

Framing Change: Feminist Theories and the Conceptual Frameworks of ADVANCE IT Grant Proposals

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Abstract

This project applies a content analysis approach to the texts of 18 NSF ADVANCE Institutional Transformation grants attempting to understand the ways in which three variable impact each other:

1. the conceptual framework the grant proposal employs,
2. the extent to which the grant proposal articulates a feminist analytical/theoretical lens, and
3. the sustainability of grant programs as demonstrated through institutionalization.

The authors hypothesize that writers will avoid explicitly feminist language, and that those grant proposals that do employ explicitly feminist language, theoretical frameworks or methods will be least likely to be fully institutionalized.

Introduction

According to the often quoted adage by linguists Chervis Kramarae and Paula Treichler, “Feminism is the radical notion that women are people.” This Enlightenment notion that women, as human beings, are deserving of equitable treatment as a human right, is perhaps the most common argument for full inclusion that grant writers use when proposing institutional transformation around issues of gender to the National Science Foundation through the ADVANCE program. The second most common argument is for women’s full inclusion is an economic one: the need for the most highly competent and talented work force possible. This second argument threads through recent important research, such as The National Academy of Sciences’ *Beyond Bias and Barriers: Fulfilling the Potential of Women in Academic Science and Engineering*. While both of these arguments offer institutions good reasons to fully include women, neither requires institutional transformation—they simply argue for inclusion.

The goals of institutional transformation require institutions to change in ways that both accommodate and reflect their changing faculty. While helping women adapt to sometimes hostile environments may eventually change institutions, many talented women will leave the institution for each of those who is able acclimate—one of the causes of our leaky pipeline problems. In contrast, the power of institutions to co-opt or transform goals in conservative ways, or to minimize differences between proposed changes and existing institutions make change painfully slow (Clemens 755).

In organizations such as WEPAN, there have been, for many years, on-going conversations concerning strategies for institutional transformation around increasing the participation of women and other under-represented groups in STEM disciplines. Five years before the National Science Foundation’s first ADVANCE Institutional Transformation were awarded in 2001, Lazarus and Nair began building a case for institutional transformation; a central component of this case was the articulation of a “Framework for Systematic Transformation” (1996), arguing that institutions seeking transformation must first critically examine those “habits of the mind” created and reinforced through the institution’s ethos (38-39).

Since that time, proceedings of the WEPAN conference have been an important venue for publishing research from NSF ADVANCE IT grants. Among these, several stand out as describing their conceptual frameworks in useful detail. Sheridan, Carnes, and Handelsman modify a “Stages of Change” model borrowed from behavioral psychology “to measure attitudinal change that will ultimately result in the diversification of the scientific labor force” (2003, 5). Bilen-Green, Birmingham and Burnett further suggest that the framework provided by the National Science Foundation in their grant solicitation offered their institution a path toward transformation even before they were awarded an NSF IT grant (2008). Other research presented at WEPAN from ADVANCE IT grants describes programs, successes, and barriers to success, but without describing in detail an overarching conceptual framework that either explains or examines institutional change (for example Montelone and Dyer 2004).

Although explicitly feminist explanatory theories are not part of the mainstream conversation at WEPAN, feminist theory has certainly informed both the organization and its goals. Moreover, every year the conference proceedings reflect an integration of feminist theories and frameworks into richly varied research (Rosser 1993; Subramaniam and Ginorio 1998; Steffen-Fluhr 2003). This kind of feminist research is offering us more “progressive visions of science and technology” as Subramaniam and Ginorio write, and “the need for collaboration and dialogue between feminists and scientists and engineers becomes all the more pressing given the growing chasm between these disciplines” (1998, 173). Such collaborative research needs to be funded, but there exists a concern that feminist research, or research framed by feminist scholarship, is not fundable.

This paper began as a hypothesis about grant funding in general, and the use of explicitly feminist theories and preoccupations as part of an argument for funding gender research. The hypothesis was simple: that feminism as a word and a set of theories have become so discredited that even feminist researchers avoid their use in framing grant. Furthermore, the authors of this paper speculated, even if such projects were funded, program implementation and institutionalization might be more difficult because researchers used the “f” word.

We chose to examine a set of proposals easily available to the public: NSF’s ADVANCE IT proposals. Moreover, because our institution had written an IT proposal, we knew that one of the NSF’s requirements for these proposals was that they include a theorized conceptual framework of some sort. Our assumption as we began this research was that even though the goals of institutional transformation are, in fact, broadly feminist, few institutions that need transformation because they are hierarchical and gendered are in a position to develop a grant proposal that uses explicitly feminist language; such a choice could disengage some powerful members of the campus community who most need transformation. In fact, we knew that there had been some concern by members of our own team about using a politically loaded (but highly accurate) term like “gendered-institution” in the title of our university’s proposal.

Methods

We designed a two-tiered research approach examining our hypotheses, of which this paper is the first tier. For the first stage of this project, we read grant proposals to test whether our hypotheses seemed accurate, examining the conceptual frameworks the authors employed to shape their arguments, programs, research, and evaluations. The second stage of this study will

be to interview authors and PIs about their choices while writing their proposals. We decided to use content analysis as a method of categorizing the grant proposals we read in two ways:

1. by the conceptual framework they employed; and
2. by degree to which a feminist theoretical structure was explicitly articulated.

In addition, for each proposal we included in our sample, we found a final report and/or made a recent trip to the program's web site to gather information about the level to which the proposed programs have been institutionalized.

Sample

This project examines the proposals of 18 of the 19 ADVANCE Institutional Transformation grants that were awarded in 2001, 2002, and 2003. We limited the sample to these three years, because all of these projects have now expired and have had final reports written and submitted. We were unable to get a copy of one grant, and therefore have considered only 18.

Categories:

When categorizing by conceptual framework, we tried to aggregate data into as few categories as possible so that we would not be discussing individual programs. Wherever possible, we quoted from the text's description of its own framework (Appendix A). Many of the proposals, however, used no explicit framework, and simply described institutional needs and proposed solutions. When assigning the degree to which a feminist framework was articulated, we looked for two pieces of evidence to suggest that an analytical or theoretical lens was explicitly feminist: 1. the proposal needed to use the words feminist, feminism, feminist analysis, etc. 2. In addition, the proposal needed to employ the language of typical preoccupations: discussions of barriers to success, bias, harassment, discrimination, gender bias, gendered institution, etc. The proposal needs to argue that structural causes have impeded women's success. We classified those proposals that only included the language of the second point as presenting a non-specific feminist approach. Those proposals that aimed to acclimate women to existing institutional structures, or to explore whether gendered discrimination exists and has caused the under-representation of women at the institution, we categorized as not employing a feminist theoretical or analytical structure.

Finally, our method of determining whether programs had become institutionalized relied upon two checks: 1. institutional self-reporting in the project's final report to the NSF; and 2. a visit to the project website to check for activity. Signs of activity included: active calendars, registrations, speakers, awards, calls for proposals, and links to programs proposed in the original document. If more than half of the initially proposed programs and activities were both self-reported as continuing, and the website showed signs of recent activity, we said that the project had been effectively institutionalized. If only the report or the website claimed programs were institutionalized, we categorized the institutionalization as unclear. If neither the report or the website met these criteria, we say the program was not effectively institutionalized.

Although we also collected information on the institutional type and the PI and discipline, we did not look specifically at these categories for analysis.

Research

We found we were able to categorize the framework described into the proposals into four broad categories:

1. None
2. Business/management/leadership
3. Broadly social scientific
4. Social Scientific specifically articulated

Again, we attempted to use cues from the proposals themselves, even if we would not have named the framework in quite the same way the authors described. For example, one proposal claimed it would add to the knowledge base in gender studies. We categorized this proposal as articulating a specific social sciences discipline, even though we found few other clues to suggest that the methods or framework were from a gender studies perspective.

Table 1 combines all three of the factors our study attempted to glean from these proposals: the conceptual framework (or model) and number of occurrences, whether that conceptual framework was able to attach itself to a feminist approach (either explicitly or broadly defined), and whether the proposal using that framework was institutionalized.

Table 1: Relationship between conceptual framework to of feminist language

Model	Number times model used	Feminist approach (Y)	Institutionalized? (Y)
None	6	5/6 used feminist language	3/5 fully institutionalized
Business/management/leadership	5	4/5 used feminist language	1/5 fully institutionalized
Social Science (broad)	4	3/4 used feminist language	4/4 fully institutionalized
Social Science (specific)	3	1/3 used feminist language	1/3 fully institutionalized

Although we might have guessed that a feminist lens or theoretical perspective might be incompatible with a business/management conceptual framework, in this small sample, that seems to not be the case, as 4 of the 5 proposals using this conceptual framework tied it to a feminist theoretical/analytical perspective. Interestingly, however, this combination was the least likely to be institutionalized effectively. By far the most common finding was of no clearly articulated conceptual framework in combination with a broadly feminist perspective. In fact, when the categories of no framework and a broadly social science approach, it is by far the largest category (10 proposals), has by far the most instances of also employing a feminist perspective (80%, or 8 of 10), and has the greatest chance of being fully institutionalized (70% or 7 in 10). In contrast, those proposals that employ the most specific conceptual frameworks 8 of 18), have the least likelihood of being fully institutionalized (2 of 8, or 25%).

Table 2 looks at these categories in a slightly different way and considers the relationship between employing an explicitly feminist theoretical approach to the record of program institutionalization. Surprisingly, all three proposals that employ an explicitly feminist

theoretical approach have strong records of program institutionalization; in fact, all are recognized leaders among ADVANCE awardees.

Table 2: Relationship of feminist frame to institutionalization

Feminist Approach	Number of proposals employing	Program institutionalized?
Explicitly feminist approach	3	3
Present feminist approach	10	4
No feminist approach	5	2

Conversely, there is no real difference in the institutionalization records of programs that present an approach that employs generally feminist language (4 of 10, 40%) and those that make no mention of typical feminist preoccupations (2 of 5, 40%). Although our sample is so small our findings can only be interesting, not generalized, this sample suggests our hypotheses were inaccurate.

Analysis

The authors of these proposals did not seem to avoid general feminist language in their grant proposals, as 13 of 18 proposals used a generally feminist approach and interpretation of data. However, only 3 of 18 authors chose to discuss their feminist approaches explicitly and call them feminist. This may or may not suggest a reticence in employing explicitly feminist perspectives in grant proposals. These data suggest that while we cannot know that a feminist conceptual framework aids in institutionalizing a grant funded institutional transformation program, (the numbers are simple too small for that claim), in this sample, employing explicitly feminist language did not seem to undermine the small number of programs that chose this strategy.

This is not meant to suggest that “institutionalization” is the most important factor in evaluating the success of an Institutional Transformation grant; on the contrary, a truly successful set of programs might be assumed to have been so successful they were not longer needed. Moreover, evaluating the success of individual programs and discontinuing funding to those that did not achieve results is only reasonable practice. But what “institutionalization” does signify is a level of acceptance. That certain pieces of programs were accepted enough to be employed, evaluated, and found, at some level successful. In that way, the concept of “institutionalization” can stand in for an idea being acceptable—not incommensurably foreign. Grant proposals, as concepts and plans with readers, need to convince those readers of the soundness of their ideas; therefore, this might suggest that at some level, feminist ideas, theories, and analysis, don’t automatically undermine success of a program.

In contrast to the finding about feminist language, the factor that seemed to have most negative impact on institutionalization was the specificity of the conceptual framework. The more clearly articulated the framework was, the more tied to a specific model from a specified discipline, the less likely the programs that grew from that model would be institutionalized—at least in these 18 proposals.

In addition, the assumption that some models, particularly those borrowed from business and management disciplines, might somehow be incompatible with feminist theoretical or analytical

lenses does not seem to be true. In fact, feminist language was distributed nearly equally across all categories except explicit social science models. This suggests that when doing feminist work, a variety of disciplines could find it useful to articulate explicit feminist language in their grants.

Two issues stand out as especially needing further inquiry as this research continues:

1. Expanding the set of proposal to include those ADVANCE IT proposals from 2004 and 2005. Gathering a larger set of data would make claims about finding more meaningful
2. Beginning to interview authors and PIs on these grants about approaches and choices and their own relationships to feminist research.

Discussion

This research is potentially important as we contemplate social and institutional change around issues of gender. Researchers such as Elisabeth Clements have argued that in the past, women's groups were most successful ideologically, when they adapted "non-political models of organization for political purposes" (1993, 758). This research, and other like research on women's social movements (Taylor 1999) might be what suggested our initial hypotheses that feminist grant writers might be smartest not to explicitly mention the political interpretive lens they would employ in transforming society and institutions. Although our sample is too small to make generalizable assertions, we can claim that in this sample, explicitly feminist language did not negatively impact a program's ability to become institutionalized. Moreover, more programs than not employed language that revealed feminist concerns and preoccupations. While this seems absolutely appropriate in undertaking work to dismantle gendered institutions, we, as grant writers seeking funding for research both engineering and feminist, may do more to censor ourselves out of fear that our politicized approach will be rejected. That concern and self-censorship may be more harmful to our roles as change agents than a clearly articulated feminist theoretical framework.

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