

Laughter and the management of divergent positions in peer review interactions



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Abstract

In this paper we focus on how participants in peer review interactions use laughter as a resource as they publicly report divergence of evaluative positions, divergence that is typical in the give and take of joint grant evaluation. Using the framework of conversation analysis, we examine the infusion of laughter and multimodal laugh-relevant practices into sequences of talk in meetings of grant reviewers deliberating on the evaluation and scoring of high-level scientific grant applications. We focus on a recurrent sequence in these meetings, what we call the *score-reporting sequence*, in which the assigned reviewers first announce the preliminary scores they have assigned to the grant. We demonstrate that such sequences are routine sites for the use of laugh practices to navigate the initial moments in which divergence of opinion is made explicit. In the context of meetings convened for the purposes of peer review, laughter thus serves as a valuable resource for managing the socially delicate but institutionally required reporting of divergence and disagreement that is endemic to meetings where these types of evaluative tasks are a focal activity.

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1. Introduction

Evaluative meetings are ubiquitous across business, educational, and research institutions. These are meetings in which participants with special professional expertise are charged with the task of reviewing and collaboratively evaluating a set of materials, with the resulting evaluations being used to support institutional decisions regarding the distribution of grades, admissions or hiring decisions, or, as we consider here, grant funding. Interactional research on evaluative meetings has included guild admission meetings (McKinlay and McVittie, 2006), academic curriculum proposal meetings (Barnes, 2007), and teaching-team meetings for evaluating student achievement documents (Mazeland and Berenst, 2008), among other contexts. Whether evaluating applicants for admission to an organization or for rank and achievement, the consequences of such meetings are far-reaching. The current paper reports on findings from the close examination of one specific form of evaluative meeting, in which expert scientists review applications for large federally-funded research grants, with such funding playing a major role in the career advancement for academic researchers.

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Despite the ubiquity of such meetings and the significant influence they have on the distribution of substantial amounts of research funding, their moment-to-moment interactional dynamics have remained largely unexamined. Research on grant peer review panel interactions has almost exclusively relied on ethnographic interviews and participant observation (Ahlqvist et al., 2013; Lamont, 2009) rather than close analysis of unfolding interaction. Indeed, research directly examining discourse and interaction in review panel meetings has only recently emerged (Gallo et al., 2013; Pier et al., 2017; Raclaw and Ford, 2015). As part of a larger project aimed at documenting interactional practices inside the “black box” of peer review meetings,¹ in this paper we focus on how participants in these settings use laughter as a resource to manage the divergence of evaluative positions that characterizes the give and take of joint grant evaluation. Using the framework of conversation analysis, we examine the infusion of laughter and multimodal laugh-relevant practices (Ford and Fox, 2010) into episodes of naturally-unfolding interaction taken from panel meetings of grant reviewers, meetings following the norms and practices used by the U.S. National Institutes of Health (NIH). We focus on a recurrent sequence in these meetings, what we call the *score-reporting sequence*, a sequence type that is a frequent location in our data for the introduction of laugh-relevant practices.

In the sections that follow we introduce the score-reporting sequence and examine how and why the recurrent activity of reporting preliminary scores emerges as a locus for laugh-relevant practices.

2. Data, methods, and the “score-reporting sequence”

The analysis draws from a database of three meetings convened for the purposes of peer review; the focal task of these meetings was joint evaluation of high-level scientific research grant proposals. Each panel consisted of 10–12 reviewers who were assigned a set of six real but anonymized grant applications for NIH Research Project Grants, also known as R01 grants. Each panel reviewed grant applications that had originally been submitted to NIH's National Cancer Institute. All reviewers were experts in their respective fields of oncology research at varying stages of their research careers, and all had previously received R01 grants, an NIH requirement for serving as an R01 reviewer.² After individually evaluating the applications and sharing their evaluations through a web portal, panelists representing research institutions throughout the US, traveled to a major US city and assembled in a meeting room to review the applications. Each meeting, videotaped from three camera angles, lasted from 2:53 to 3:37, totaling approximately 10 h of meeting interaction. Interactions were recorded with full informed consent of participants, and permission to publish transcripts and still images from these interactions was obtained from all participants. The video data were transcribed using the conventions of conversation analysis (Hepburn and Bolden, 2013), with notations of embodied actions relevant to the analysis at hand.

In addition to the reviewers, meetings were attended by a Scientific Review Officer (SRO) who served as the primary coordinator for the pre-meeting review process, including the selection of a meeting chair and co-chair from among the reviewers. In concert with the chairperson, the SRO oversaw the running of the panel meeting itself. Prior to the meeting, reviewers were responsible for writing critiques detailing the strengths and weaknesses of their assigned applications and for arriving at preliminary scores for the overall impact of the application as well as for specific review criteria. Reviewers scored applications using a reverse nine-point scale, with one corresponding to “Exceptional” and nine corresponding to “Poor.”³ Each reviewer's preliminary scores and critiques were made accessible to other panelists through an online review site. In the days leading up to the in-person meeting, this site allowed reviewers to gain a general sense of whether a grant application had been evaluated favorably by its three assigned reviewers.⁴

The overall impact scores and critiques for each application are also made interactionally consequential during the meeting itself, particularly during the early moments of each application's review, when the preliminary scores are announced by each reviewer. We turn now to examining how the announcements of preliminary scores in particular are treated within the review meeting during a recurrent and predictable sequence type: the *score-reporting sequence*. It is in this initial reporting phase of the meeting that we find evidence that participants treat score divergence as accountable, delicate, worthy of mitigation, and potentially laughable.

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² See Pier et al. (2015) for a full description of the design and implementation of the peer review panels examined in this study.

³ Reviewers are provided with these details of the scoring rubric prior to the grant review period, though there is evidence that reviewers' individual understanding of these scores are fluid and subjective, and during meetings reviewers actively work toward negotiating shared understandings of the “meaning” of a score (Pier et al., 2015).

⁴ A copy of the review template used by reviewers can be downloaded from http://grants.nih.gov/grants/peer/critiques/rpg_critique_template.doc.

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