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Despina Lalaki

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Rehabilitating the Importance of the Non-cognitive: An Interview with Michèle Lamont

Despina Lalaki

Published online: 20 June 2007

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Abstract In spring of 2006, Michèle Lamont, Professor of Sociology and African and African-American Studies at Harvard University, was invited to give a lecture for the New Sociological Imagination Lecture Series, organized by the New School for Social Research. This lecture concerned her book *Cream Rising: How Peer Review Finds and Defines Excellence in the Social Sciences and the Humanities*, which is to be published by Harvard University Press in 2008. Drawing on 81 interviews with panelists serving on five multidisciplinary fellowship competitions in the social sciences and the humanities, the book analyzes (1) the meaning panelists give to academic excellence—including whether they believe in it or not; (2) how excellence is recognized (both through formal criteria of evaluation, such as originality and significance, but also through more evanescent signals such as the display of cultural capital and the proper use of theory); (3) how excellence is combined with other criteria pertaining to interdisciplinarity and diversity (geographic, institutional, disciplinary, racial, and gender diversity) to push proposals over the proverbial line or to promote or criticize proposals. In her talk, she analyzed the customary rules that panelists say they follow, and which allow them to believe that the evaluation process is fair, and that *Cream Rises*. In the interview below, we asked her to discuss how procedural fairness actually operates in panels and reflect on many other aspects of the phenomenon that she analyzes.

On behalf of the *IJPCS*'s editorial board, I would like to thank you for accepting our invitation to give this interview.

Could you first talk about the methodology you have adopted for this research project?

I used interviews. I had the ranking of the applicants that each panelist produced prior to deliberations. I also had the outcome: who the winners were and often the order which the awards had been given. The methodology consisted essentially of asking people to describe what argument they had made and what arguments others had made in order to produce this outcome. Through the description of these specific cases, I would isolate the criteria of

D. Lalaki (✉)

The New School for Social Research, 65 Fifth Avenue, New York, NY 10003, USA
e-mail: lalad335@newschool.edu

evaluation panelists used. I also asked a number of more general questions, for instance, “do you believe in academic excellence?” I was trying to get at their templates for evaluating excellence, by having them articulate them around very specific instances but also by talking generally about their best students, their mentors, their intellectual heroes, and the qualities that are most important to them. I had an interview schedule, which I followed, but not always in order. At the end of the interview I would go over it to make sure that I had touched upon all my questions. It was systematic but it left a lot of room for variation and for the unexpected to emerge. From the first interviews we conducted to the end, a number of hypotheses emerged. I added questions like “how do you deal with ‘horse-trading?’” Initially, I wasn’t aware that this could be such an important question.

Were you thinking of all the institutions you approached as similar entities?

My study draws on interviews with scholars who serve on twelve interdisciplinary funding panels. The funding competitions under consideration were held by the Social Science Research Council (SSRC), the American Council of Learned Societies (ACLS), the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation (WWNFF), a Society of Fellows at a top research university, and an anonymous foundation in the social sciences. Each of the twelve panels was studied for two consecutive years. I used a convenience sample. Some of them have very large panels that give substantial amounts of money; others have very small panels and give far fewer and much smaller fellowships. I solved the problem by thinking that what I was really interested in were the cultural templates panelists use to evaluate excellence. Because of confidentiality, I could not refer to the specifics of each competition. I have to disguise everyone’s identity. When, for example, I provide empirical details, I have to make slight changes to prevent the identification of respondents—describing a specialist of China as a specialist of Japan for instance.

Does your study include both private foundations as well as governmental institutions?

I negotiated very hard with the National Science Foundation (NSF) to get access to their panel, and even though the directors gave me access, the General Council’s Office, opposed it, invoking the Privacy Act. Ultimately they refused to give me access. Then the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) refused me access as well. Because of that, it is all foundations that I studied. There is also a competition within a university, the Society of Fellows. However, the focus is not on how the organization setting affects the competition, because of the constraints I faced in terms of identifying some of the participating organizations.

Did you have the opportunity to observe any of these panels in action?

I was able to observe three different panels. In one case, the chair of the panel was a friend of mine, someone with whom I had spent a year in sabbatical somewhere so I have gotten to know him very well. He was somewhat nervous that I would do this but, at the same time, he wanted to be helpful. Because they were concerned with reactivity, they asked me not to observe the following year. There are real constraints on the type of research that is possible in that kind of setting.

You feel that your presence then had affected the deliberation process?

Certainly! The panelists know that you are observing and much of what they say in the interviews is about trying to demonstrate that the process is fair. One of the arguments is that it is a faulty process but there is no other obvious alternative given that those who are

doing the evaluations are themselves implicated in networks and that they have their own definition of what is interesting. Inevitably, they think of their work when they have to judge and the only tool they have to judge with is their own head, which is bound in time and space. It is a suboptimal but necessary process.

I understand that the panelists discuss and evaluate only a portion of the applications submitted to every foundation's competition call. Who is responsible for the initial evaluation and furthermore, did you have the opportunity to examine any of the proposals that were not included in the final process at all?

The initial screening is done by professors who are slightly more junior and who may or may not be promoted to the panel. They are promoted based on the impression that the program officer forms about whether an individual has a good judgment. It is really a great deal of work and it is not very rewarding, because in general people are not paid to do it and it is very time consuming. However, it is very interesting because you learn what many other people are doing. For one of the competitions I had the chance to look at the whole stack of proposals, including those that had been eliminated by the screeners. They often write only three or four words to explain their decision.

Did you largely agree with these decisions?

My personal goal was not to determine whether the process was fair but to understand the production of fairness, that is, the conditions that make it possible for the panelists to believe that it is fair, as most of them do. Assessing fairness would require projecting in time what the applicants' trajectories would look like had they not received the fellowship. This is a problem that is not falsifiable.

Within which theoretical tradition would you situate this work? In what ways do you capitalize on pre-existing research in this field and in what ways does your approach differ?

I started as a sociologist of knowledge who had come out of Marxism essentially and Mannheim's theory about the conditions of production of ideas and the sociology of culture. Then, when I was in Paris in the late seventies, I worked with Bourdieu, which really helped me to think about the sociology of knowledge in more complex terms but then, again, I went away from him, for all kinds of reasons. A great deal of my own work has been really inductive. There is a big difference between his approach to evaluation and mine. I take as a point of departure the individual's understanding of the classification system in which he or she functions. Bourdieu starts with the structure of the field, which is predefined. This is my big disagreement with him. I also think that the paper which I presented at the New School is very inspired by pragmatism and by ethno-methodology. It analyzes what happens when people break the rules, building on the work of Irv Garfinkel. It raises the issue of the collective constitution of the social order and it traces the rules that people follow to perform this collective accomplishment of judging. This is not Bourdieu at all and it is much more inspired by symbolic interactionism.

In your forthcoming book, *Cream Rising*, you mention Goffman as well.

It is a very Goffmanian project, but also, because I come out of Marxism, power is there in a way that it is not in Goffman. I am, also, close to Boltanski. Hence, both the ethno-methodological focus and the pragmatism focus are there. I am actually going to write a paper before July, positioning myself in relation to Bourdieu in that literature, so that will be an occasion for me to think deeper on these issues.

Could you provide us with some additional information with regard to the structure or the content of the deliberation process?

There is enormous variation. For example, applicants to the Society of Fellows have about 1 in 200 chances of success. Those for the Social Science Research Council (SSRC) have about 1 in 12. The deliberation process typically takes one or two full days during which the panelists collectively discuss and rank the proposals, which, of course, they have read and ranked individually beforehand. One of the great qualities, actually, of a good panelist is his/her preparedness level, which influences his/her ability to produce a convincing argument during deliberations.

In your talk, you referred to Durkheim, the distinction between the profane and the sacred and the ways the latter emerges through rituals. Is the tone adopted by the panels in harmony with this ritualistic spirit?

There is great consensus about the importance of maintaining a very collegial tone. There are many opportunities for conflict but if someone engages in that, he or she disqualifies him or herself for the next year. People have to learn how to disagree while remaining very civil. It is a form of professionalism, if you will.

Is there always a chair or an officer present at these deliberations and what is the role that he/she is called to play?

The program officer exerts a lot of emotional work. He/she tries to make sure that everything goes smoothly, so in the few cases of conflict that I actually documented you had the program officer going back and forth between people trying to appease the spirits. There was a case where someone got really upset in the morning because a proposal in his field was not funded and he believed that the other panelists were not qualified to judge it. He was beside himself and he was having lunch by himself when the program officer approached him in order to create a compromise. This is a breach, however, which is rather uncommon.

What is the process followed for the selection of the panelists? What are the criteria?

The program officers choose people who are known among their colleagues as knowledgeable and fair and broad and interdisciplinary, to the extent that these are all interdisciplinary panels, although they fund many disciplinary proposals as well.

I would like to make a parenthesis here and ask you to comment on the “interdisciplinarity” of these competitions. The reason I ask is because we often see a number of disciplines listed in these announcements for the funding of interdisciplinary research but I believe that there is a tendency for what I would call “disciplinary favoritism.”

This has very much to do with who applies. For instance, in all of these competitions there are always many historians, in part because the field of history is enormous. Consequently, if you have a single anthropology application among the proposals judged you cannot say that they do not fund anthropologists. It really depends on who applies, which varies enormously across disciplines. The American Council for Learned Societies (ACLS), for example, really funds sociologists, but sociologists very rarely apply to it.

To go back to the question about the criteria by which the panelists are selected ...

The program officer’s job is to identify panelists. They would call people that they trust to get their opinion on this and that person, they talk to people within their organization to get suggestions, while they also identify former winners who might qualify.

Is that an invitation that is usually welcomed? What drives a professor, loaded already with multiple responsibilities, to serve as a panelist, provided that this is a rather time consuming procedure with little if any monetary reward?

I think that many people accept because it is very interesting, even though it is a very big responsibility and very time consuming. It can take you a whole weekend to read forty, fifty proposals. It is a lot of work. However, it depends on what stage you are professionally and on whether it is interesting for you to do this. You might have done this enough times to the point that is not interesting for you anymore, whereas for someone who is young in the profession it is really a chance to enter another realm.

Would you suggest that the interest and therefore participation of more senior professors, in terms of intellectual achievement, diminishes with the years?

It may, but as you get more senior you also want to remain part of the game, because many professors become more isolated, as they become more senior. To be able to continue to have an impact is really important. We do not necessarily have a one-to-one correlation between interest and age.

Being included in this rather prestigious professional circle would you agree that it is not only a position from which one exerts or produces knowledge but also power?

Power and self-identity, because they are thinking: "I have the ability to make those judgments," which is really important about the way people experience their expertise and power.

What are the qualities a good panelist should have? Is it his/her cognitive qualities or his/her moral demeanor that qualify him/her?

I think it is really a balance. Because if you only have the intellect and you do not have the interpersonal skills, you will be a failed panelist because you will not be able to convince anyone. The people will not be open to listening to your arguments. An individual here at Harvard comes to mind, who has this unbelievable combination. She is very intelligent but she is also very very kind and attentive and interested in people. It is a form of intelligence, social and emotional intelligence. However, if you only have someone who is nice there is no reason why this person should be in the panel. This form of "niceness" is not friendliness but it is more like a form of consideration for other people's opinions and feelings.

In your talk, you stressed the importance of what you call "balanced panel." Is this balance with regard to academic disciplines and areas of expertise or are race and gender also considered? Could you comment on this aspect of a panel's composition?

When the interviewees make references to "diversity," most often they make references to institutional diversity which means people who teach in four-year colleges, research universities and state universities, as well as people who are from New Mexico and Wisconsin and from the East Coast. Hence, in discussions about "diversity" people do not really refer to racial and gender diversity. It is a fact, however, that in those panels there are almost no people of color. The main issue is institutional and geographic diversity, so you would never have, for example, a panel of Ivy League professors.

I find very interesting the fact that Ivy League professors do not constitute a great part of these panels, them being the "gatekeepers," as you have suggested, of the American academia.

It would be un-democratic if you would only invite the representatives of the oldest, most prestigious universities. Otherwise it would be too inner-circle and the process would

lose legitimacy. Furthermore, there are many people who have that as an agenda, who really think that the Ivy League professors are looking too much for their own species.

What are the formal rules by which panelists abide? In what ways do panel deliberations follow principles analogous to those of deliberative democracy, as you have proposed?

The parallel is really there. Everyone is expected to contribute to the discussion in a free, non-coerced way and it is the balance of opinion that determines the common good. As a kind of dynamic, it is very Habermasian, if you will; the fact that it is supposed to be a rational discourse as opposed to an instrumental one. The parallel is obvious. It is intended to be a democratic process. It is obviously not a participatory democracy: it is a kind of aristocratic democracy because only those who have the expertise can express opinion.

Your approach obviously pays more attention to the processes through which excellence emerges and to the individual's role. However, I would also like to ask you about the extent to which the institutional mandates define the deliberations of the panels, in terms of formal rules, for instance, and about the extent of liberty that the panels are given.

The rules are never made explicit. It is presumed that everyone they invite to serve already knows the rules because it is kind of the same rules that apply in determining graduate admissions or hiring faculty. People are supposed to come very well-prepared, knowing the files, being able to engage in the deliberation where people make explicit very different perspectives. Through deliberation, collective wisdom is supposed to emerge. However, each of the competitions has distinctive sets of priorities. So if, for example, a competition has as a mandate to fund proposals that can have a public policy implications, the panelists will not be forced to take this into consideration, but policy implications is one of the considerations that they may take into consideration.

The panelists enjoy great liberty!

Yes indeed. If one wants to have something funded he/she can make an argument that uses the criteria that are privileged; originality, significance, feasibility, clarity, these are always at work. However, there are other criteria, which have to do with the mandates of the foundations. Panelists are highly reputed academics and their expertise is based on their individual expertise. In addition, it happens that the program officers are academics who did not get tenure. They do not have the same stature as the panelists, so they are not necessarily in a position to chastise the evaluators. They might decide not to re-invite people, an issue which is wholly under their jurisdiction, but they will generally not confront.

Does this affect the relation between program officers and panelists? Does it affect the level of respect that the officers receive and ultimately the deliberation process?

I would venture that panelists know that they have a different standing than the program officers, who are facilitators. Then again, if panelists want to be re-invited they might cultivate the program officer. Especially for people who teach at small liberal arts colleges, for whom serving on these panels is really a big deal, they might go out of their way to become friends with the program officer, who can have a complex relationship with the panelists.

Is there a dynamic relation between institutions, institutional mandates and the way panelist interact? Do you think that over the years panel procedures have influenced or have altered the agendas of the foundations?

They might ask the panelists for feedback about how things work and occasionally they do evaluations. I remember such an evaluation when I was studying the SSRC panel. Furthermore, they might also hire outside consultants to look into how they do peer review.

I was invited to do that at some point for the Paul and Daisy Soros Foundation. I remember commenting on the qualification of their panelists.

In general, the functioning of panels is really a very loosely structured process, very discretionary. There are many such issues when it comes to the American academic elite. This is really a case where experts are sovereign. University professors have a job with unbelievable freedom. Nobody looks over your shoulder and you are presumed to be competent until proven not, in part, because the mechanisms of selection are unbelievably stringent. Very few people can apply or qualify for the job, so the disciplining process has worked to its full extent before someone can be hired. One can know then that who you hire is extremely unlikely to engage in a whole bunch of reprehensible behaviors. Besides, we have to consider that so many people vetted them too.

Are these deliberation processes then comparable to other academic practices?

There are, but there are also important differences. If you hire an assistant professor or a senior colleague you know that you have to work with them, so there the interpersonal factors are more prominent. Here, they are just giving them money. Who gets the money will have very little impact on the panelists' personal life. Therefore, they can more easily focus on the proposal itself. Some of them even claim that the letters do not carry great importance because the letters are all grossly inflated.

You suggest that “universalism” is essential to the legitimacy of the process. In what ways do you employ the term, as opposed to particularism, for example?

What I meant by it is really the idea of applying the same rules to all, so it is about consistency and it is also about trying to bracket what particularistic relationships you might have with the applicant. If you are from Harvard, for example, and you have a Harvard applicant you go out of your way to consciously take notice that there is a possibility of bias and therefore you abstain or step back and try to look at the applicant with certain impartiality. It is also about abstracting the applicant from his/her content, so as not to privilege those who are more like you. It is a position of principle, which people do not necessarily follow in practice. This is of course a belief not shared by all. My French students would suggest that all this is nonsense and lies which Americans tell themselves in order to justify the production of this very elitism. In the French academic system, in contrast, it is rumored that all depends on who your dissertation advisor is and what relationship the dissertation advisor has with people who sit in the committee. I think there is a big difference between the two systems. In the American context, the official ideology empowers both the applicants and the panelists to do things that they wouldn't do otherwise. Someone in the English department, a post-colonialist scholar I was talking to yesterday, said he ranked at the very top of a list a proposal that was from a renaissance scholar just because he thought that it was the best, while acknowledging that by doing this he was voting for someone with whom he would have nothing in common. This kind of behavior is not geared towards protecting one's self-interest.

I would think that “unequal competition” is inherent in the university system. For instance, recently I happened to discuss the issue with a friend who is a professor and who has served as a panelist and he suggested that some universities extend to their students great help in writing their proposals. We are all aware that not all universities provide these kinds of services.

One of my respondents told me that people at Harvard never really get any help at all, because of the ratio of faculty to students is too low. However, at Stanford the students are able to go back to their faculty a few times with their proposal so they could do three drafts and the quality of the proposals would be much higher.

Your research focuses on the evaluation of interdisciplinary proposals by interdisciplinary panels. Could you describe some of the challenges an interdisciplinary proposal faces and then explain some of the challenges that panelists face?

None of the panelists has all the knowledge needed to evaluate an interdisciplinary proposal. If there is a proposal on sexuality in 19th century northern England, as a historian, I might know the history of northern England but I might not be familiar with the gender literature. You have panelists who come together, each mastering part of the expertise needed. They have to reach an agreement coming from very different perspectives.

The challenge of writing a good interdisciplinary proposal is that often people tend to think that there is an overreach and a shallowness. Reaching enough in order to be interesting but not overreaching, to the point where it becomes not convincing is the great challenge for an interdisciplinary proposal.

What qualifies a proposal as “interdisciplinary?” Is it the methodology, the choice of topic, a combination of the two?

I think it is dealing with a topic which traditionally has not been the object of research within a field. You need substantial knowledge about one field, methodological or theoretical tools from another and maybe an area study. If you study Mesopotamian history, for example, you have the area study, you have the discipline and you have the theoretical tools and if these come from three different places, being able to bring these together requires much more skill. If you have then panelists who do not have detailed knowledge about what has emerged out of these fields then it is really hard to make any judgment.

In relation to this, both in your talk and your chapter on “Paradigmatic Fairness,” you extensively used the term “disciplinary sovereignty.” Could you please explain the ways you employ the term and reflect upon the ways it facilitates the deliberation process as well as the challenges that it might present the panelists with and the fairness of the procedure?

The notion of sovereignty in this case means that the ultimate authority rests in the judge, the person who has the knowledge required to evaluate. The sovereign is the expert. The challenge is that people can become too self-serving in their relationship to their own discipline. It is the case for instance if there is only one anthropologist and he has a very peculiar view about what is a good anthropology proposal. One panelist, for instance, was very opposed to multi-sited research, that is research that starts from many sites, which is not the traditional anthropological canon. He was opposing many proposals, which was somewhat unfair, to the extent that many anthropologists are now doing multi-sited research.

Could “disciplinary sovereignty” challenge the democratic aspect of the deliberation process, since the decision might come down to expressing the opinion of a single individual?

As the deliberations proceed, panelists make up their own mind about how fair their colleagues or peers are. If there is a consensus that he/she is not very fair then they will decide not to apply the principle of “disciplinary sovereignty,” because they understand that everyone can have their own agenda. When we have a system that is expertise-based it cannot be democratic, to the extent that knowledge is not democratic. The whole purpose of the enterprise is to fund good work and in order to assess that you need to have the expertise, so there is this tension.

You suggest that “alliance formation,” “strategic voting” and “horse-trading” are tactics which panelists adopt without this challenging their collective belief in the legitimacy of the process. Could you elaborate on this?

These tactics do present challenges but my argument is that there might be no obvious alternative. For instance, you may have five fellowships to give and you are comparing fifteen people who are differently faulty and cannot be compared neatly on a scale of one to ten. What you need to do then, in order to convince others that the ones you think should win actually win, is to engage in “horse-trading.” Bear in mind also that these are practices introduced mostly towards the end of the process; if you have thirty awards to distribute, things are very open when you are distributing the tenth one or the fifteenth one or even the twentieth, because there are still many resources to go around.

You argue, and I would think that most people would agree, that scholars are immersed in academic networks where personal and intellectual affinities are built. In what ways can these affinities be bracketed and contained in order not to have an impact in the deliberation process?

People understand that this is not a process where “I will scratch your back if you scratch mine.” The way you relate to the others involves both a certain distance but also an openness. My argument concerns how panelists think it works and should work. It has also to do with whether on the panel they can find people with whom they can relate, with whom they share taste and understandings of what good work is. They might find themselves on a panel where they think all other panelists are somewhat unintelligent or they do not share their taste.

How should we understand “self-interest” on the part of a panelist? Partially, I understand this process as a way of positioning yourself within the field, within the academia.

It is really about promoting a kind of knowledge with which you identify and promoting people associated with that kind of knowledge, whether colleagues, students of colleagues, students of departments to which you are close. I think that the difference between my understanding and Bourdieu’s is that I don’t think there is a zero sum-game. I leave room for accepting pluralism and for the fact that panelists do not always think that their personal preferences should be trusted or rewarded. It is really a question of frame.

Being part of a diverse panel, both in terms of disciplinary and geographical orientation and having the opportunity to exercise judgment within a broader spectrum outside a single school or even a discipline, I would think that the panelists, implicitly or not, engage in a power struggle for recognition of their intellect and of the importance of their disciplinary approach.

You also have to think about this question in terms of strategy. If I am on a panel and you have proposals that emerge from all quarters of the discipline, if I were really to promote more culture proposals, let’s say, I would lose a lot of legitimacy. By definition, the best of each category should be funded if I am to maintain my legitimacy. The whole process has very much to do with being respected and maintaining your self-image as competent professional. Maybe the stake for me would be to have funded four instead of two cultural proposals. That would be acceptable for me and for others. However, this is how much gain I can get without losing my legitimacy. I could not get eight because then I would really lose my legitimacy, given what we know about the relative importance of a number of fields.

How often are the panelist invited back to join the same panel?

They rotate, although there are differences across funding panels. Normally, for each year half of the panel rotates. There is no point participating in a panel and behaving in ways that would be reprehensible, which would result in not being reinvited. If you have a professor who teaches at Columbia who behaves dishonorably it is very likely that people will take notice. The networks are very small.

It is rather clear that, as in any group effort, power dynamics play a role. In deliberation processes such as these we discuss, are these dynamics disruptive or they constitute a rather “natural order of things?” In this context, what exactly do we mean by power dynamics and how is power constituted?

In the chapter on “Pragmatic Fairness,” I talk about personalities, about the power people draw from the kind of institutions where they teach at, from their seniority or gender. It really has to do both with group dynamics and with how people’s characteristics influence, how much sway they have. Now, how it is constituted? I think a lot of it has to do with importing, within the context of the panel, external status orders that people know about: gender, institutional prestige, age. There are shared expectations about who the “alpha male” would be or the “alpha person” and if people want to challenge that, probably a senior white male would put up a fight. The question of how you can challenge this in a way that is acceptable is always up for grab and there might be a price to pay, depending on what kind of alpha senior white male you are dealing with. There is a chance, I think, that people might have a sense of what the natural order of things is and the proper sense of group positioning and who should be entitled to do what, which is all unspoken but is part of the status hierarchy.

I would think that this is an occasion where people not only affirm or impose themselves but can also lose legitimacy and power.

Yes, people are not given any determined amount of power. This is all negotiated. It is a negotiated order, in a Goffmanian way.

If “contextual ranking” is at the heart of the art of evaluating, as your analysis suggests, then what is the context within which the proposals are evaluated? The cognitive context of their discipline, the social context of the panelists’ particularisms or a new context emerging from the juxtaposition of the proposals considered?

What I have in mind is the fact that you never have the same group of proposals compared to one another. So there is a constant re-shuffling of the points of reference and it depends on topics, it depends on, sometimes, alphabetical order, it depends on the rankings produced prior to the meeting. The proposals ranked as Cs or As, for instance, are rather easy to be discarded and funded respectively. However, there will probably be another category of, let us say, B pluses or A minuses. There might also be one proposal, for example, on gender in contemporary Italy and there might be one on gender and welfare state in Sweden. In this case, these two will be judged the one against the other and the best emerges through comparison. It is true, however, that here is also the context of the network, the context of disciplinary cognition and the specific group dynamics. In my book, I have another chapter about disciplinary differences and disciplinary cultures of influence, which really talks about the cognitive context and how it varies across disciplines. These topics are handled on different levels in different chapters.

Are the criteria applied to graduate student competitions different from those applied to competitions for professionals, considering especially that the latter are

already part of the academic network and they may be judged by peers who work in competitive fields?

Even among the faculty, there is huge variation in the extent to which a name can be known because most junior people might not have reputation yet. For graduate students more emphasis is put on the project itself. Many people think that the letters are useless, because they are over-inflated. How much weight is put on past accomplishment depends on what stage of their career people are. Nevertheless, the quality of the proposal is the decisive component of an application or this is what most people say. Many panelists oppose taking into consideration reputation because people who have great reputations often turn in bad proposals. The good reputation helps a lot, if your proposal is very good. It is the logic of cumulative advantage, cumulative pieces of evidence of your excellence and the excellence of the project put together. It is interesting, because what you have is both the logic of the cumulative advantage and the logic of cumulative evidence, which work together.

Are students' resumes considered pieces of evidence? Can a resume or a letter of recommendation play a decisive role?

Certainly! If the individual has under review or published papers, presentations, grants, fellowships, breadth of experience. But then it also depends on who pays attention to what. A number of people, as I have mentioned, do not talk about the letters at all.

It seems that your research points to the direction of what you call "a pragmatic understanding of fairness," which I understand as anti-objectivist (to borrow another of your terms) but still legitimate. Where does the legitimacy of this procedure rest?

I think it would be in something like the people following the rules, which they believe give the process legitimacy, like not pushing for their students to be funded. If they behave in a way that they believe is universalistic then they uphold themselves that the legitimacy of the process rests in the interpersonal understanding, or the inter-subjective understanding of the process. It comes from their socialization as academics; it starts with these panelists being taught by their professors about how to handle things in a way that is fair.

I would think that the legitimacy rests on the shared belief of a more extensive network of people who in one way or another engage in that process; students, panelists, donors. Would you agree with that?

Exactly!

I understand that your study is not historical but if you would like to point to the direction of change, what changes could you observe in the ways that foundations and panelists operate, comparing let's say with twenty years ago, and in what ways can one challenge these practices?

You may think of the book by Jerome Karabel, *The Chosen*, which is about Ivy League universities. They had legitimacy, yet were very exclusive of Jews and this legitimacy was challenged historically in the courts. Asians at UC-Berkeley, where now they are the majority of the students, also benefited from legal change. The cultural conditions also, the Civil Rights movement, for instance, had a great effect on foundations' and panelists' practices. The criteria of evaluation are historically-laden.

Have you had cases where panelists themselves challenged a deliberation's outcome?

There are very few cases where there is a fight. In one case, there was an applicant from the humanities and she used the word "measure" in a proposal, and a political scientist got

really upset because she used the word but yet she did not show how she would actually measure, therefore, he suggested that she should not get the funding. Another panelist suggested that she used the word “measure” but that she did not mean it. There was a real conflict and he was accused of being an imperialist, a quantitative imperialist. I can’t remember how the program officer handled it. Probably the others contributed an opinion in order to avoid a decisional dead end.

I think that as a society we still believe in academia and the practices that consecrate it. Do you think that these deliberation processes reinforce these beliefs? Do they constitute another ritual for the collective production of belief in this system of the production of excellence?

Yes, but I am also sampling, if you will, on a dependent variable, in the sense that people who are called to serve in these committees are people highly committed to the sacred values of the academia. They are not people dropping out and starting bed-and-breakfast on the side, some kind of washed out academics. They are people who have strongly invested in what they are doing.

You have identified interdisciplinary panels as “sites where new rules of fairness are redefined, reinvented and slowly recognized.” Based on the research you conducted, inductively, what are the criteria you have identified that panelists actually use in order to judge the substantive quality of interdisciplinary proposals? Have you noticed new rules actually emerging, processes being redefined or re-invented?

Yes, for example the inter-disciplinarity that is so much valued today, especially in English, History or Cultural Anthropology did not exist thirty years ago. This is kind of a new interdisciplinary nexus. The humanities looked nothing like they look now forty years ago. If you think about sociology, there is also enormous change in how people are using network analysis, for instance. I think it changes just as the definition of good work changes; it is not static since it is not located into a static environment.

Do you think that over the years there have been changes on the way we do or do not value the importance of the subjective in any judgments we make, especially in cases of collective judgment such as this one we discuss here?

I do not know if it is more or less now. I think that there is greater awareness. Especially in debates about gender-related issues people are more aware about how socially entrenched interests lead to social reproduction. Maybe this is wishful thinking, I don’t know.

As an observer of the evaluation process, was your faith in the sacredness of this collective endeavor shaken? In what ways do you think it has changed you as a panelist?

I gave a talk on this where a young person told me something like that: “I find your project both very reassuring because you see how hard the panelists are working to make sure that they identify the best, you see them struggling. At the same time, however, people say things that are really appalling like ‘I really dance so we should fund this project on dance.’” The study showcases the worst and the best one can find in academia. I think for me what it has done is that it has directed me to a much more complex and I think objectivist view. I came to look at this by taking great distance, not as someone who is involved in it, although I teach graduate students and I evaluate all the time, with a kind of curiosity and equanimity. I really tried to objectify the process. It has been a lot of fun to engage people across the disciplines, all kinds of people like Homi Bhabha, people who live in very different intellectual worlds than I do. I also had many of my graduate students

read all the chapters to help me speak to that audience. I do not want to be Pollyannaish and naïve but I am amazed to see the effort that goes into producing legitimacy. Of course there are variations across panels. Not all the same rules prevail everywhere.

Would you say then that your faith is stronger in the whole process?

I do not know if it is stronger. I think that my understanding of what happens is much more complex and informed but it is not a matter of faith.

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