blacks and women are typical.³⁶ This certainly may influence how members of these groups approach the experience of serving on panels.

I did not find any specific instances where the impact of the racial identity of panelists on their influence in deliberation is explicitly spelled out, beyond the quote above from an African-American women scholar, which does not tie her experience to her racial identity. The absence of data on the topic is hardly surprising given the small number of African-Americans involved in the panels I studied. Moreover, it is possible that panelists were reluctant to bring up experience of stereotyping on panels to a white interviewer, especially if they did not know of my academic interests in comparative anti-racism, as it was the case for most of the respondents. The same can be said about the experiences of marginalization that panelists may have experienced due to their lack of seniority. Nevertheless, the social psychology literature gives us good reasons to anticipate that both race and seniority affect how much influence panelists exercise and the extent to which they are the object of low expectations.

In contrast, the impact of gender on influence on panels was clearly mentioned by a few interviewees. This is clearly demonstrated by the advice given by a more experienced panelist, Joan, to a new panel member, Monique, as related by the latter.

Joan said to me afterwards that the gender dynamic often in these meetings can be difficult. She said “you have to learn how to use language in a way that is almost like a form of warfare, rather than get at the issues. There is a drama to attack that has nothing to do with talking specifically about the projects, but it's how you launch yourself.” She said I was just too nice . . . Ultimately my take on it is . . . really this whole committee meeting was a kind of performance. You have to learn to perform in a more bombastic manner to get your points across, and this has nothing to do with really what you say, but how you say it . . . [Lucy] said the same. She said “You have to do thing with a flourish and a dramatic sort of . . . Leave it at that and then they have to take it one way.” She said “You're altogether too nice and diplomatic about it.”

³⁶ Expectation state theory. For a summary, see Webster 2003; also Berger, Wager and Zelditch 1985.

Others noted gendered patterns of interaction and self-presentation among panelists. For instance, a woman says about another panelist, “He's very bright and was in a performance mode, like a lot of males get into, you know, they're like bred for it, I swear, in academia . . . They need more women next year, to tone the testosterone down. Seriously, the year before this was not . . . [like that].” Of the other women panelists she says: “we tend to defer a little and maybe not be as assertive as perhaps we'd like to be. When I get like in a situation with a hard-hitting male, I just want to not say anything, it's like “I'm not playing this game.” I don't want to perform, I just want to do my thing and try to do as good a job as I can and this is what I think is fair.”

A final determinant of influence is whether a panelist is perceived by others as sharing similar standards. This is suggested by a history professor who explains that she felt very close to another panelist in her evaluations – she knew this panelist beforehand from having tried to recruit her at her institutions, which speaks to the question of preexisted networks discussed next. This woman explains how her appreciation of this panelist rested in shared theoretical frameworks:

There were just a couple of cases where she and I agreed and we together disagreed with others and I remember feeling pleased about that although I really felt quite at peace and attuned to the whole panel. I felt that we understood each other quite well. As I said, she articulated her criteria very well and very clearly. It was really helpful that she did that. . . . I guess we were attracted often to same kinds of knotty intellectual problems. She and I share a post-structuralist intellectual background and perhaps for that reason we share a liking for those projects that took problems that had previously been considered in a binary framework and did something creative with that. . . She has a way of framing problems that are very broad terms that are not just drawn from her field. I mean, she really reaches out to the humanities for philosophy and all kinds of frameworks that were familiar to me. So I had a good appreciation of her knowledge base and her approach to things. In some respects, that made the conversation much better because I knew where she was coming from . . . She and I would often agree with each other about proposals that fell somewhere in-between our two fields. When I saw that she had given a proposal a high mark, it encouraged me to spend some time explaining why I thought it was really good. It's a very cheering experience to discover that someone I knew and admired [was there]. . . the other people on the panel, once again, I didn't have any prior knowledge [of them]. . . After the panel I am full of respect for all of them. But I don't really know how to account for that. . .

This panelist clearly states that when the other panelists “had given a proposal a high mark, it encouraged me to spend some time explaining why I thought it was really good.” Whether or not such influences violate the norms of fairness may be unclear. While outsiders could view them as prejudicial to universalism, once panelists are chosen, it is difficult to ask them to abstract their tastes. For this reason, evaluators seem to have no qualms using intellectual similarity as a criterion for assessing the quality of mind and the level of influence that they are willing to give their peers serving on the

panel. Needless to say, preexisting networks among panelists also have an impact on how decisions are made and may generate alliances that are viewed as violating the rules of universalism.

D) The Impact of Preexisting Networks and Reputation

It seems intuitive that panel deliberations would be affected by the connections that exist between panelists and by the amount of information they have about one another prior to deliberations. Indeed, as we just saw, extraneous connections are likely to influence how much weight panelists give to the opinions of their peers. Thus, preexisting networks are one factor that can disrupt the fair proceeding of deliberation by introducing particularistic considerations.

In the majority of cases, however, panelists have no ties with one another and have very little or no information about each other prior to the meetings, except for panelists of the Society of Fellows who are all drawn from a single institution and for evaluators who had served together on panels in previous years. This is not altogether surprising given the sheer size of the American academic community and that program officers explicitly aim to put together diverse panels that include scholars from various disciplines, regions and types of universities. Individuals serving on single-discipline panels (say, in political science) would be much more likely to have at least a passive knowledge of the topics on which other panelists work and to be familiar with their academic and personal reputation and epistemological orientation.

A number of evaluators were familiar with the reputation or the writings of their colleagues before meeting them, especially when fields or areas of specialization overlapped (for instance, among historians, Women Studies scholars, or Europeanists). They mentioned having seen the work of their co-panelists cited in graduate student papers or elsewhere, or stated that they were indirectly connected through friends or colleagues.³⁷ This was more frequent among those living in large metropolitan areas that include many colleges and universities and among individuals teaching in elite institutions that often sustain dense cross-institutional networks. In one case, two panelists were former colleagues and knew each other very well. In another case, two panelists were involved in overlapping professional circles. As the historian amongst them explains, this overlap was welcomed:

The person that I felt closest to was the person I knew in advance, someone whom I didn't have to become acquainted with. I can't at all claim that we were close friends, but we've had an occasional dinner and we've been at a couple of conferences together, and I knew coming in that it would be relatively easy for us to discuss these issues.

³⁷ "I had recently been examining a graduate student on some of her dissertation work and she made many references to this guy's work. And so I hadn't read any of his work, but I had this odd kind of acquaintance with this very helpful and important work of his." (English Professor).

Few evaluators took time to gather information on others prior to the meeting, even though the internet makes data gathering almost effortless. For instance, a historian says: “I didn’t [do any research about the other panelists]. I’m not too serious, I never did. I mean in most cases I knew the name by reputation. I had never met the anthropologist before last year, but I knew his work. And I think both years I didn’t know the economist, and I didn’t research. Interestingly, both of them were locals.” This paucity of information about academic achievements or personal reputation makes it more likely that candidates rely on preconceived notions about disciplinary differences to prepare arguments in anticipation of the position that their co-panelists will take on specific proposals. This is illustrated by an English professor who we met earlier and who shaped her defense of a psychoanalysis-inflected proposals based on what she believed to be the likely reactions of other panelists, anticipating that they would perceive the project as self-indulgent, autobiographical, and precious and that they would find it annoying. The dearth of information on others may also push panelists to be quite conservative in criticizing what they may see as the foibles of other disciplines. Under conditions of uncertainty, it may be a safer strategy in the long run to err on the side of prudence and excessive collegiality, in order to avoid antagonizing the allies one might need to make a particular label (positive or negative) stick to a proposal.

E) The Role of Chance

Although panelists view their deliberations as legitimate and fair, they are also attuned to the elements of randomness that affect their outcomes. For instance, when asked whether cream rises to the top, an English professor responded as follows: “Every panel kind of gets its own rhythm going and there is a kind of randomness having to do with who got picked to be on the panel, and the results could be very different on another day . . . I guess I hoped that all of these people are applying to lots of different fellowships and the cards will fall a different way for different people.” She does not describe the process as unfair, but views it as somewhat random and acknowledges that the invisible hand of the market is beyond the control of any one individual. This should lead applicants to multiply their applications to maximize their chances of obtaining funding. Although this same panelist believes in academic excellence, she says:

I don’t put a huge amount of faith in my or anybody else’s ability to measure it exactly. [Just because of] all the subjectivity involved, the field-by-field and even day-by-day or minute-by-minute variations in what might count as excellence for any given person for group of people. Certainly, so much is involved in writing a proposal that has to do with cleverness, and that could be totally different from the excellence of the end result. Things like that, I guess, that make me uncomfortable. I mean, I certainly do feel every now and then that I read something that is just luminously both clear and smart, and then I think I know, “yes, that’s it.”

The limitations of the panels are easily acknowledged by other panelists. For instance, an art historian explains that because one can’t predict the composition of the committee, “It is a tremendous game of chance that you can manage to get something

funded. That was my sense, that it's a real crap shoot of who will get the funding and who won't." Also speaking of the role of chance, a historian explains that in his view, the best projects do get rewarded, but "with mistakes" because there is "bad judgment, dominating personalities and the review [is done by] people who don't see the true beauty of some project over another. Mistakes are made. You're reading a lot of these things in between doing everything else."

For an English professor, these elements of chance work against the more innovative proposals. He says: "the alternates, sometimes to me they're the ones you really like to see sort of get in because they're just quirky enough, they're just odd enough, and they're just daring enough that they really might come to something so unexpected and unusual and provocative. But those are the ones that really are subject to these other variables, such as: What are the interactions among the members of the committee? Where are the proposals alphabetically? Or in terms of what order these are being decided? So it's by no means an objective process." For a historian, luck is especially important in discussion of the more creative proposals where usual standards do not apply, and which require a common agreement to take a risk: "We have to make decisions that are based on these intangibles about creativity and pushing the envelope, and those are harder, more intuitive, as you probably noticed. You can't say this person's grades are higher or their letters are better, you can't use those criterion."

The time at which proposals get discussed is also crucial, since at the end of the day people are more pressed, eager to go home, and may be forced to make quicker judgments on each proposal under consideration. It is also often the case that the more contentious proposals are discussed at the end, after all the easier cases have been dealt with. These "last cases" are generally faulty, but in different, non-commensurable ways, which makes it harder to reach consensus about them, especially if little time is left to discuss them carefully. Thus a political scientist describes the context that emerges at the very end of the deliberations:

This is one of the last proposals we talked about, one of the very last. At that point we knew we had fifty grants to give away, and we also knew that we were at number forty-four or forty-five and we had like three or four proposals to go. [Some] were sort of on the fence [and] there were a few people who were pushing hard. At this point there was no displacement effect because you knew that if you funded this person, it wasn't going to displace somebody else who might have more meritorial. And so I think they might have just simply said, "Look, you know, it's 4:30 on Saturday. We're at the end of the day. I'm tired. You feel passionate. I don't really care." But I don't think [the award] was [made] on the merit. That's my observation."

He points to the fact that timing *and* sequence matters, as each award is made without certainty that there is in the remaining piles of proposals to consider others that are more deserving. Reconsideration at the end is always a possibility, but is somewhat unlikely given that it requires the energy-consuming challenge of refocusing collective attention on the specifics of any one proposal. An anthropologist feels that the outcome

of the deliberation would have been different had the panel taken time to revisit its decision: “I feel that if the meeting had gone another day and if we had been allowed to pull people out of the 'yes' list and change our minds, there might have been six or seven or eight switches.”

The sheer intellectual exhaustion that panelists experience after two days of intense work also affects the seriousness with which they approach their task as the deliberation near an end, another factor that may affect the legitimacy of the outcomes. Over the two days they spend together, panelists develop a common sense of humor, a group culture of sort, which may disrupt the seriousness of the deliberations. Thus an art historian explains that “I think as people get more and more tired, certain topics that emerged, people made fun of and became sort of the butt of the joke right through to the very end.”³⁸ It’s interesting to also note that because of time pressures, one of the panels I studied did not distribute all the fellowships it had at its disposal because panelists had flights to catch. This illustrates how officiating about academic excellence is shaped by real world constraints and is not produced in a vacuum that allows panelists to uphold abstract standards of professionalism.

Conclusion: The Heart of the Art of Evaluation: High-Minded yet Practical

In this chapter, I have reviewed the customary rules that panelists follow to convince themselves that the peer review process works and that they are indeed able to identify the best proposals. The picture that emerges is that of an imperfect but optimized process, one where strategic voting, horse-trading, self-interest, idiosyncraticism, and inconsistencies are an unavoidable part of the equation. We also learned that evaluation is an eminently social and emotional process, as opposed to being a cognitive process corrupted by extra-cognitive factors. More specifically:

- 1) **The value of proposals *qua* cultural products depends on their embeddedness in the context of evaluation.** Proposals are not evaluated in a vacuum, but relationally, in comparison with other proposals. The universe of comparison is not stable, nor are the criteria: which proposals are compared depends on topic and on chance, i.e. on timing and sequence. Specific criteria are primed by different groups of proposals, and funding decisions are based on different criteria and may be incommensurable, proposals being located on different matrixes and shining when viewed through different lenses. Support and opposition for proposals depends on a range of factors, including which subsets of panelist are qualified to comment on which subsets of proposals. Thus, contextual ranking is at the heart of the art of evaluating and consistency is a very challenging task.
- 2) **Panelists support a pragmatic understanding of fairness that is at odds with an idealistic understanding that would abstract proposals from their contexts of evaluation to consider only their intrinsic qualities in and of**

³⁸ Common referents and jokes are part of the development of an idioculture, as described by Gary Alan Fine’s (1979) article on the development of group culture in little league baseball.

themselves.

Beyond low-balling, strategic voting is unavoidable because all voting is to some extent strategic, aiming to support or prevent the funding of a proposal. Because many of the judgments are relational and conjectural, panelists have to think strategically about what they can realistically accomplish in a negotiation process that is simultaneously high-minded and practical and that allows proposals favored by each of the other evaluators be funded.

- 3) **It is impossible to totally eliminate the impact of interpersonal relationships, including clientelism, on evaluation, particularly because scholarly expertise is not entirely independent of, and is in fact superposed onto, the social networks of those who produce knowledge.** Nevertheless, discussions proceed as if panelists were abstracted from social networks and operating as free agents without any personal agenda or connections.
- 4) **Idiosyncratic evaluations are almost unavoidable, and they are presented in universalistic terms and seamlessly folded into formal criteria of evaluation.** Panelists they have no alternative but to use their own personal understanding of what is a fascinating problem in order to do the work that is expected of them.
- 5) **Accumulating credibility with colleagues, which is essential to obtaining the support needed to making a label “stick” to a proposal, results in part from respecting the customary rules of deliberations.**

Belief in the fairness of the process is not shared throughout academia. It is likely that scholars invited to serve on panels are individuals who have strongly internalized the view that peer review “works.” Moreover, it is reasonable to surmise that the higher individuals are within the academic prestige hierarchy, the more they are to buy into the sacred values of the group (the ‘totem,’ to paraphrase Durkheim) – and panelists are likely to be high within the system, as program officers evoke prestige to account for who gets asked to serve. Thus, those who never apply for nor receive grants and fellowships are more likely to believe that the allocation system is particularistic and based on cronism. Nevertheless, the belief in its legitimacy is strong enough to animate the general process of peer review, in the United States at least. Such is not the case in France, despite the creation of a system of examinations that would insure the meritocracy of the system.³⁹

Perhaps the processes of evaluation documented in this chapter apply to interdisciplinary panels only. Uni-disciplinary panels may follow different rules: for instance, the rule of disciplinary sovereignty does not apply and there may be more competition among members of a same discipline to appropriate the right to speak on a

³⁹ This is suggested by a review of the literature on peer review in the United States, the United Kingdom, and France (Lamont and Mallard 2005). The particularistic aspects of French academia are also highlighted in many essays on French intellectuals and French academia. See for instance Debray 1979.

topic. Moreover, that panelists have to convince one another of the value of a proposal certainly contributes to the belief in the legitimacy of the process. In contrast, evaluations of journal submission are conducted in the privacy of the reviewer's office or home and are not defended publicly – they are only meant for the journal editors' eyes. This may leave more room for more personal arbitrariness. Thus I am not arguing that peer review at large is legitimate or is perceived as being legitimate, nor that it needs debunking. Instead, I have confined myself to analyzing the conditions that lead panelists to view their collective work as legitimate.

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