Subversive linguistic conventions in funding panel decision-making: A team level study

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Introduction

This paper presents the decision-making processes of business funding panels. The research brings together the literature on small group practices and panel-based judgement, something that has received little empirical scrutiny of its processes. The panels are the decision-making unit for each stage of a formal process that distributes millions of pounds in startup funding to UK businesses every year. The significance of the research lies in the insights it offers on a practice that is commonly deployed in highly instrumental settings (such as job interviews, research grant funding and probation/performance reviews), yet rarely scrutinised within organisation studies.

Judging panels present several characteristics that make them considerably different from those taking place within settled organisational environments as part of the normal work course (e.g. Rogelberg et al., 2007; Scott et al., 2012). Specifically, judges come from diverse organisations representing diverse sectors and industries, are likely to have diverse competencies and represent a wide range of views. They are also less likely to suffer from "groupthink" (Janis, 1982; Olbrecht & Bornmann, 2010).

Whilst the aforementioned group characteristics as well as the social dynamics taking place within them are not considered in organisational decision-making (see: Grant et al., 2000; Van Arensbergen et al., 2014), they have been widely researched in the social psychology of peer-review panels (Johnson, 2008; Langfeldt, 2001, 2004; Olbrecht et al., 2007; Thorngate et al., 2009) and, to a lesser extent, in the literature on cultural sociology of expert panels (Lewandowska & Smolarska, 2020). Therefore, we draw on these bodies of work as our conceptual lens.

The literature on cultural sociology has considered both the power dynamics taking place among panel members (Lewandowska & Smolarska, 2020) as well as how evaluations of symbolic goods are made (Beljean et al., 2015; Lamont, 2012), whereby business ideas can be

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considered symbolic goods. Despite this attention, how power, status and hierarchy impact on group decisions has been relatively overlooked according to Mannix and Sauer (2006). Opportunities to observe such contexts in depth and over a sustained period are hard to come by, particularly in the business environment, due to sensitivity over access to proprietary intellectual property, practical restrictions and discomfort at being observed, and these challenges underpin Olbrecht and Bornmann's (2010) call for empirical studies of panel review processes.

Methods

The project began in 2018, being given privileged access to the panel decision-making process, and has built a dataset of 110 charted funding pitches with follow-up Q&A, 39 panel observation sessions with field diaries and reflections, 38 in-depth interviews with competition applicants, two in-depth interviews with judges, and three in-depth interviews with the competition organisers.

The study uses linguistic ethnography as its methodological basis and seeks to situate the practices of the panels within the broader social structures of power and influence that the judges are representative of. Maybin and Tusting (2011, p.12) note that, "[t]he challenges of bringing together linguistic and social theoretical frameworks of explanation are formidable." The panel observations themselves form the core ethnographic work, using fieldnotes. These fieldnotes represent a blending of description and analysis whereby they are produced to record the "units, criteria and patterning of a community" (Hornberger, 1995, p.238), but they also contain a 'voice' since records are "[S]elective, purposed, angled, voiced, because they are authored" (Emerson et al., 1995, p.105). The recorded interviews then give a chance to scrutinise the participants' lived experience of the events observed, offering an account of their perspective and enriching the interpretation of the observations.

Following the convention in ethnographic research to make the *familiar seem strange* (Copland & Creese, 2015), the work has allowed distinct patterns and conventions to be identified. Judges in these panels are required to reach consensus over the funding award decision and they do so through mutual social exchange (Olbrecht & Bornmann, 2010). We consider the coalescing of linguistic and social practices and expose how the performance of this social exchange reproduces structures of authority and power among relative strangers.

Initial Findings

The following description of findings emerge principally from our observations and reflective notes, triangulated where relevant via our direct contact with the competition applicants, organisers and judges. Below is a discussion of four key findings (individual credibility, establishing a hierarchy, the preparation paradox, the expert paradox), followed by a short summary of some others that are emerging.

Individual Credibility

Considerable attention of the panel members is devoted towards establishing their own legitimacy and credibility. An impact of this was that the job of the panel manifested as a secondary objective for many judges. Instead, the panel discussions were used as a vehicle for establishing credibility with peers. Therefore, a discussion about an application could

often not move far beyond semantic exchanges. This brought with it a common reliance on a subjective basis for evaluation. Apparent judgements were often quickly transitioned into a personal anecdote or a CV vignette, such as: "I used to be a consultant in this area so…" or even "I have a very good friend who does this…". This is interpreted as being a posturing device for the benefit of establishing legitimacy with other panel members.

Establishing a Hierarchy

Panel exchanges were suffused with the polite, indirect and unsolicited negotiation of a hierarchy. The hierarchy was then implicitly harnessed throughout the judges' deliberations to legitimise decisions, or for individuals to withdraw from contributing (on the grounds of not being identified as an expert on the topic). This typically manifested as polite reciprocal affirmation of status, such as "*you're far more qualified than me to judge this one*", "*no, you're the expert here.*", or at the beginning of the day, "*well we'll leave all the technology-based ones to you then…*" This polite negotiation formed informal hierarchies of expertise that gave the panel members a felt sense of legitimacy in their decision making and determined implicitly who was 'responsible'. However, this often undermined or bypassed open discussion and robust group consensus. This trend characterised an underlying conceit of the role of hierarchy and its relation to the entitativity of the panel. Because the individual members were relying on the appearance of legitimacy from a hierarchy in the absence of developing collective responsibility, they shared a synthetic sense of having followed a robust process, whilst simultaneously corrupting the 'sovereignty' of the panel as an entity.

The Preparation Paradox

All judges would receive the candidates' applications in advance, but it was apparent that some had not done the preparation. Olbrecht and Bornmann (2010, p.294) note the common "undesired group effect" of a portion of panel members not being prepared. Paradoxically, we find that the most vocal panel members were overwhelmingly those who had not 'done their homework'. In interviews with the competition organisers, they noted this trend, recalling specific judges who they could tell had not read the applications, yet would be a dominant voice in discussions. Although our study is not considering gender as a specific analytical focus, there was a pronounced gender divide in this trend, women would often join panels with evidently diligent preparation and then be spoken over by unprepared men throughout the day.

The Expert Paradox

Regularly, an expert (informally elected by the hierarchy negotiations described above) would set out a categorically negative evaluation in a way that predicated their judgement on their status. In one panel, when judging a vegan food product, a judge (who was vegan) discredited the application on the basis that they had "*never seen or heard of this product, so it can't be making any traction*". We contend that by being singled-out as the expert, a judge is able to appeal to their bestowed authority without needing to substantiate their position or be held accountable by the rest of the panel. This meant that when the panel deferred to the expert, the application invariably was dismissed and thus there was a sense of paradox since the person deemed best placed to make a judgement rarely substantiated it. We see a link with the practice of establishing credibility here, since the opportunity to appeal to this bestowed authority served as a means of further legitimising one's position by being invited to materially exercise their authority. Therefore, the dynamics of the decision-making process

has actively diminished the robustness of the decision because the rest of the panel has deligitimised itself to the extent it cannot challenge or question the identified expert. This paradox is intriguing because there is a series of linguistic events that evidently *feel* robust and fair to the individual panel members, yet as this process plays out the ability for the panel to operate as a group diminishes progressively. We see this as almost a countervailing cousin to groupthink, where a sub-optimal group dynamic leads to a decision that the group 'believes' is optimal, yet is rendered sub-optimal by the very process that produced the belief.

Other Findings

Other findings to emerge from the study are:

Contribution Momentum: Once someone had been 'listened to' during the discussion, they would import that legitimacy into later discussions. This would often result in them entering into a discussion but with seemingly less substantive reasons to do so.

Make it up and discredit it: When a panel is struggling to understand something, they 'make up' what they think the applicant means and then they discredit the proposal. When we observed the linguistic overture of "I think what they're doing is…" we knew it was likely that we were about to witness the panel rejecting an application.

'I don't get it': When someone says, "I don't get it", they are setting out a position to discredit. 'I don't get it' communicates a judgement that if they do not understand then it is unlikely to be a viable proposition.

Conflicts of Interest: Another prevailing trend was the grey area of 'conflicts of interest'; when a panel member declared a conflict, they tended to continue to contribute to discussions despite the conflict. At the end of the day when final decisions were being made, they often made an effort to advocate on behalf of the business for which they had declared an interest.

Conclusion

Our initial discussions in response to the data revolve around ideas of the epistemic stance of the panel members. The manifest dominant stance of most judges is on their own individual epistemic sovereignty and of concern for their legitimacy within the group. 'Entitativity', according to Campbell (1958), suggests that in 'optimising tasks', a panel is likely to be highly entitative, yet our findings suggest that there can be a difference between the way a panel thinks of itself and its material linguistic and social practice. There is a relationship between the motivation to assert and establish oneself within a group and the prevalence of relying on subjective reasoning or circumstantial authority. This relationship stands to debase or diminish the decision-making process and potentially disempower the panel as a group that is ostensibly trying to optimise its ability to use consensus and discussion as a core element of its practice. Although some of the constituent parts of these findings are evidenced elsewhere in the literature, we are developing an understanding of how the decision-making process plays out in practice and how this can build a shared illusion of robustness whilst simultaneously diminishing the work of the panel through subtly subversive sociolinguistic conventions. There are strong performative and interactive forces that preclude the panel from functioning as a group, yet there are interventions that could be developed to contain the prevailing dynamics that currently: (1) privilege the loudest and most unconstructive voices as opposed to the most constructive opinions, (2) appeal to situational authority as

opposed to considered evaluation, and (3) are open to explicit corruption and oppression as opposed to implicit transparency and fairness.

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