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Stress-Inducing and Anxiety-Ridden: A Practice-Based Approach to the Construction of Status-Bestowing Evaluations in Research Funding

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Abstract More than resource allocations, evaluations of funding applications have become central instances for status bestowal in academia. Much attention in past literature has been devoted to grasping the status consequences of prominent funding evaluations. But little attention has been paid to understanding how the status-bestowing momentum of such evaluations is constructed. Throughout this paper, our aim is to develop new knowledge on the role of applicants in constructing certain funding evaluations as events with crucial importance for status bestowal. Using empirical material from retrospective interviews with Sweden-based early-career scientists who, successfully or unsuccessfully, applied for European Research Council (ERC) Starting Grants, our findings show how these scientists interlinked experiences from various practices to construct the ERC's evaluations, in general, and the final-stage appointments at Brussels' Madou Plaza Tower, in particular, as apex-esque, crescendo-like status-bestowing events. We discuss our findings as instructional, preparatory, and demarcative practices that, by extension, distribute responsibility for the construction and reinforcement of high-stakes, career-defining evaluations through which considerable stress and anxiety is generated in academia.

Keywords Status · Events · Practices · Evaluations · Funding applications · Early-career scientists

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Evaluations that Bestow Status in Academia

Almost 50 years ago, Merton (1973: 276) observed that "the activities of scientists are subject to rigorous policing, to a degree perhaps unparalleled in any other field of activity". Today, Merton's observation seems as valid as ever: evaluations are, if anything, quasi-ubiquitous in contemporary academia. Scientists evaluate and are evaluated on a recurrent basis to make decisions about grants (Lamont 2009), conferences (Brezis and Birukou 2020), publications (Langfeldt and Kyvik 2011), and employments (Musselin 2009). Presently, there appears to be an innate supply of and demand for evaluations in the academic sector.

While evaluations are important tools for a wide range of decisions in academia, we know that evaluations, advertently or inadvertently, also tend to engender extended consequences. Seen as organized instances in which the worth of targeted individuals is assessed through prespecified criteria (Lamont 2012), evaluations are regularly transformed into situations that delineate "winners and losers" (Langfeldt 2006: 32), thus generating stratification among scientists (Yu 2014). This means that evaluations tend to become fundamental for status, commonly understood as positions occupied by individuals in hierarchical orders deriving from unequally ascribed recognition (Gould 2002; Podolny and Lynn 2009). Status constitutes a pervasive aspect of social life (Ridgeway 2014), but it is perhaps particularly pervasive throughout the academic sector. In academia, status has long been regarded as one of the, if not the, most desired reward for scientists (Cole and Cole 1973; Hermanowicz 2009).

Status has traditionally been bestowed on scientists who have produced substantial discoveries and crafted influential paradigms (Merton 1957). With project-based grants gaining ever-increasing importance among scientists (Fochler et al. 2016; Lepori 2011), however, evaluations of research funding applications have also emerged as important situations for status bestowal in the academic sector. Inspired by Merton's (1968) Matthew effect, much attention has concomitantly been directed at the status consequences rendered by research funding evaluations. Studies have demonstrated that scientists who achieve early-career successes in nation-level funding evaluations subsequently tend to enjoy long-lasting status advantages *vis-à-vis* other scientists with near-identical achievements. Such advantages are, for instance, expressed through differential rates of access to positions and further grants among otherwise comparable scientists (Bloch et al. 2014; Bol et al. 2018). Nedeva et al. (2012) studied the status consequences engendered by European Research Council (ERC) funding evaluations, similarly showing that early-career successes during these evaluations are manifested over time in differential rates of access to further grants among scientists with near-identical achievements across several countries and disciplines. Nedeva et al.'s (2012: 73) findings depict how successes in ERC funding evaluations are regarded as "life-changing event[s]" among early-career scientists, not only because of the large monetary amounts that are allocated, but also because of the durable status advantages that are generated. Further studies have demonstrated that ERC funding recipients tend to enjoy preferential employment conditions

as various research organizations across Europe reform and revamp their bonus systems and promotion procedures to attract and accommodate such recipients (Cruz-Castro et al. 2016; Edler et al. 2014).

But, whereas much attention has been placed on the long-lasting status consequences rendered by certain funding evaluations, little attention has been directed at the processes through which such evaluations are constructed as 'life-changing events'. This is, as we argue, because previous studies have typically started from an assumption that the studied evaluations already constitute events, or "occurrences" with "momentous consequences" (Sewell 1996: 842), influencing status bestowal in academia. Recent work has, however, begun exploring the role of research funders in organizing evaluations that strategically appeal to and align with traditional norms and values in the academic sector (Edlund 2020; König 2017). Still, our understanding regarding how funding evaluations are constructed as status-bestowing events remains thin, and we have particularly few insights concerning the role of other actors than funders. This, for example, implies that our knowledge about the role played by scientists themselves is sparse, even as they seem to be those who are most impacted by the durable consequences of particular evaluations with core significance for status bestowal. We see such sparsity as an unfortunate omission.

Our aim in this paper is to develop new knowledge about the processes through which early-career scientists construct evaluations of research funding applications as status-bestowing events. We pose the following question: How are funding evaluations constructed by scientists as events with important bearing on status bestowal in academia? To explore our question and achieve our aim, we turn toward the ERC's evaluations once again. Our empirical material centers on early-career scientists who applied for ERC Starting Grant (StG) funding, and then reached the final stage of StG evaluations. Drawing on retrospective interviews with 34 scientists in Swedish universities, and relying on specific status (Rivera 2010; Sauder 2005) and practice (Dreyfus 1991; Reckwitz 2017) theory streams, we interpret and analyze how our interviewees described various actions unfolding before and during the ERC's evaluations, including hearing about, getting ready for, and toughing it through these evaluations. We find that early-career scientists distributed their descriptions over space to encompass several actors throughout the academic sector, such as panelists, senior colleagues, department heads, university vice chancellors, and nation-level funder officers. But, ultimately, our findings also demonstrate how actions and actors were interlinked over time by scientists in Sweden to construct the final evaluation stage appointments at ERC headquarters as apex-esque, crescendo-like status-bestowing events that, because of their high stakes, engendered much stress and anxiety.

We structure the remainder of our paper as follows. After this introduction, we expand our practice-based and ERC-focused approach to the construction of events with salience for status in academia. While doing so, we also present our methods to interpret and analyze a set of interviews conducted with early-career scientists in Swedish universities. Moving on, we flesh out our full findings, showing how scientists intertwined various actions and actors over space and time to construct the ERC's evaluations, in general, and the final-stage StG appointments, in particular, as status-bestowing events with crucial importance for Sweden's academic sector and

beyond. We finish our paper by suggesting contributions, highlighting the implications of switched roles and distributed responsibilities in constructing events with bearing on status, and sketching future inquiry avenues that involve further actors and additional dynamics, as well as new ways to foster research milieus within which careers are not unduly influenced by a small number of stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden funding evaluations.

Constructing the Status-Bestowing Momentum of Evaluations

Our definition of status refers to hierarchical orders within which individuals occupy positions that are based on unequally ascribed recognition. Such recognition can, but it need not, be grounded in notions of quality (Gould 2002; Podolny and Lynn 2009). This implies that status extends beyond excellence, which, despite its broad and loose usage as a superlative in academia, remains associated with notions of quality (Flink and Peter 2018). Status inherently, distinctively, and ultimately builds on beliefs held by audiences, including various in-groups and out-groups, about who is worthy of recognition throughout their respective social spheres (Ridgeway 2014). While status is often understood as trivial and shallow in comparison to quality, status has long been a perennial topic for social theorists due to the pervasive advantages and disadvantages that are generated by unequally ascribed recognition (Bourdieu 1984; Weber [1922] 1968).

Recent work has documented how the current proliferation of ratings, rankings, and other similar evaluations is partly driven by different intermediaries that seek to participate as third parties in status bestowal (Blank 2007; Bowers and Prato 2019). Using evaluations as tools, intermediaries assess the worth of individuals (or organizations), and then communicate the outcomes to audiences. Intermediaries, in this way, regularly compare the achievements of multiple individuals, but mainly elevate the achievements of select individuals (Best 2011). From this work, we learn that intermediaries actively attempt to construct desire for the status they participate in bestowing, often deploying intricate organizing efforts. Turning specifically toward the academic sector, recent work similarly depicts how research funders as intermediaries attempt to construct status desire through organizing efforts that strategically align evaluations with traditional norms and values among scientists (Edlund 2020; König 2017). Taken together, this body of work from academia and beyond provides substantial insights into the important role played by intermediaries in constructing evaluations as events with significance for status bestowal.

Although important, the role of intermediaries is but one aspect to consider. We should also consider those individuals who are assessed because they may play a role in constructing certain evaluations as status-bestowing events by making claims about achievements on the basis of particular evaluation outcomes. Here, previous literature shows how evaluations, after being conducted by intermediaries, are reinforced as events with important bearing on status bestowal when individuals use the corresponding outcomes to make claims about worth (Rivera 2010; Sauder 2005). This literature does, however, not shed much light on how individuals may gradually construct the status-bestowing momentum of specific evaluations before

and during their conduct by intermediaries. It is difficult to see how the outcomes of certain evaluations could suddenly be leveraged for status bestowal after they have been conducted. We thus think there are plausible reasons to suggest that the status-bestowing momentum of particular evaluations is not only, or perhaps not even primarily, constructed after their conduct. Our argument is that much of this momentum may be constructed through processes unfolding before and during the actual evaluations. Such processes will, however, be bracketed away if we immediately place our focus on the ways that evaluation outcomes are deployed for status bestowal after these very same evaluations have been conducted.

To explore the construction of StG evaluations by early-career scientists, we will specifically turn our attention toward those sets of actions, or practices (Schatzki 2002), that scientists engaged in before and during the ERC's evaluations. Those practices, and, most importantly, the ways in which they were experienced, should impact how early-career scientists constructed evaluations as events with salience for status bestowal. We will, in what follows, elaborate on our practice-based approach to the processes playing out before and during StG evaluations.

Practices, Action Chains, and the Retrospective Construction of Status-Bestowing Events

A central tenet of practice theorizing is that practices are contexts through which people make sense of and engage with one another and the world (Dreyfus 1991; Schatzki 1996). Academic practices, for example, enable individuals to be considered as scientists by attending seminars, supervising students, and producing research results. This, in turn, suggests that practices are phenomena that organize actors. Practices encourage ways of being that are aligned with various rules, affects, and aspirations, which, altogether, facilitate mutual intelligibility among actors (Reckwitz 2017; Shove et al. 2012). Importantly, practices are not isolated phenomena. Practices are spatially and temporally arranged through chains of actions (Schatzki 2002). Such chains can, to follow up on our previous example, be seen in departments, universities, and other research milieus, within which academic practices are interweaved with administrative practices that may include scheduling, budgeting, and staffing. Milieus like these are accordingly constituted by interlinked complexes of practices.

Our argument is that practice theorizing provides us with a fruitful approach to study the construction of StG evaluations as status-bestowing events. We specifically argue that the ERC's evaluations are constituted by practices unfolding before and during these evaluations, and that those practices are interweaved by scientists through chains of actions. It is across such chains that the status-bestowing momentum of certain evaluations gradually comes to be constructed. Attending to action chains requires openness toward the actors involved; toward how practices are arranged; and toward the ways that various actors make sense of processes across multiple practices. This emphasis on making sense, by extension, connects with the phenomenological aspects of experiences from having been engaged in multiple and, what often appear as, successive practices (Schatzki 2010).

We now combine insights from status and practice theorizing to analyze our empirical material, which consists of 34 semi-structured interviews with early-career scientists who worked at Swedish universities and applied for StG funding within the Life Sciences (LS), Physical Sciences and Engineering (PE), or Social Sciences and Humanities (SH) disciplinary domains during the inaugural ERC budgetary period (i.e. 2007-2013). All these scientists obtained the highest grade (i.e. an "A") for their StG applications after the ERC's evaluations had concluded. In light of budgetary shortages, however, evaluation panelists ranked top-graded applicants against one another to generate recipient lists and runners-up lists. Recipients were allocated StGs, while runners-up were instead allocated monetarily equivalent substitute grants from the Swedish Research Council (SRC). Between 2014 and 2016, we interviewed 23 StG recipients; eight runners-up who were funded by the SRC; and three runners-up who were initially funded by the SRC, before re-applying to the ERC and subsequently receiving StGs.

During our interviews, which lasted between 45 and 180 minutes, we strove to capture how early-career scientists retrospectively understood the ERC's evaluations. These interviews consisted of asking scientists about their experiences from the different StG evaluation stages, along with general questions about their employment and funding when they applied for ERC grants. This, altogether, resulted in rich narratives. Whereas observing a set of practices *in situ* and in detail has often been acclaimed (Nicolini and Monteiro 2017), we regard retrospective illustrations as feasible modes (see also Schatzki 2002), and retrospective interviews as plausible means (Hitchings 2012), to explore individual experiences emanating from various practices over time. Hernes (2014) reminds us that events tend to crystallize as meaningful when they are grasped retrospectively. Given our interest in capturing how events are constructed through successive practices, we actively drew on the ways that early-career scientists attempted to structure their past experiences from multiple practices into meaningful chains of actions. Our interviews were thus useful to understand how scientists, after the conclusion of StG evaluations, retrospectively interlinked experiences deriving from practices that had unfolded before and during those evaluations. As our interviews progressed, however, we noticed that early-career scientists not only provided narratives about how practices organized applicants throughout ERC evaluations (e.g. by recounting rules), but that they also shared intimate insights into the emotional dimensions of experiences associated with applying for StG funding (e.g. by describing affects and aspirations). Such narratives and insights are, as Hernes (2014: 78) states, difficult to capture "in the heat of the action". This statement, by extension, offers further support for our reliance on retrospective interviews.

We analyzed our interviews by following an abductive coding technique that took us back and forth between theories and empirics (Swedberg 2014). Utilizing MAXQDA software, we discerned terms, sentences, and broader themes within our interview transcripts, and this gradually allowed us to move from more empirically grounded toward more theoretically anchored codes. That said, we are now ready to begin presenting the findings of our study.

Hearing About, Getting Ready for, and Toughing it Through Starting Grant Evaluations

StGs have, ever since they were launched by the ERC in 2007, offered generous funding conditions. Indeed, in terms of eligibility rules (i.e. windows of two to seven years after PhD completion for applicants from all disciplines[1]), resource amounts (i.e. 1.5 million Euros), and duration periods (i.e. five years), StGs offer conditions that are not matched by any other individual grants on the nation- or Europe-level. Such funding conditions, and especially such resource amounts, immediately suggest that ERC evaluations will generate attention among scientists. Our findings, however, indicate that these evaluations were constructed as much more than resource allocation procedures by early-career scientists in Sweden. We will, as we move through our findings, see how StG evaluations were constructed as nothing less than status-bestowing events that could elevate scientists, departments, and, indeed, entire universities to new positions of recognition, largely based on beliefs in academia about the quality signals emitted by successful ERC applications. But, in light of such beliefs, StG evaluations also seemed to generate considerable stress and anxiety as early-career scientists, before and during those evaluations, successively became aware of the high stakes at play. This stress and anxiety commenced to build up when scientists heard about the ERC's procedures; it accumulated as scientists got ready for the ERC's evaluations; and it climaxed when scientists toughed it through the ERC's final-stage appointments.

Learning the Ropes

Across our interviews, early-career scientists regularly reflected on the ways that other actors talked about ERC grants within research milieus. That talk was regarded as key for the socializing of scientists into particular perceptions of StGs early on during PhD programs.

Initial contacts Research funding was, according to our interviewees, a quotidian discussion topic in the offices and corridors of departments. While this topic seemed to be prevalent across a range of disciplinary domains, funding was perhaps most intensively discussed within departments that housed laboratory-driven, experiment-heavy, and, thus, resource-craving disciplines, such as physics, engineering, and the life sciences.

Throughout these research funding discussions, ERC grants stood out. "Well, as colleagues, we talk a lot about funding", and "StGs are certainly not the only mentioned, but they are big… so you would always hear about them as a doctoral student" (Recipient 7 PE). Such discussions were, however, not neutral dialogs among actors, but normative conversations that quite clearly singled out some application practices as more desirable than others. Senior colleagues would, for instance, remind junior colleagues that the latter allegedly "needed to apply and get grants

[1] Up until 2012, these windows comprised two to 12 years after PhD completion.

of the ERC's range" (Recipient 23 LS) to achieve and secure prosperous careers in academia (see also van Arensbergen et al. 2014). StGs were, in this way, not only singled out as desirable grants, but they were also put forth as benchmarks that other grants would be compared to and measured against. These reminders about the supposed necessity of seeking and accessing ERC grants (or, at least, ERC-ranging grants) appeared to engender considerable pressure among early-career scientists because they most often aspired for a future in academia. And, adding to this pressure, many of our interviewees did not see much excitement in pursing non-academic careers (cf. Müller 2014). Scientists could realize their career aspirations, as senior colleagues emphasized, by accessing grants on an independent basis. Such emphases forged connections between grants and careers, and, by extension, generated a form of future-looking stress and anxiety that Fochler and Sigl (2018) have labelled "anticipatory uncertainty".

While desirable, StGs were not perceived to be within the range of all early-career scientists in Sweden. Indeed, through recurring discussions and reminders, an elitist aura gradually seemed to be constructed around these grants within departments and universities. That aura was not only fueled by how the ERC's funding was talked about (i.e. as necessary for prosperous careers in academia), but also by who talked about it:

> "The very best scientists spoke about the ERC and its grants. It was nothing for us common, unstructured PhD students who did not know what we would be doing in the future… I would hear about the ERC because it was talked about as something cool and attractive, almost as if it was out of reach" (Recipient 3 LS).

StGs were thus seen as grants for the most promising PhD students, depicted as those who followed linear education paths and resolute career goals, which, in turn, are associated with an increased "projectification" (Torka 2018) of doctoral programs.

The elitist aura around ERC grants was not solely constructed by actors and practices in Swedish departments and universities. The ERC itself also appeared to play an important role in constructing that aura (cf. Edlund 2020; König 2017). To understand this role, the ERC must be situated against a background of Europe-level research funding policy developments. Up until the mid-2000s, Europe-level funding policy was generally regarded as rather unsupportive toward basic research, especially if such research could not promise to deliver any evident economic and/or societal benefits (Breithaupt 2003; Schiermeier 2001). Our interviewees asserted that, before the ERC was founded in 2007, Europe-level grants would best be described as "bureaucratic and controlled by politicians who thought they knew what researchers should do" (Recipient 11 LS). The ERC was consequently perceived as "a big thing because, suddenly, you could get a large amount of money to work freely on whatever you wanted" (Recipient 9 PE).

Those perceptions of freedom quickly seem to have augmented the desirability that early-career scientists in Sweden attributed to StGs. But this is, at the same time, perhaps not very surprising because scientists have often ascribed much recognition to peers who can freely pursue their own research topics, without being bound

by expectations of economic and/or societal benefits (Abbott 1981). Such desirability only appears to have been further exacerbated throughout the ERC's first few calls for applications, during which ERC top managers portrayed StGs as extremely scarce and highly exclusive grants (Myklebust 2012; Winnacker 2008). It is, along these lines, well-known that scarcity and exclusivity constitute important bases for the status of material possessions, as well as for the actors associated with such possessions (Bourdieu 1984; Lamont 1992). The ERC's portrayals were communicated through articles, documents, and press releases, but also through speeches at various promotional activities targeted at early-career scientists:

> "I had this ironic experience at [nation-level research funder], where there was a woman [from the ERC] telling us how things worked in Brussels, saying 'yeah, they've [ERC top managers] set up this so that they're gonna end up with way more applications than they [evaluation panelists] can handle, and nobody's gonna get one [an StG], there's gonna be very few'" (Runner-up 2 PE).

Such experiences seem to have cemented the construction of an elitist aura around ERC grants. While the exact correspondence between this aura and scientific quality was ambiguous (cf. Gould 2002; Podolny and Lynn 2009), our interviewees, nonetheless, sensed that department heads and university vice chancellors across Sweden soon embraced StGs as "quality stamps" (Recipient 20 SH). Heads and vice chancellors appeared to approach ERC grants as status halos that not only reflected the scientific quality of grant recipients, but that, by extension, also enabled the entirety of departments and universities to bask in StG-derived recognition. As such, this approach to ERC grants forged connections between StGs and the status of entire Swedish departments and universities.

The 'quality stamp'-like aspects ascribed to ERC grants meant that StG applications were strongly encouraged by universities in Sweden. These universities took to organizing and supporting sub-units, often known as grants offices (Perrault 2009), that, among other tasks, compiled and disseminated information about the ERC's funding. Representatives from such sub-units, as well as invited speakers, regularly held information sessions at departments in order to foster StG applications from early-career scientists. Those sessions appeared to generate mixed results, however. One result was the continued cementation of an elitist aura around ERC funding, as grants offices, when it all came around, only encouraged StG applications from certain scientists. Information sessions, as such, also resulted in discouraged early-career scientists:

> "So, I went there [to an information session] with a colleague, and, after that, I thought 'hell no, I am never applying for this [an StG]'… If anything, I became completely scared of applying… There was a lot of 'you have to be the best of the best, and you have to be excellent in all areas, and you have to have the best idea in Europe, and you must be in the top five percent among all researchers in your field'… I thought that the ERC was probably not targeted toward me" (Recipient 3 LS).

Below, we will see how the elitist aura that was constructed around ERC grants resurfaced as our interviewees reflected on their perceptions of what merits viable StG applicants had to display.

Tacit barriers Although the ERC issued specific eligibility rules for StG applicants, it did not issue specific merit requirements for applicants. Instead, throughout official ERC communication, the role of original research ideas for successful funding applications was stressed. The characteristics of such ideas were not outlined, however (cf. Heinze 2008; Luukkonen 2012). Despite this lack of specific requirements, there seemed to exist quite clear perceptions among early-career scientists about what merits characterized viable StG applicants. The ERC expected, or so it was perceived among our interviewees at least, applications that were based on solid trails of particular publication practices:

> "It [an StG application] is about showing many articles published in highly ranked journals, plus an idea that is original… But, if you have a weak CV, it does not matter how good your idea is… Your CV first needs to surpass a threshold that allows you to even become a serious participant" (Recipient 30 SH).

While this publication-based threshold was not formalized through any specific merit requirements, perceptions about such a threshold, nonetheless, appeared to exert considerable influence on the ways that many early-career scientists in Swedish universities worked with StG applications. These scientists worked assiduously on "CVs that would be enough", although "they never felt enough in comparison to the CVs others had when they applied for StGs" (Runner-up 10 LS). This publication-based threshold was consequently associated with self-selection processes, which initially led many of our interviewees to refrain from applying for ERC grants (cf. Neufeld et al. 2013). Even early-career scientists who saw themselves as fairly successful seemed to abstain at first if they could not display particular publications:

> "My postdoc abroad was stimulating because I learnt a lot of new stuff… But my postdoc was perhaps not so great publication-wise. I published, but not any of those high-impact articles that everyone reads. So, when I returned [to Sweden], it was as if I would not stand much chance [at the ERC]… Kind of 'you have not produced'… At that time, I felt there was no purpose with applying [for an StG]" (Recipient 3 LS).

But perceptions about a publication-based threshold not only led scientists to refrain from applying for ERC grants. Early-career scientists who understood this threshold could, at times, also take on roles as "assessors" (Nästesjö 2021) who recommended other scientists to abstain from applying. "I would", as one of our interviewees put it, "probably tell someone who has a mediocre CV that it is a waste of time for him or her to apply [for an StG]" (Recipient 17 LS). Another interviewee elaborated on how such recommendations could be formulated to colleagues:

> "You actually have a rather concrete threshold with StGs, so, if you look at yourself in the mirror, there is this level of publishing that you must reach… I

> have tried to help people with [StG] applications, but, when it is clear that they have not reached a sufficient level, because it is quite high, I will tell those persons that 'there is no purpose for you to apply'… You do not say it in that way obviously, but, if someone is far from the ERC threshold… Well, then there is no purpose" (Recipient 13 SH).

The self-induced selection processes, in which scientists perceived it would be wise for themselves to refrain from applying, and the other-directed selection processes, in which scientists instead perceived it would be wise for certain colleagues to abstain from applying, influenced how our interviewees approached their actual ERC applications. We flesh out these approaches in what follows.

Application rationales Across our interviews, early-career scientists working in Sweden described various approaches to StG applications. These scientists applied under different circumstances, as well as through various practices. All approaches, however, appeared to be guided by perceptions that pictured ERC applications as much more challenging than nation-level funding applications.

One group of interviewees seemed to work with their applications in quasi-scheduled ways that required careful planning and timing. "StGs had been on my radar for a while, and, with some key publications, you get this window of opportunity that increases your chance" (Recipient 15 LS). Here, it is important to emphasize that these interviewees already commanded small grants from Swedish funders. With such grants at hand, early-career scientists apparently found certain calm and refuge to plan and time their ERC applications.

Another group of interviewees instead appeared to approach their applications as trial-like attempts. But these interviewees also commanded small grants from funders in Sweden. Such grants allowed this group of scientists to approach their first few StG applications as training in "the art of writing a persuasive proposal" (Serrano Velarde 2018: 86): "I applied just to see what would happen, and I was thinking 'I'll never get it [an StG], but I'll get the ERC referee comments at least'" (Recipient 5 PE). The obtained comments could, or so it was perceived at least, subsequently be used in rather instrumental ways to strengthen future StG applications.

A third group of interviewees could not afford to work with their applications as training. These interviewees supposedly applied to the ERC just as all of their funding was drying up. Such applications could thus be understood as last-minute attempts, which, by extension, embody the precarious aspects of short-term, project-specific grants that have now flourished in European academia for three decades or so (Fochler et al. 2016). Last-minute StG attempts would, for instance, be initiated against a backdrop of impending relocations:

> "I was desperate for funding… I had an offer at a university in [geographically remote country from Sweden] that I was considering seriously, but, at the same time, I thought that this article we had just published might look good in an ERC StG application… So, I decided to apply, but I was very close to having to relocate my lab" (Recipient 21 LS).

Last-minute attempts could also be launched against a background of ending contracts:

> "My employment contract was running out, and I only had funding left for a few more months… But I had published a recognized article around this time, and I had an idea for how to take that article further, so my feeling was that 'I will never get a better chance at the ERC than now'" (Recipient 3 LS).

Regardless of approach, early-career scientists typically concurred in that StG applications were "a different ballpark" (Recipient 33 SH) than applications to nation-level funders. But what did this imply? Below, we will explore what the ERC's 'ballpark' was perceived to entail for applications and evaluations.

Novel scenarios StG applications allegedly required a hyperbolic language that many of our interviewees were not familiar with after writing funding applications in Sweden. Drawing on cultural stereotypes, several scientists emphasized that it was "difficult for timid Swedes to brand themselves [through applications] out in Europe" (Runner-up 31 LS): research ideas allegedly had to be framed as "extremely interesting", while researcher merits supposedly had to be portrayed as "particularly fitting" (Runner-up 34 PE). Such emphasis on 'branding'applications does not seem all too uncommon, as it could similarly be seen in the advice early-career scientists received from senior colleagues throughout Roumbanis' (2019) study of grant information sessions at Swedish universities.

In addition to unfamiliar StG applications, the subsequent ERC evaluations supposedly involved much more challenging procedures than those associated with other funding applications. Our interviewees often singled out the final StG evaluation stage as uniquely challenging. Throughout this stage, all qualified scientists were invited to individual, on-site appointments with panelists at ERC headquarters in Brussels (Luukkonen 2012). These appointments, whose evaluation practices we will specify later on, consisted of presenting applications for and answering questions from StG panelists. Allegedly, "many applicants from Sweden make it to Brussels, but very few get funding afterward" (Recipient 21 SH).

Seeking to prepare those who had qualified to the final evaluation stage, SRC research officers organized one-day tutoring workshops in anticipation of Brussels appointments. Such workshops revolved around exercises in which early-career scientists presented applications for and answered questions from mock panelists. The latter had been instructed to "drill" (Recipient 22 PE) StG applicants as if they were on-site at ERC headquarters. These tutoring workshops appeared to generate intense affects among our interviewees as mock panelists provided a taste of the challenging questions that could, and perhaps would, be posed in Brussels. "I went to one of those SRC workshops, and everyone had their appointments booked for the next month… I could really feel and notice the stress and anxiety everywhere" (Recipient 15 LS). In what follows, we will show how this stress and anxiety among applicants seemed to be closely connected with the ways that the ERC organized its final-stage appointments.

Weathering the Procedures

Among early-career scientists from Swedish universities, StG appointments were generally understood as meticulously organized situations, presumably designed to evaluate the independence of applicants through challenging meetings with panelists. This organizing not only appeared to generate stress and anxiety, but its meticulousness, by extension, also seemed to veil the ERC's entire final-stage appointments in an atmosphere of secrecy.

Formalized arrangements Our interviewees often described their appointments as "extremely methodical" (Runner-up 34 PE), not seldom bordering on "absurd" (Recipient 30 SH) and "surreal" (Runner-up & recipient 8 PE). Such descriptions primarily concerned the ERC's pre-planned spatial boundaries that were meant to minimize interactions between competing StG applicants. These boundaries could supposedly be seen as soon as applicants arrived at the Madou Plaza Tower, where all appointments took place. "You are not even supposed to know who else will be there [at the Tower] that day, so everything is very secretive" (Recipient 17 LS). Allegedly, when StG applicants arrived, they were hurried to different waiting rooms by ERC administrators. These rooms were not chosen haphazardly. In fact, they seemed to be carefully populated with scientists from disparate and, thus, non-competing disciplinary domains. The ERC's attempts at minimizing interactions between competitors appeared to engender an "odd feeling" (Recipient 23 LS) among applicants who, nervously and silently, waited together for their individual slots (for a similar account, see Schiermeier (2014)). "It [the room] was like a dentist reception with people waiting for something they were not looking forward to" (Recipient 3 LS). Whereas the ERC strove to minimize interactions between competing StG applicants, it also sought to depersonalize interactions between applicants and administrators:

> "Someone finally came and picked me up from the waiting room, 'it's your turn now'. So, this lady walked with me down a corridor to the actual meeting room, and she was not supposed to say anything, she was completely quiet, but she did actually give me a small, small supporting smile. 'Well, someone is a little bit human at least', that was what I felt" (Recipient 17 LS).

Our interviewees not only described their final-stage appointments as 'extremely methodical' in reference to the ERC's spatial boundaries, but also in reference to the precise temporal boundaries that characterized interactions between applicants and panelists. Although StG applicants received detailed appointment instructions several months in advance, ERC panelists made sure to reiterate these instructions as early-career scientists entered their respective meeting rooms. "You would be greeted by strict rules that your slot is 25 minutes in total, and not 24 nor 26" (Recipient 27 PE). Scientists were first expected to present their applications for ten minutes in front of 12 to 16 StG panelists. "I had ten minutes to present, and not a second more than that… They [panelists] would pull the plug" (Recipient 17 LS). After presenting, applicants were expected to answer questions from ERC panelists for 15 minutes. "Even though I had the last slot of the day, panelists told me that

they would pose questions for exactly 15 minutes to ensure fairness" (Runner-up 2 PE).

While these spatial and temporal boundaries inside the Madou Plaza Tower were deemed 'absurd' and 'surreal', many early-career scientists simultaneously utilized those boundaries to characterize StG appointments as impartial situations that were centered on research. Such spatial and temporal boundaries, by extension, provided the organizational framework for ERC panelist meetings that our interviewees experienced as stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden situations. Below, we will focus on a number of dimensions that appeared to generate much stress and anxiety during the actual meetings.

Uncomfortable encounters When early-career scientists in Sweden recounted their actual StG panelist meetings, three particular dimensions were deployed to construct these meetings as stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden situations. One dimension was a notion of panelist meetings that were associated with large consequences. While this notion had presumably been constructed on a successive basis, influenced by reminders from senior colleagues and exercises during tutoring workshops, as well as by portrayals from ERC top managers, our interviewees emphasized that, when their individual slots commenced, the high stakes at play suddenly became very palpable. "I entered the [meeting] room, and that felt special because, once it [the meeting] started, time was short and the stakes were high" (Recipient 23 LS), as an early-career scientist put it. Another scientist similarly mentioned that "the pressure was unbelievable, you know, a big part of your career is hanging on those specific 25 minutes" (Recipient 6 PE).

Another dimension that early-career scientists employed to construct StG panelist meetings as stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden situations was a notion of meetings conducted by respected actors. Across different disciplinary domains, our interviewees regularly asserted that some of Europe's most lauded researchers were active as panelists at the ERC. That said, the exact identity of StG panelists was deliberately surrounded by secrecy (König 2019). The ERC's administrators only released lists with chairperson names after all evaluation procedures had concluded. This meant that StG applicants entered their meeting rooms having heard loose rumors from senior colleagues about what panelists were in attendance during earlier years, as well as vague predictions from research officers about what ERC panelists would be in attendance now. Many of our interviewees described how that secrecy served to augment the stress and anxiety they already experienced in advance of their StG meetings. But these meetings also seemed to be reinforced as impartial situations that were centered on research when our interviewees described the secrecy surrounding ERC panelists. Scientists appeared to be taken aback when they eventually stood in front of StG panelists:

> "There were Nobel Prize winners sitting there [in the meeting room] … That was a dream panel, the very best experts from my discipline were in that room… On top of that, one of my heroes was there, so I thought 'whatever happens, [panelist name] has read my application, and that's something I can live off for a long time'" (Recipient 21 LS).

Previous work on evaluations shows that the involvement of experts in evaluations tends to generate associations with informed and rigorous procedures (Allen and Lincoln 2004; de Nooy 1988). Such associations may very well have colored how our interviewees recounted their experiences from standing in front of the ERC's panelists.

An additional dimension that early-career scientists in Sweden deployed to construct StG panelist meetings as stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden situations was, besides large consequences and respected actors, a notion of panelists who employed uncompromising practices. These practices were mainly connected to the challenging questions that ERC panelists supposedly posed after applicants had presented their proposals. StG applicants were, as soon as they had finished presenting, allegedly "bombarded with a quick succession of questions" from three designated panelists that "barely allowed you to catch your breath, let alone think or reflect" (Recipient 30 SH). As one of our interviewees succinctly put it, "you had to find your verbal composure quickly, simple and plain" (Runner-up 29 PE). These questions were not only challenging because of their fast-paced sequencing, but also due to their quasi-confrontational style:

> "They [panelist questions] were not some pleasant chit-chat, they were all about trying to challenge you and see whether you got defensive or unsure… That seemed like the main purpose… I mentioned [during the meeting] that I recently got a grant with [company name] on a certain subtopic, which covered part of my StG proposal, and the next question was directly 'so you don't need the ERC grant anymore or what?'" (Recipient 23 PE).

In general, StG panelist meetings seemed to engender considerable stress and anxiety (a *Nature* (2013: 409) editorial labeled the ERC's meetings as "remorseless"). Some of our interviewees, however, described their StG meetings as more or less challenging depending on what preliminary grades early-career scientists had obtained from panelists, who had read all written applications before the final-stage appointments. Now, the ERC did not release any preliminary grades, but there was, despite this, a perception among certain interviewees that high-graded applicants "were pretty safe and would most likely be funded", while low-graded applicants "got a shot, even though they were unlikely to be funded" (Runner-up & recipient 8 PE). Middle-graded StG applicants supposedly faced the most challenging meetings, as ERC panelists probed, but struggled, to decide whether those applicants should be funded or not (cf. van Arensbergen and van den Besselaar 2012).

While some scientists perceived that StG panelist meetings could be more or less challenging depending on preliminary grades, two of our interviewees emphasized how most perceptions surrounding these meetings were rather exaggerated. The latter interviewees reflected on what they regarded as needless stress and unnecessary anxiety, which was jointly built up by senior colleagues, research officers, and ERC top managers in anticipation of final-stage StG appointments:

> "In a way, I felt like they [StG appointments] were built up too much because everybody at home said that you had to prepare endlessly, that it was such a big thing, and it was almost a bit anticlimactic to get there [to Brussels] because it was just a presentation and a round of questions… It was obviously a big thing, and the instructions from the ERC were strict and so on, but people almost overprepared… Afterward, I said 'I will never do this again' because I would not be able to handle the pressure, but it was not the appointment itself that was so stressful, it was all the anxiety before" (Recipient 7 PE).

These appointments constituted the final stage for early-career scientists as applicants, but scientists who succeeded with their StG applications often appeared to assume roles from which those practices that allegedly made ERC evaluation procedures so stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden were reinforced. It was, for example, not uncommon for previously successful StG applicants to subsequently assume roles as ERC panelists (König 2019). In Sweden, successful applicants, moreover, tended to assume roles as speakers at information sessions and as mock panelists during tutoring workshops. These past applicants would thus go on to socialize future applicants into particular perceptions that reinforced the desirability of and the elitist aura around StGs, as well the meticulous organizing of ERC evaluations. Altogether, such perceptions contributed to constructing the final-stage StG appointments as apex-esque, crescendo-like status-bestowing events that, because of their high stakes, also engendered considerable stress and anxiety among early-career scientists in Swedish universities.

Roles and Responsibilities that Construct and Sustain Funding Evaluations in Academia

Today, ERC grants are tremendously desired among scientists. These grants have become career-defining due to their material, as well as their symbolic, consequences. StGs, as such, not only consist of extremely generous resource amounts for lengthy basic research projects, but their preceding evaluations have also been transformed into procedures that profoundly impact the status of early-career scientists across Europe (Opsvik 2019; Stockero 2017). The ERC's evaluations are, indeed, regularly hailed as an outright "Champions League" (Morgan 2018) for scientists.

In this paper, we sought to develop new knowledge about the ways that certain funding evaluations are constructed as events with crucial significance for status bestowal throughout academia. Our argument was that we cannot understand the status consequences emanating from particular evaluations without understanding how these evaluations are constructed by those who participate in them. In advancing previous literature, we thus relegated the role played by research funders that construct evaluation procedures with status-bestowing momentum. Instead, our focus was on the role of scientists as funding applicants that also contribute to constructing such momentum. We used a practice-based approach

to explore how early-career scientists in Sweden retrospectively constructed ERC StG evaluations as events with central bearing on status bestowal. In doing so, we showed that the status-bestowing momentum of these evaluations did not emerge suddenly after those procedures were conducted, but that scientists largely constructed this momentum by intertwining their experiences across action chains involving multiple practices unfolding before and during ERC evaluations. To overview how this constructing played out, we group our findings into three types of practices that early-career scientists interlinked through chains of actions. We label those types as instructional, preparatory, and demarcative practices. Instructional practices, which played out before StG evaluations, were driven by reminders from senior colleagues, who told junior colleagues about the possibility of achieving and securing a future in academia through ERC grants, as well as by recommendations from early-career scientists, who told other scientists that they did or did not possess sufficiently strong CVs for viable StG applications (cf. Nästesjö 2021). Moreover, preparatory practices unfolded during ERC evaluations, and these practices were fueled by research officers, who held tutoring workshops for early-career scientists whose applications had qualified to the final-stage StG appointments. Preparatory practices, by extension, introduced scientists to how stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden the ERC's final stage could be (cf. *Nature* 2013). This was followed by demarcative practices, which also played out during StG evaluations. These practices were driven by the ERC throughout its final-stage appointments in Brussels. Demarcative practices encompassed the creation of spatial boundaries that allowed minimal interactions between competing applicants, as well as the creation of temporal boundaries that enabled precise interactions between applicants and panelists. Further demarcative practices fueled by the ERC included those boundaries that lauded and respected StG panelists were asked to draw among variously graded applicants, thus rendering what early-career scientists regarded as impartial funding decisions (cf. Schiermeier 2014). Altogether, the experiences of scientists from traversing across interweaved instructional, preparatory, and demarcative practices infused ERC evaluations with stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden features that helped construct these evaluations as events holding enough momentum to bestow considerable status on those few applicants who ultimately succeeded with their proposals.

Throughout our three types of practices, we could also see how certain successful StG applicants switched roles over time, moving from being the ones who received instructions, endured preparations, and faced demarcations, to being the ones who instructed, prepared, and demarcated. Oftentimes, as Lave and Wenger (1991) point at, successful actors have previously been initiated, educated, and socialized into desirable practices. These actors subsequently tend to initiate, educate, and socialize other actors in their communities. In our study, applicants first learnt the ropes within Swedish departments and universities; then, they weathered the procedures required to access ERC grants through high-stakes evaluations; and, finally, they turned the tables and switched roles, thereby assuming tasks that included sitting on SRC mock panels and/or on StG panels. Previously successful applicants thus continued to participate in the construction of ERC evaluations as events with important bearing on status bestowal, but these former applicants now did so through new

roles. It is, as such, not only interesting to note what practices mattered as StG evaluations were constructed, but also to note how actors that shifted roles over time helped sustain this construction by ensuring its continuity.

Here, an important aspect to contemplate is that, when ERC evaluations are constructed as status-bestowing events in a distributed manner among multiple actors (with some actors even shifting roles over time), the responsibility for any consequences emanating from these events would also appear to be distributed. This is, at least, an aspect that can be contemplated from the perspective of early-career scientists that applied for StGs. At first glance, the ERC would, as an intermediary that organized StG evaluation procedures, carry significant responsibility for any consequences deriving from those evaluations. By emphasizing the centrality of original research ideas, and by organizing challenging panelist appointments, the ERC contributed extensively to shaping what scientists perceived as stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden evaluations. But, more broadly than that, senior colleagues, department heads, university vice chancellors, and nation-level research funder officers also contributed to constructing the stress and anxiety that surrounded StG evaluation procedures. In various ways, these actors added impetus to ERC evaluations by pushing StGs as highly exclusive and desirable grants that not only were central for the careers of scientists, but also for the status of departments and universities hosting applicants. Finally, as applicants, early-career scientists themselves would carry certain responsibility too. They constructed and sustained ERC grants as exclusive and desirable by propagating informal merit requirements; by discouraging applications from particular scientists; and, in some cases, by embracing roles on mock panels during tutoring workshops and/or on panels throughout StG evaluations. In some ways, the ERC's evaluations can thus be connected to Bourdieu's (1996: 230) concept of *illusio*, or a "collective belief in the game and in the sacred value of its stakes". Chancellors, colleagues, applicants, panelists, officers, and heads viewed StGs from different perspectives, but, in one way or another, all of these actors contributed to constructing ERC evaluations as events with significance for status bestowal, and, thereby, implicitly or explicitly, accepted and legitimated this 'game', despite its stress-inducing and anxiety-ridden features. Ultimately, our contemplation of distributed responsibility points at important issues concerning the negative impact we, as applicants, as panelists or officers at funders, and/or as academic leaders within departments and universities, may exert on research milieus around us where there seems to be a desire for status, and its associated advantages, that could easily transcend into stress, anxiety, and other similar affects (cf. de Botton 2004).

Subsets, Triadic Dynamics, and Tempered Status Desires in Funding Evaluations

We have, throughout this paper, explored questions dealing with how early-career scientists in Sweden retrospectively intertwined experiences from practices into action chains that served to construct ERC evaluations as status-bestowing events, which, because of the high stakes at play, also engendered much stress and anxiety. As we have only commenced to address these questions, our paper also opens up

several inquiries for future research on the construction of events with bearing for status in academia.

When it comes to actors that construct such events, we could gain additional insights by expanding our scope beyond the practices of scientists who succeeded, or almost succeeded, in funding evaluations. We solely interviewed early-career scientists who had reached the final StG stage, and they only form a subset of all scientists who may or may not construct ERC evaluations as status-bestowing events in Swedish academia. Our analysis did, for example, not encompass the practices of early-career scientists who were disqualified during early StG evaluation stages, nor of those who had not submitted applications at all. How would these scientists construct the ERC's evaluations? And, to adopt a comparative stance, what similarities and/or dissimilarities could be seen among the constructions of early-career scientists who reached different evaluation stages?

Moreover, because our study focused on scientists, we need work that also incorporates the role of intermediaries, such as research funders, and relevant audiences, such as peers, administrators, and academic leaders, to understand how events with significance for status are constructed through practices among three actor groups. While panelists, colleagues, research officers, department heads, and university vice chancellors were included in our analysis, we only considered their respective roles from the perspective of early-career scientists. What triadic dynamics would emerge if we fully and simultaneously incorporate the role of scientists, intermediaries, and relevant audiences in constructing certain evaluations as status-bestowing events?

Finally, as for the stress and anxiety that such events seem to generate, we would benefit from exploring new ways of devising departments, universities, and other research milieus within which merits can be rewarded, status can be bestowed, and careers can be secured through various academic practices, without an undue reliance on 'life-changing' funding evaluations. We, as scientists, panelists, officers, and/or leaders, are, to a considerable extent, collectively responsible for an academic sector that, in many of its disciplinary domains, is rife with status desire. What can we collectively do to temper this desire?

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