

Gender Equality and Social Justice in Funding ‘European Excellence’: The Case of the European Research Council

Barbara Hoenig

Department of Sociology, University of Graz

Abstract. The starting point of this small study is the assumption of a ‘structural ambivalence’ (Merton 1976) between scientific excellence and gender equality and social justice as cultural goals of the European Research Area which occasionally are seen as conflicting values instead of appreciating them as fundamental preconditions of achieving ground-breaking research. Taking the case of the European Research Council (ERC) as an example, and combining qualitative and quantitative methods of social research, the paper empirically scrutinizes norms and strategies of the ERC’s gender policy and its structural effects in improving gender equality and social justice in funding of top researchers. Findings show how the ERC, despite its normative commitment to equality, latently perpetuates the idea of excellence and equality as competing values. Nevertheless, the ERC’s most recent awareness-raising strategies at least partly contribute to eliminating some gender inequalities inherent in its institutional processes and public science systems at large. Moreover, the paper provides a useful conceptual framework and an appropriate methodology for analysing the role of gender and social justice in funding for excellence initiatives in European, and global, science.

Keywords: gender equality, social justice, scientific excellence, research funding, European Research Council

1 The Problem: Structural Ambivalence in Gendering ‘Excellence’ in the European Research Area¹

The European Union enjoys a long tradition of promoting policies and strategies for realizing gender equality in the labour market and in political representation. In the area of science and research, based on meritocratic principles, more recent funding for ‘excellence’ initiatives began to systematically combat stereotypes and biased evaluation procedures among the scientific community. Nevertheless, scientific excellence as cultural goal of science is still often perceived as contradicting those of

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gender equality and social justice instead of considering them fundamental preconditions for achieving innovative research.

The notion of 'structural ambivalence', as defined in the structural tradition of the sociology of science (Merton 1976), designates conflict or dissent between proposed cultural values, norms and goals of a given society. When applied to the scientific community, we can refer to conflicting values of the ethos of meritocratic public science versus an increasing marketization of science in contemporary academic capitalism (Nowotny 2011). This paper starts from the assumption of structural ambivalence between scientific excellence, on the one hand, and gender equality and social justice, on the other, as fundamental norms of public science systems in Europe. More particularly, it scrutinizes its complex entanglements from a conceptual, methodological and empirical perspective, taking the European Research Council (ERC), the European Research Area's (ERA) most important supranational funding institution, as an exemplary case. In order to assess structural change in the ERA, the paper investigates how and to what extent the ERC realizes its own goals of gender equality, as articulated in its gender equality plans.

The ERC is innovative in its supranational institutional structure for research funding, reshuffling relations between the European Commission and the scientific community and enacting a strong normative impact on the national research funding landscape. It is the ERC's cultural, or normative, influence upon public science at large, which is emphasized here, and what also creates the need for developing a conceptual framework and an appropriate methodology for scrutinizing and critically reflecting its wider impact upon the science system. European research funding is particular insofar it provides new opportunities to influence a funding landscape's institutions and objectives, criteria and procedures, hitherto predominantly organized at national level. Apart from the question of who proves successful in the international competition for funding, new cultural norms of scientific excellence are established that are consequential for *all* members of the scientific community.

Equal opportunities in access to research funding are both an important precondition for and an integral part of the cultural legitimacy of public science. Researchers' structural conditions and opportunities for realizing ambitious goals of scientific excellence, however, are less likely to be considered in public discourse. Taking public funding of basic research as an example, the paper examines the relationship of equal opportunities and excellence. The ERC, representing an excellence initiative at European level, is analysed with regard to how it constructs gender equality goals in relation to the notion of scientific excellence.

Conceptually, the paper outlines a structural explanatory model for analysing the role of gender in European research funding that is anchored in the structural sociology of science (Merton 1968, 1973). It can fruitfully be applied to understanding the culturally

normative 'gendered substructure' of the ERA's multilevel system and for assessing structural change initiated by establishing gender equality plans. The model reconceptualizes the interdependence of different structural levels in the scientific system at large. The potential conflict between the ERA's cultural structure of proposed norms and their actual realization in the social structure of science is regarded as crucial measure for assessing the nature and extent of structural change.

Methodologically, the study proposes to compare the ERC's gender equality plans with empirical data on its actual realization. A combination of qualitative and quantitative research methods is applied for analysing the ERC's equality plans in researchers' structural representation, scientific careers, cognitive problem choice, and its intersection with notions of social justice as well. More particularly, a documentary analysis of the ERC's first decade's gender equality plans is contrasted with quantitative ERC statistics on funded projects and with own findings of curriculum vitae analyses based on a sample of n=601 top researchers in their roles of ERC panellists and/or grantees.

Empirically, comparative data on the ERC's gender equality plans and its actual institutional processes are useful in assessing how and to what extent any structural change with regard to gender equality were effectively initiated by these in the last years. They also set legal and institutional boundaries for research performing organisations such as European universities.

The paper starts with defining gender equality and social justice in the current ERA and the ERC and the status of research on it from an explicit gender perspective (part 2). Chapter 3 develops a conceptual framework based on the structural tradition of the sociology of science for systematically analysing the cultural, social and cognitive structure of the ERA with respect to gender equality and social justice. The applied research design for assessing structural change is specified in Chapter 4, results are presented and discussed in Chapter 5 and followed by provisional conclusions.

2 Gender Equality and Social Justice in European Research

Funding: State of Research

The history of European science policy was always accompanied by conflict or ambivalence between different interests of members of the European Community. While North-Western countries have emphasized the competitive excellence idea from the 1980s onwards, the notions of transnational collaboration and cohesion found more resonance within the Mediterranean countries that were also successful in addressing the social sciences and humanities as part of the new Research Framework

programmes (Guzzetti 2009; Hoenig 2017). That underlying structural ambivalence of European funding policies was enforced when in 2000 the ERA was called into life both for strengthening transnational collaboration and for increasing Europe's competitiveness in a global international division of labour.

2.1 The Case of the European Research Council

The ERC has been established in 2004 as an institutional instrument in order to strengthen the ERA's economic competitiveness and to realize its political objectives articulated in the Lisbon Strategy. The ERC installs a new governance level of research funding 'above' nationally defined public science systems, in order to promote groundbreaking research of individual researchers in all scientific fields. Exceptional quality or scientific excellence is regarded as sole criterion for evaluating proposals by panels of international experts. From the new programme period in 2014 onwards, the ERC's focus on 'excellence through competition' (Winnacker 2008) has had a strong impact on all initiatives of European research funding. ERA's more recent re-interpretations (EC 2020b, 2020c) explicitly underscore that the 'principle of excellence, which entails that the best researchers with the best ideas can obtain funding, remains the cornerstone for all investments' under the ERA. This is important insofar the approach represents a normative shift from strengthening social cohesion, cooperation and coordination among the ERA's members towards an increasing differentiation and stratification of individual researchers as well as their institutions. Since public research funded by nationally defined household subsidies increasingly gets under pressure, researchers and their institutions cherish great expectations towards European funding.²

2.2 Gender and the ERC: State of Research

While science and research always entail a strong orientation towards scientific competition and the creation of new knowledge, critics often claim a too narrow interpretation of what constitutes scientific excellence. Moreover, normative claims gender equality and social justice, as precondition of realizing scientific excellence, often strongly diverge from its actual implementation at organizational level (e.g. van den Brink & Benschop 2012; Husu & de Chevigné 2010; Dahmen & Thaler 2017). What does an enforced excellence-principle mean for science policies and strategies of gender equality, diversity and social justice? How does the ERC, claiming to

² Moreover, in the last two decades funding for excellence initiatives emerged at national level as well, while simultaneously reflecting historically grown and distinct path-dependent public science systems with varying ideas on gender equality as well. The relationship of national and European research funding and the relation of excellence and equal opportunities both have found rather little attention in the research community so far (but see Hoenig 2020).

represent European excellence, define the cultural goal, norm and values of scientific excellence vis-à-vis the goals of gender equality and equal opportunities? How does the ERC publicly justify its funding system with regard to these norms? Is there any empirical evidence for the success of its gender policies? How can its potential impact upon public science system be explained in analytic and methodological terms?

Equal opportunity policies usually make a distinction between three levels of analysis as represented in the ERA's research programmes: a) the structural participation of gendered groups in the vertical hierarchy and horizontal segregation of scientific disciplines; b) scientific careers and models for promoting women in research performing organizations, and c) cognitive content of gender studies and its institutional integration in research funding initiatives. More recently, with regard to the ERA, the new gender equality strategy of the European Union (EC 2020a) has emphasized d) the intersection of gender equality with social justice and the need for analysing the interdependence of various forms of social inequalities and discrimination.

Though funding for excellence initiatives is very well researched, and this is true for the ERC in particular, the relationship of gender equality objectives to excellence goals is less frequently analysed.³ With reference to research on the ERC's gender dimensions, *the structural representation* of genders in the ERC affects its gender distribution among applicants, grantees, panellists, decision-making boards and internal structures (Bautista-Puig et al. 2019; Hoenig 2016). Following the EU's early goal on strengthening structural representation of women in decision-making bodies, the ERC predominantly focused on the first dimension of gender quality (EC 2004; 2009; 2012; 2017; 2017, 2020; ERC 2010, 2014a, 2014b, 2018, 2021). Since the ERC defines competitive funding exclusively through the excellence criterion, and also because of its knowledge claim towards scientific autonomy, it simultaneously distances itself from institutional strategies and measures of quota or positive action towards women (see Vernos 2013, ERC Scientific Council, undated).

Studies on *scientific careers* of researchers measure institutional procedures for receiving tenure or being promoted towards professorship and grant effects upon scientific careers (Pina et al. 2019; Vinkenburg et al. 2020). Very few studies so far

³ Experts on the ERC and those on gender often do not take notice of each other's research. Moreover, the majority of evaluative studies on the ERC are commissioned by the institution to be evaluated, which structurally does not support discourses on 'controversial' questions or 'inconvenient' results (e.g. Wenneras & Wold 1997). Methodologically, this affects conditions of investigating the ERC for *all* researchers, because the ERC restricts access to data for independent researchers not involved in evaluation projects, e.g. to interviews with panellists, applicants' data, contents of panellists' discussions or remote reviews. Both the cultural legitimacy of public research funding and the trust in its funding institution would be strengthened by more opportunities for independent information and research available.

focus on the *cognitive content*, such as the integration of problem choice with reference to gender studies in its panel descriptors, the (missing) gender expertise of panellists and the content of funded projects (Hoenig 2021). Research on *social justice* as part of the ERC's gender equality plan does not exist so far; the more recent focus on intersectionality in the EU's Gender Strategy (EC 2020a) might initiate structural change in that regard as well.

3 Conceptual Framework: A General Model for Analysing Structural Change

How can a multilevel system such as the ERA be analysed with regard to the role of gender equality? In which way can gender equality plans serve as normative guidelines for initiating structural change? What about the impact of the ERC on equal opportunity as goal of national research funding, and how can we explain it in conceptual terms?

This small study of gender equality in excellence initiatives is oriented towards a structural tradition of the sociology of knowledge (Merton 1968, 1973), applying Robert K. Merton's explanatory model of social action to the case of research funding (Hoenig 2014, 2017, 2018).⁴ Merton makes a distinction between the *cultural structure* of culturally legitimized norms, values, and goals of a given society, for instance material success, and the *social structure* of institutionalized means available to social actors to realize these cultural goals. The notion of *opportunity structures* reflects social actors' *different rates of social choice* for realizing their goals by taking social action in a given *social situation* which is often institutionally pre-structured by available sets of particular social roles and social statuses. The very social action taken has *social consequences*, intended as well as unintended ones, at individual and collective level. Consequences or effects of social action also *feed back* to reproduce, maintain or transform the initial cultural and social structure while the possibility of 'no effects' is available as well (for a detailed account, Crothers 2021). *Social mechanisms*, a term coined by Merton, are fruitful for explaining how different levels of macro-, meso- and micro-social action are dependent upon each other; the concept refers both to the social phenomenon and building blocks of the explanatory model (Mayntz 2004; Hedström and Swedberg 1998).

⁴ Merton's general social theory has not fully been worked out by himself, but is a rather latent or implicit conceptual framework present in much of his writing at large (Stinchcombe 1975; Crothers 2021) and had an enormous influence on theoretical debates often initiated by some of his students.

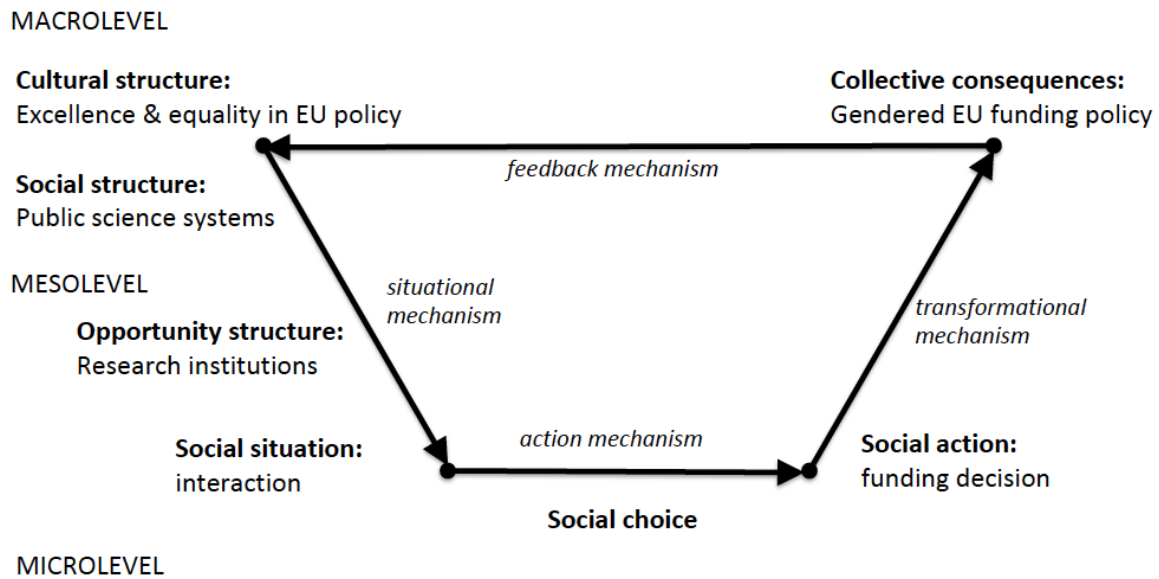


Fig. 1. Structural model for analysing gender in European research policy. Based on Merton (1968), Stinchcombe (1975), Crothers (2021), adapted from Hoenig (2017: 49).

The general explanatory model can be fruitfully applied not only for analysing structural change in a given society at large, but also in the area of European research funding and its interplay with a given social structure of public science systems (Hoenig 2014, 2017). With regard to research funding, different levels are involved: the *European* level of funding programmes; the *national* level of public science systems; the *organisational* level of research performing and funding institutions and the underlying opportunity structure for social action it provides for its agents; and the level of *social interaction* and *social choice* in particular situations, for specific social groups and actors, such as ERC panellists in situations of assessing proposals.

Analytic strengths of that conceptual framework consist in explaining the reproduction of scientific elites based on mechanisms of structural closure and symbolic reputation as self-reinforcing dynamics of the science system at large. In addition, the structural tradition of the sociology of science is able to show how and to what extent these dynamics of social inequality contradict the meritocratic ethos of science. Empirically, it scrutinizes scientific careers of Nobel laureates (Zuckerman 1977), peer review in research funding (Cole 1992), and gender specific inequalities as resulting from cumulative discrimination in low status positions (Epstein 1991; Zuckerman et al. 1991). Although these analyses predominantly refer to the United States, they are also appropriate for stimulating cross-nationally comparative research across Europe (Hoenig 2017).

The framework can also be extended towards a structural interpretation of supranational norms of gender equality in order to empirically analyse its consequences for European and nation-state funding structures. Here I focus on gender equality plans as part of the cultural structure proposed by the ERA's funding programmes in order to analyse the function they can play for promoting structural change towards realizing gender equality. In this framework, the *cultural structure* refers to the culturally proposed norms for achieving gender equality by equality plans particular for a research funding programme (or, in the absence of an explicitly stated strategy, the prevalence of implicitly gendered cultural norms concerning gendered divisions of labour). The *social structure* refers to how gender equality plans are implemented in the structure of public science systems, concerning gendered structural representations in the distribution of scientific fields and the vertical academic hierarchy. The *opportunity structure of scientific institutions* with regard to gender evokes the differential range of social choice for women at the labour market, e.g. between more teaching or more research centred academic institutions, more or less realized equal payment in academic positions, or universities' institutional strategies towards equal opportunities. *Social action* mechanisms in funding decisions refer to how and to what extent potential gender bias or equality policies are taken into account at level of interaction in social groups such as evaluation panels. Their choices do have particular *consequences* at collective level, resulting in more or less gendered distributions of researchers' funds, positions, careers, and problem choice. Effects also *feed back* at institutional level, producing more or less pronounced structural change in a research system, such as the ERA, towards gender equality and social justice.

The proposed structural model thus provides a useful methodology for scrutinizing how cultural goals of equality are really set into practice, assessing the extent of discrepancies or variance between culturally proposed goals and their actional realizations in the social structure and also the extent of structural change in a given public science system at large. The multilevel structural model can also be usefully applied in analysing the supranational influence of the ERC's interpretation of gender equality and social justice upon the national level of funding initiatives.⁵

⁵ See Hoenig 2020 for a comparative documentary analyses of the ERC's gender equality plans with three excellence initiatives at national level, implemented by the Swedish *Vetenskapsradet*, the Dutch *Nederlands Organisatie voor Wetenschappelijk Onderzoek (NWO)* and the Spanish *Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas (CSIC)* as Research Councils.

4 Assessing Structural Change: Research Design⁶

In this study, a *documentary analysis* of the ERC's gender equality plans from 2007 to 2017 is applied in order to scrutinize its cultural goals with regard to the relation of scientific excellence and gender equality it imagines and defines. The documentary analysis is complemented and contrasted with empirical evidence based on a *secondary statistical analysis* of data, provided by the ERC itself and also based on own data, in order to assess whether the ERC was successful in meeting its own normative goals or not. Findings obtained can serve as a proxy indicator of assessing, evaluating and explaining structural change (or non-change) in the ERC with regard to proposed gender equality and social justice.

The documentary analysis of gender equality policies has been contrasted by examining both ERC's gender statistics on funded projects and a sample of curriculum vitae data (Hoenig 2017) of both ERC grantees and panellists, in order to study which factors do influence top researchers' scientific careers. CV data for 601 researchers were generated via the publicly accessible internet and analysed against approximately 100 indicators; results were complemented with background knowledge from qualitative interviews (n=24) with ERC Starting and Advanced grantees (Hoenig 2016, 2017, forthcoming). The CV sample (n=601) included top researchers from two age groups, six disciplines and twelve countries.

⁶ The research presented here builds on findings from a small long-term project that has compared ERC's funding effects for a sample of twelve countries and six disciplines, combining qualitative and quantitative methods (Hoenig 2017).

Table 1. Quantitative sample of ERC researchers' curriculum vitae in three roles (n=601)

ERC sample characteristics		Share in overall sample, in %	Share of females, in %
ERC roles	grantees	51.2	17
	panellists	34.6	28
	dual role incumbents	14.1	22
Grant types and domains	Starting	52.0	30* / 10**
	Advanced	47.0	20* / 10**
Institutional affiliations	public university	80.0	23
	non-university research organization	18.0	17
	academies of science	2.0	25
Sample disciplines	physics	16.8	14
	chemistry	16.8	19
	biotechnology	16.1	17
	economics	17.1	14
	sociology	16.5	37
	history	16.6	33

Note: *female shares for the domain of the social sciences and humanities (economics, sociology, history), **female shares for the domains of the physical and engineering sciences (physics, chemistry) and the life sciences (biotechnology)

Data given in Table 1 describe the sample of the curriculum vitae analyses in more detail, with respect to ERC roles, institutional affiliations, disciplinary background and grant type of the researchers. For all data, the share of females is given as well.

Sampling six scientific disciplines respective ERC panels was led by the criterion of their relative weight in the ERC overall funding of grants, resulting in sampling physics and chemistry in the domain of physical and engineering sciences and economics and history in the social sciences and humanities. Strategically, the more heterogeneous disciplines of biotechnology and sociology were of interest.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Comparing the ERC's Cultural and Social Structure

As part of the ERC gender equality policy, a Gender issues Working Group has been called into life in 2008 and installed as a permanent structure in order to monitor gender equality through the entire ERC funding processes; since then, it has formulated three strategy papers or gender equality plans (ERC 2010; 2014a; 2021). The Working Group is also responsible for a transparent implementation of gender equality in its

institutional procedures. Assuming that women and men both are capable of developing frontier research (ERC 2010), the strategy aims at combatting structural disparities in functionally irrelevant status properties, to the advantage of innovative research. Equal opportunity goals are legally implemented as part of the Seventh Framework Programme by promoting awareness-raising measure, 'with a focus on excellence' (ERC 2010). Differences in peer review procedures and outcomes shall be identified and a balanced gender distribution among applicants, panellists and decision-making bodies shall be realized, with a participation of at least 40 percent of the underrepresented gender (ERC 2010). The second gender equality plan (ERC 2014a) specifies, however, that gender proportions of the underrepresented gender should correspond to the share among advanced or established senior researchers.

The ERC's most recent gender equality plan, adopted in June 2021 (ERC 2021), follows the gender-relevant operational objectives defined in Horizon Europe so that the ERC can "support excellence frontier researchers across Europe, irrespective of nationality, gender or age" (ERC 2021: 2). As its preceding gender equality plans it mainly focuses on awareness raising measures for identifying and removing any potential gender bias in the evaluation procedure and continues monitoring potential gender differences in submittal and approval rates and researchers' careers. It also aims at reaching a gender balance among ERC panel chairs, panellists and external reviewers.

The relationship between equal opportunities and excellence formulated in the gender equality strategy remains a 'structurally ambivalent' (Merton) one. Equal opportunities can be interpreted as constitute for a successful implementation of excellence criterion, but can also be seen as a competitive goal which should be relativized in the light of the goal of scientific excellence (cf. Hoenig 2016). At the end of the first programme period the ERC admitted the persisting gender differences in the application and evaluation process, insofar the approval rate among women reached at best 85 per cent of their male colleagues (ERC 2014b). Following policy documents define goals of equal opportunity and excellence as partly contradictory: 'No positive discrimination, no affirmative action, no quotas – ERC awardees are selected based on EXCELLENCE only' (ERC Scientific Council, undated, p. 3). Diversity and inclusion are interpreted by the ERC primarily as related to regional disparities, only 1.5 percent of ERC grants go to researchers from east European research institutions (HLEG 2015; Hoenig 2017).

Low application rates of female researchers the ERC considers as more problematic than unequal approval rates. More recently it extended its eligibility criteria by including credit periods for family leave. Since 2016 awareness-raising measures are implemented among ERC panellists and personnel of the ERC's Executive Agency. ERC data show improved participation of female applicants, while their approval rates

remain lower than among male colleagues. For the future the ERC intends to increase female application rates and also more diversity among panellists (ERC Scientific Council, undated). Regarding gender knowledge in content, apart from singular projects, there is no panel structure comparable to the existing structure of subpanels; thus, there is no reason to assume that the ERC deploys any systematic interest in interdisciplinary gender studies.

While the ERC does not formulate the goal of social justice, as part of its gender equality strategy, the Commission's recent gender equality strategy (EC 2020a) explicitly demands European actors to include intersectionality in its programming. It also builds on legal frameworks mostly set in place in the late 1990s, such as anti-discrimination strategies, which, however, are not specified for science, research and its funding.

Table 2. Female shares and approval rates among ERC researchers, by grant type and programme period, in percent. Source: ERC Statistics 2007-2017.

ERC roles	By grant type / by scientific domains	Female share by programme period, in %	
		2007-2013	2014-2017
Applications	Starting	31	35
	Advanced	15	16
Approval rates	Starting	80*	92
	Advanced	85	100
Approval rates	Life sciences	66	86
	Social sciences and humanities	80	100
	Physical and engineering sciences	82	100

*Note: Data designate approval rates of female researchers' applications as a share of approved male researchers' applications.

In order to assess to what extent gender equality policies were successfully implemented, existing ERC statistics and own data were analysed (see Table 2). According to the ERC (2018), between 2007 and 2017 the female share among panellists was a third among Starting and a quarter among Advanced grantees. Among applicants, since 2014, the female share improved to 35 respectively 16 percent, depending on the grant type. The strong domain-specific gender approval gap in the life sciences considerably decreased since 2014. Meanwhile female and male applicants from both the domains of the social sciences and humanities and the physical and engineering sciences enjoy the same chance of having their proposals approved by the ERC (Hoenig 2016, 2020).

5.2 ERC Grantees’ Careers and the Cognitive Integration of Gender Research

Curriculum vitae analyses can show gender disparities in scientific career’s vertical mobility moves in universities and non-university research organizations⁷. Based on self-reported CV data of grantees, five distinct employment positions were defined and analysed for potential gender disparities in the median of employments, counted in years, when researchers were appointed in a particular scientific career position.

Table 3. Median of employments in years, by gender and position in ERC grantees’ scientific careers.

Gender	Employments				
	first	second	third	fourth	fifth
Male	2.6	3.5	4.5	5.4	6.0
Female	2.2	3.0	3.7	4.6	5.1
Total	2.5	3.4	4.4	5.2	5.8
N	472	440	423	332	243

1= PhD student; 2= postdoc; 3= assistant professor; 4= associate professor; 5= substitute professor; 6= full professorship; 7= group leader; 8= director. Own calculations (Hoenig, forthcoming).

Table 3 shows that male ERC grantees more frequently self-reportedly started their career already as a post-doc, while female grantees both started being employed in a lower position and needed at least one employment more at postdoctoral level for reaching the same career stage as their male colleagues. That is, they climbed the academic ladder much slower than their male colleagues, both at the university and when affiliated to non-university research performing organizations. Since *early* promotion as well as non-promotion of researchers has significant effects for academic careers (Zuckerman 1977) this empirical evidence is particularly of interest. Female ERC grantees less frequently reach the position of full professorship or a leading role in non-university research organizations, such as a group leadership or directorship.

Regarding the cognitive representation of gender studies’ themes in the ERC’s panel structure, the most recent panel descriptors (status 2020) do not include any particular panel for assessing gender research. However, within the social sciences and humanities’ panel SH2, addressing sociology, anthropology, social psychology, educational and communication sciences, issues of gender are mentioned. In the SH6 panel dedicated to the historical sciences, the notion of ‘gender history’ is found while no gender panel descriptor is mentioned in the domains of the life sciences or the physical and engineering sciences. It can be assumed, that across all panel groups less than one percent of all panellists have stated any expertise in gender studies for evaluating projects in interdisciplinary gender studies (see also Hoenig 2021). Thus,

⁷ For a detailed account of the method, Hoenig 2017.

although the ERC frequently underscores its interest in interdisciplinary research projects, this is not particularly visible with regard to making room for the innovative potential of gender research in its panel structure yet.

6 Provisional Conclusions: Assessing Structural Change in Gendering the European Research Area

This small study has scrutinized how and to what extent the ERC realizes its own excellence goals in terms of gender quality and social justice. Apart from detailed empirical findings on the research questions mentioned, the paper proposed a general conceptual approach, based on the Mertonian sociology of science, for assessing structural change in the ERA's gender equality policy, and complemented it with an appropriate methodology, combining qualitative and quantitative methods of social research. Empirical results from a documentary analysis of the ERC's normative gender equality plan were compared with actual empirical evidence, based on statistical data from various sources, of its realization.

Findings show that despite recent improvements in ERC's practices, structural ambivalence of scientific excellence and gender equality objectives prevail, due to the deeply gendered construction of scientific excellence in research performing and funding institutions as well. That the ERC regards interdisciplinarity as conducive to cognitive innovation could have a much clearer impact on the structural integration of gender studies in its panel structure. Latently, the ERC perpetuates an interpretation of gender equality and excellence as *competing* values of funding policies, instead of regarding equal opportunities as *constitutive* for scientific quality and thus as an integral part of scientific excellence. Female top researchers such as ERC grantees also experience a slower vertical mobility than their male colleagues in their academic careers. Findings show the importance of *early and ongoing* support for female researchers at organizational, discipline-specific and nation-state levels, in order to retain this scientific talent in Europe.

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