

PART IV: Current Challenges for Peer Reviewing: Towards More Open and Gender-Sensitive Peer Reviewing Practices in the SSH

A gender and geopolitical perspective on peer review

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Introduction

Gender biases in academic work have received a great deal of scholarly attention recently. The great majority of the extant research focuses on academic women's achievements; authors highlight gender differences in success to obtain a permanent position (Dubois-Shaik & Fuselier, 2017; Morley, 1999, Waaijer et al., 2016), or to complete high quantity and quality of publications (Kretschmer et al., 2012). Peer review plays an important role in the discussion of gender differences in academia. Academic progression and research in large are connected tightly to peer reviewing and even though peer reviewing promises to adhere only to academic quality (Roberts & Shambrook, 2012, p. 33), several biases in peer review have been identified in the literature but have also been equally questioned (for an overview, see Lee et al., 2013).

Many of these biases are relevant for gender. For example, Roberts and Shambrook (2012, p. 34) state that peer review is often seen as controlled by "elitists" or "gatekeepers" whose influence can be deemed as arrogant power mongering. According to the EU Commission's report "She Figures 2015", women publish fewer papers as corresponding authors (but in journals of similar prestige) than men and the gender gap in the funding success rate is decreasing but women's success rates are still lower than men's. Furthermore, the percentage of publications with a gender dimension remains low (with the highest score being 6.2% in the social sciences, see European Commission, 2016, p. 149). Both issues are often seen to be related to journal editorial policies and gender bias during the review process (GENDERACTION, 2019, p. 20). Helmer et al. suggest that women are underrepresented in the peer review process, and that editors of both genders operate with substantial same-gender preference (homophily) when appointing reviewers (Helmer et al., 2017, p. 1). Consequently, according to Budden et al., a double-blind peer review process can significantly increase the publication of female first-authored papers. The authors therefore suggest that this practice should be introduced widely (Budden et al, 2008, p. 4). This is considered important because research grants are also decided using peer review procedures and receiving grants or not can decide upon careers. Some studies show that men have on average statistically significantly greater odds of approval than women applying for grants (Bornmann et al., 2007, p. 234; Wennerås & Wold, 1997). Other studies suggest a gender bias in academic recruitment (van den Besselaar & Sandström, 2015; van den Brink et al., 2006). However, as the overview on the empirical literature on bias in peer review by Lee et al. (2013) shows, there is quite some counter evidence. Following the findings by Wennerås and Wold (1997), many studies could not replicate a gender bias in grant rewards (Bornmann & Daniel, 2006; Friesen, 1998; Mutz et al., 2012). The replication at the same institution as the original study found even a gender bias in the other direction (Sandström & Hällsten, 2008). Borsuk et al. (2009) showed in their experimental study that changing the gender of authors does not influence the judgement by peers. Also, they did not find support

for the gender-homophily thesis but rather that female post-docs are the most critical reviewers. Similarly, Husu and Cheveigné (2010), when discussing gatekeeping of excellence in research funding, state that increasing the proportion of women among gatekeepers of research funding does not necessarily or automatically lead to higher success rates for women applicants, nevertheless the a more equal representation among gatekeepers on women's participation in research may have a more indirect positive impact, not least by providing opportunities for women to become integrated in important networks (Husu & Cheveigné, 2010, p. 43). Van den Besselaar and Sandström (2015) did not find a difference in citation impact between papers by women and men but found a difference in performance, i.e. the quantity of papers produced.

Lee et al. (2013, p. 8) conclude that there is not much evidence for gender bias in peer review, however, other biases might apply. Meta-analyses show that controlled for different factors, such as discipline, seniority, reputation of the institution, no gender bias persists (Marsh et al., 2009; Mutz et al., 2012). Similarly, controlling for research stage, Ley and Hamilton (2008) do not find a gender difference in funding success rates. At the same time, it is still obvious that women are underrepresented at almost all stages of academic careers, the higher the scarcer women are. This points to the conclusion that while there is no evidence for a direct discrimination of women in peer review, there seems to be an interaction between different biases: Less money is granted to SSH disciplines, researchers affiliated to high reputation institutions or such with higher ranks receive better evaluations in peer review. At the same time, women are more likely to be active in SSH disciplines, are more likely to be at lower levels in the academic career and work at institutions with lower reputation. Ceci and Williams (2011) therefore argue women are not being denied grants and journal publications because of their sex, but rather due primarily to factors surrounding family formation and childbearing, gendered expectations, lifestyle choices, and career preferences. These factors might well reflect self-selection but also discrimination – yet not strictly within the academic realm but rather within society at large. Hence, they argue for shifting the focus from investigating bias in selection processes to studying social processes that pull women into inferior positions. This is even more important as the type of studies presented above has several theoretical and methodological shortcomings. Here, we point to four shortcomings: first, the studies start with the assumption that disagreement between peers is normatively not desirable (as notes Lee et al., 2013), second, most of them do only look at funding or publishing rates but not at performance (as criticises van den Besselaar & Sandström, 2015), third – and related to that –, outcomes of non-funded or non-published research cannot be compared to funded or published research (as pointed out by Mutz et al. 2015), fourth, the focus is on the reviewers, editors or funders but not on the researchers (as noted by Rowley & Scaffi, 2017). Lee et al. (2013) argue that while impartiality of peer review is seen as important in ensuring both consistency and meritocracy in the evaluation process, such expectations on peer review might be questionable and ask whether impartiality should be upheld as an ideal for peer review altogether, as peer reviewing, editorship and evaluation serve as a social function in negotiating and improving academic quality (Lee et al., 2013, p. 13). This, then, asks for further investigations in how peer review is seen by scholars and how they react on and interact with peer review and whether there are gender differences in the perceptions of and reactions to being reviewed.

Rowley and Sbaffi (2018) report on survey research on scholars' attitudes towards peer review. They find that, in general, gender was not seen as a source of bias, but region and seniority were seen as potential sources of bias (Rowley & Sbaffi, 2018, p. 652). However, their methodology is highly questionable ("The confidence interval (at a 95% confidence level) for any one question is 1.18", Rowley and Sbaffi, 2018, p. 647; note that means and standard deviations, and consequently standard errors, were widely different across variables). What has rarely been studied before is the scholars' opinion on peer review from a gender perspective, which could be the key in resolving female academics' lower scientific production and could lead towards a better inclusion. Of high interest in this context is how young scholars perceive the process as, first, bias is shown to be small at the early career stage and it is at this stage when scholars will decide on whether they want to stay or leave academia, both of which is important regarding later gender bias (van den Besselaar & Sandström, 2015). Thus, in the following, we will present first results of a Europe-wide project on Early Career Investigator's experiences with peer review, at the beginning of their career, struggling to enter to academia and secure a place in a very competitive system. On this path they are encountering the peer review process, in various forms, but mostly as the ones who are submitting papers in peer-reviewed journals or applying for various grants and being exposed to potential biases in this process. The following presentation of the findings is to be considered as exploratory as we hope to raise interest towards this topic for further research investigations.

Methods and Sample

In March 2017, ENRESSH's Special Interest Group on Early Career Investigators (SIG ECI¹⁰), agreed to conduct a qualitative research in seventeen European countries, namely Belgium, Bosnia & Herzegovina, Croatia, Cyprus, Finland, France, Latvia, Lithuania, Montenegro, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Serbia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Switzerland and Malta. In each country, semi-structured interviews were conducted. The interview grid was developed by the SIG members, with the aim of analysing the narratives of young researchers about their early careers, more specifically, how certain "moments of evaluation" (such as doctoral exams, dissertation defence, post-doc recruitment, academic job application processes, research activities and peer review) played a role in their career development. Each of the interviewers conducted up to four interviews from his or her home country. The interviews were conducted in native and/or state languages of the interviewees to avoid selection bias through language and they were later translated into English language.

For this short contribution, 48 interviews were analysed. There were 28 female respondents (58%) and 20 male respondents (42%). Not all interviews contained data on peer review, as the interviewers let the respondents talk freely, therefore, some of the questions were unintentionally skipped, respectively were not important enough for the respondent to

¹⁰ George Afxentiou, José Gabriel Andrade, Katya De Giovanni, Stefan De Jong, Gemma Derrick, Rita Faria, Haris Gekic, Bradley Good, Emanuel Kulczycki, Karolina Lendák-Kabók, Stephanie Mignot, Reetta Muhonen, Filippo Nereo, Martin Nuhliček, Michael Ochsner, Antun Plenковиć, Stevo Popovic, Jolanta Sinkuniene, Julia Stukalina, Mimi Urbanc and Marc Vanholsbeek.

emerge during the interview, or simply the interviewers were more focused on other questions from the interview grid and skipped the question about peer review.

Preliminary findings

In the following, we present preliminary results from analysing the interviews regarding gender and geopolitical differences in the perception of peer review. These are two important topics as gender bias in peer review is a strongly debated issue, while geopolitical differences are a confirmed bias of peer review (Lee et al., 2013, pp. 6–8). Both can be studied with our sample as there is sufficient variance between gender and geopolitical location, specifically Eastern and Western Europe.

The interviewees see peer review predominantly as a suitable way of advancing in the scientific career and improving research or publications. Yet, both male and female respondents mentioned several negative aspects. Given the vivid scholarly discussion on bias in peer review, we will start with presenting the negative aspects and end with the positive aspects.

Negative aspects of peer review

First, we present a general criticism from a geopolitical context towards peer review, which was mentioned by both men and women from the Eastern European countries.¹¹ Respondents in Eastern European countries report two different, if not conflictive, perspectives on geopolitical biases: On the one hand, the respondents (both male and female) were complaining about nepotism and local networks which are dominant in either small countries (like Slovenia), where the scholars are mainly familiar with each other's work and peer review practices, or in Bosnia and Herzegovina and Croatia where they are criticising the national system and emphasizing that there is a need for “Western system”, which is presumably more fair and objective. On the other hand, some respondents criticised the international peer review system or editorial practices as well, which they suspect being biased against Eastern European researchers.

In Western European countries, the discrepancy between local and international peer review focused on topics or language rather than evaluation bias. The hurdle between passing local peer review vs international peer review was attributed to differences in relevance of topics at the local and international level, leading to the problem of career advancement if one focuses on local relevance or if one publishes in local languages rather than in English. Contrary to the respondents in Eastern Europe, the respondents in Western Europe interpret this as a perverse effect of science policy favouring international research in English rather than local research, while Eastern Europeans feel a discrimination even if they publish in English on internationally relevant topics.

Regarding gender-specific views on peer review, we will start with the male respondents who are more critical towards peer review than female respondents are. On the one hand,

¹¹ Eastern and Central European countries are the ones geographically and geopolitically considered as Eastern Europe; more specifically, they are the ones who accessed the EU with the 2004 enlargement or later (Croatia, Latvia, Lithuania, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia) and the ones who are considered to be part of Western Balkans and are not EU members, i.e. Bosnia & Herzegovina, Montenegro, and Serbia. Western European countries are the ones geographically and geopolitically considered as Western Europe (Switzerland) and/or as “the old member states” of the EU, i.e. Belgium, Finland, France, the Netherlands, Portugal.

male respondents believe that peer review can be biased and some of them have a strongly negative viewpoint, adding that the expertise of the peer reviewers is questionable, even to the point that they are not accepting the reviewer's comments. Men are emphasizing that good relations are needed to get the paper reviewed, concluding that this form of evaluation may even damage the paper's quality. Among the arguments against peer review, other male respondents point out that network is of great importance, as well as that the quality of reviewing is very variable and depends on the journal's editor. Finally, according to some of the respondents, the process slows down the development of new ideas. It is noteworthy to mention that all of the male respondents already had some experience with peer review. In a general sense, male respondents were much more critical towards peer review, from the ones who answered the question about peer review five reported more positive aspects of peer review and thirteen more negative aspects about it.

Female respondents share the opinion with their male counterparts, that peer review is often influenced by interpersonal relationships (between senior researchers). They agree with their male peers that the comments are sometimes irrelevant and misleading. Female respondents question the slowness and the long process of peer review, that requires a good command of English. The main gender difference, however, lies in the effect reviews have on the ECIs. Peer review seems to affect the confidence of young female researchers negatively, while this was not the case of male interviewees. For instance, some of them were very surprised to get criticised for something she invested a lot of effort in and some of the female respondents expressed their disappointment with the process. The second gender difference concerns a more positive stance toward peer review, i.e. eleven female respondents had a generally positive attitude towards peer review whereas twelve mentioned more negative aspects. Furthermore, some female respondents never had any experience with peer-review, which is important to note, as peer review gives credibility to scientific production.

Positive aspects of peer review

Both male and female respondents reported also positive experiences with peer review. As stated by some of the respondents, they perceive peer review, all things considered, still better than any other evaluation procedure.

Despite being conscious about the reported negative aspects, many male respondents point out that the process is of great importance for the improvement of a paper, and that one can learn a lot along the way. The process is very often fair and makes young researchers progress faster by having constructive comments to rely on.

Similarly, female ECIs point out that peer review is not always perfect, but very often fair, useful and reasonable. They often find the reviewer's comments very useful. In order to make the process more objective, one of the respondents suggested an internationalisation of the peer review process, pointing out that collegial peer review should be replaced by fairer peer review.

Conclusions

Peer review seems to be an important moment of evaluation for both male and female respondents. The majority of them believes that this sort of evaluation is the most appropriate way to improve the quality of the paper or to evaluate grant applications. However, both men and women perceive the process as dependent on interpersonal relations in some

contexts, dominated by local networks, sometimes even biased and unfair, and slowing down the process of publication. There was a clear geopolitical difference when both men and women from Eastern Europe were criticising national peer review and idealising the “Western style” of peer-review. At the same time, they were mentioning that the level of English was acting as a discriminatory factor, while scholars from Western non-English speaking countries mentioned language bias not as a discriminatory factor but rather an effect of science policy favouring topics relevant in the Anglo-Saxon context. It is interesting to point out, that neither male nor female respondents mentioned a gender bias in peer review, they were solely concentrating on perceptions of and responses to the peer review process.

While the ECI scholars did not mention gender aspects of peer review, their reflections and reactions to peer review nevertheless revealed important gender differences in how peer review influences them and their research practice. Female respondents seem to have less experience with the process whereas all the male interviewees had previous experience with it. Moreover, female scholars are affected to a greater extent by the comments than male researchers, who show more confidence and sometimes disagreement with the reviewers. Male ECIs seem to develop their standpoints and build their own profile in the sometimes conflict-ridden interaction with reviews, whereas female ECIs seem to try to follow the suggestions of the reviewers and even question themselves if they disagree.

We thus find empirical evidence for the hypotheses formulated by Ceci and Williams (2011) arguing that the reasons for gender differences in academic publication and positions might lie outside the peer review process. However, our results suggest that they do indeed not necessarily lie in discriminatory practices by reviewers but nevertheless are not completely outside of the peer review process: rather, the way female researchers react to – and maybe interact with – reviews or moments of evaluation might lead to different success rates in academic careers. Furthermore, discrimination appears on the level of topics as well, be it through gender or region-specific ways of approaching research questions. This might lead to seemingly self-discriminatory behaviour, but the roots lie deeper in society, for example in socialisation, gender norms or geopolitical hierarchy. For example, measures for helping women reconcile family and work in academia might not help increasing the share of women in higher positions as it might have adverse effects: If it is easier for women to reconcile, it is the women taking responsibility for caring for the children as men do not have the same options. At the same time, a notion of “quota female professor” can emerge if policies are favouring women. Besides helping women entering the work sphere, it seems to be important to support (or push) men to take more responsibility at home. Besides the conclusions in line with Ceci and Williams (2011), our results suggest, however, that it is also important to not mask gendered or localised ways of prioritising topics or reactions to evaluations behind general societal developments. Such gender and geopolitical issues need to be addressed in evaluation practices and in research on evaluation.

In sum, our preliminary results report on geopolitical differences in peer review and a gendered perception of and response to peer review. We therefore argue that instead of focusing almost exclusively on analysing impartiality of peer review that comes with methodological but also conceptual problems, as shown in the introduction (see also Lee et al., 2013), and besides monitoring relative representation of women or other discriminated groups in certain positions, more research should investigate how researchers at different

stages of their career react to selection mechanisms and how peer review can be enhanced to improve research and to help building an academic identity and academic careers. On the one hand, academics should be better trained to provide useful reviews and to interpret reviews in a constructive way. On the other hand, one should de-mystify peer review as an impartial, objective quality assessment and rather acknowledge its gatekeeping and social functions that need to be actively and critically negotiated between different actors in academia. Furthermore, research should investigate peer review of interdisciplinary research where disciplinary differences between research and reviewing practices can lead to similar ways of (self-)discrimination, for example of SSH researchers. Awareness of the social functions of peer review and their active negotiation will be an important issue to be addressed in the future for a better inclusion of Eastern European and female scholars of different disciplines, and especially the combination of the three, in the European Research Area because also forms of self-discrimination and discriminations outside evaluation practices can lead to inefficient selection processes.

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ENRESSH Work Group 1

Overview of Peer Review Practices in the SSH

ENRESSH Report

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Executive summary

Peer review is an important method of research evaluation, and it seems that the only adequate way to evaluate SSH research involves some form of peer review. Even if bibliometrics and other quantitative ways of evaluation may provide information on some aspects of SSH research like productivity and publication strategies of research units, metrics-based indicators should be used with caution in SSH due to low coverage of SSH fields in the standard publication databases and a mismatch between dimensions of quality as defined by peers and standard bibliometric indicators. Still, peer review faces many issues and challenges. This report identifies the challenges particularly relevant for the SSH, such as different and thus often conflicting research paradigms or epistemological styles of reviewers and applicants or authors; difficulty in many SSH disciplines to define and evaluate research methodology compared to STEM disciplines; the lack of the idea of linear progress and a much longer time span necessary to evaluate academic impact of publications; the diversity of publication outputs and specific importance of books or monographs; the importance of local languages; challenges related to recent developments in research and its evaluation related to growing interdisciplinarity and the Open Science agenda. To this, the general challenges of peer review are added, such as the risk of gender bias, conservative bias, workload for all parties involved.

The report concludes that peer review fulfils different functions and that peer review practices not only need to acknowledge different disciplinary particularities but also their evaluative context. Rather than playing metrics and peer review off against each other, the focus should be on their optimal use and combination within different evaluation situations. This is especially important when it concerns the SSH because the disciplines falling under this umbrella term share the concurrency of different paradigms and a context-dependent, sometimes interpretative mode of knowledge generation and the use of a wide range of dissemination channels. This leads to a particular challenge regarding the burden of reviewers because SSH disciplines often act in a local context in national languages and include small disciplinary communities.

The SSH disciplines should develop their own ways to adequately evaluate their research, and peer review takes an important part in that. The past has shown that automatically copying evaluation procedures from STEM disciplines did not always work out well. However, the SSH community is well resourced to analyse and remediate the current tensions in research policies between funders' expectations of societal impact and the value of academic autonomy, between the ambition of mainstreaming of SSH research and the care for specific SSH methods and practices, and not least the threatened legitimacy of science in the post-factual society. The task of the SSH community should not only be to defend the integrity of scholarly disciplines, but to contribute to the development of new practices of research assessments that may build bridges between different communities of researchers and between the world of research and society at large.

Keywords

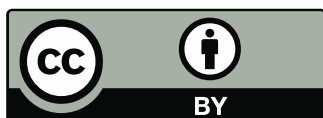
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