

Letter to the Editors of *FQS*

A.E. van Wyk

Dear editors,

I would like to comment on the following contribution:

Roth, Wolff-Michael (2002, September). Evaluation and Adjudication of Research Proposals: Vagaries and Politics of Funding [87 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research* [On-line Journal], 3(3).
<http://www.qualitative-research.net/fqs-texte/3-02/3-02roth-e.htm> (Date of Access: December 16, 2002).

As a natural scientist (Botanist) I accidentally came across this contribution whilst trying to look for potential answers as to why, at the height of my academic career, and following the recent receipt of several awards for academic achievement, our National Research Foundation (NRF; previously the Foundation for Research Development) just informed me, in two brief sentences, that my research proposal (comprising 15 projects; 13 funded by the NRF the previous year; involving 8 doctoral and 4 master's students) has been rejected for funding. I could particularly identify with the statements made in paragraph 1 of ROTH's paper.

As a university teacher I have more than 25 years experience of the vagaries and politics of funding for research proposals. In South Africa we currently have a dual system of evaluation for natural scientists, both open to all the shortcomings of the peer-review based system noted in ROTH's article. Not only must a research proposal pass the review process, but individual researchers must also, about every five years, undergo personal rating procedures in which they are allocated, among others, either a C, B or A grading indicative of their perceived standing as a researcher (see <http://www.nrf.ac.za/>). Until recently only rated scientists were allowed to submit proposals for funding.

Over the years I have served on many committees and participated in many capacities linked to the assessment and funding of research proposals. Following my involvement in a particular decision-making committee to evaluate reviewers reports a few years ago, I became completely disillusioned by the blatant injustices towards applicants that took place in the group. Subsequently I have been an outspoken critic of the procedures adopted by the NRF. In answer to the question posed in ROTH's paragraph 87, I can assure the author that what he had written could just as well have been my experience with the South African NRF. Chances for "politics" to enter during decision making is perhaps even greater in our country because in addition to the English-Afrikaans language divide, we have the added issue of "redressing the past" by giving special treatment to so-called "previously disadvantaged" applicants and institutions ("affirmative action").

I have come to exactly the same conclusion as expressed by ROTH in his paragraph 82. However, the challenge is with what to replace the prevailing

system. I am constantly reminded by the funding authorities that peer-review is still the best and most widely adopted evaluation procedure in science. I would like to share one perspective that I gained after discussing the fairness of the peer-review procedure with colleagues in our Legal Faculty a few years ago. I was told that legally (Roman-Dutch law) it is considered unfair for any person who is a co-competitor for a certain prize, tender or benefit (funding) to participate in the procedure that is followed to identify the beneficiaries. Apparently the relevant principle in Latin is expressed as: "Nemo iudex in sua causa" or "No man may be judge in his own case". I firmly believe that referees cannot be objective if they compete for money from the same pool as those they review. Application of this principle is commonly seen in society, especially in competitions, where the employees of the business that sponsors a prize are not allowed to participate in the competition.

As in the case of SSHRC, applicants to the NRF are also given the opportunity to name assessors they think/hope would not provide an unbiased review (exactly as in paragraph 84). I have insisted in my applications that reviewers be approached that do not themselves apply for funding at NRF. In practice this usually meant colleagues from overseas. In my experience comments by such assessors are nearly always less harsh and acrimonious than the comments of some of those faceless (unanimous) local individuals who have stakes in the cutting of the funding cake. This seems to work very well for giving points to the project and for assessing an applicant as researcher. But a major weakness remains. The final decision-making committee is still, admittedly for practical reasons, made up of local stakeholders, resulting in all the problems ROTH so clearly highlighted in his contribution. Perhaps replacing such a committee with a selected board of "wise men" without stakes in the funding process may provide a solution, but may not be practical because of time and costs involved. And by providing such individuals with remuneration for their services, one may well compromise their impartiality.

Another commonly employed principle in the funding business is that of anonymity. Giving this kind of protection to evaluation and decision making participants leaves the door open for abuse. In other types of decision-making processes (e.g. government; parliament) a high premium is placed on transparency, accountability and openness. Yet these virtues are swept under the carpet when it comes to funding applications. Interesting comments on the principle of anonymity in refereeing of scientific papers can be found in the book *Passionate Minds* (WOLPERT and RICHARDS 1997, especially p.24-25¹). It would be informative to study the scholarly literature on the "psychology of anonymity" as part of ones assessment of current funding procedures.

I must congratulate ROTH on an excellent article on a very relevant topic.

1 Wolpert, Lewis and Richards, Alison (1997). *Passionate minds: The inner world of scientists*. New York: Oxford University Press.

With best wishes

Yours sincerely,

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