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## Editorial

# What Does the Research Teach Feminists about the Possibility of Organizational Change?

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At the winter meeting of SWS [Sociologists for Women in Society] in 2019, Barbara heard Julia give her SWS Feminist Lecture and was totally fascinated. The U.S. National Science Foundation had been spending millions of dollars each year to promote gender transformation on college campuses, hoping to increase the participation of women in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) disciplines. What had we learned about the organizational policies that were changed to overcome gender bias? What interventions made the most change? What did not seem to make any difference? Julia presented data on 19 years (at the time) at her own school, where she had been a major player in the feminist change agenda. When she gave the Feminist Lecture, she also talked about the potential for valuable insights from the many feminist sociologists who were working on institutional change projects with and without ADVANCE funding.

We met again at an Eastern Sociological Society conference in Boston later that spring and took a long walk. We talked about what we could learn from ADVANCE grants about leveraging social change and the implications for feminist theories about organizations. The idea for a possible special issue was hatched during that walk.

Julia, Sheryl Skaggs (as Deputy Editor), and Kevin Stainbeck (Editorial Board member) proposed such an issue to the Publications Committee; the idea was accepted, and we were off. This [special] issue is the result.

Julia and her coauthor Nestor Hernandez offer the results of what they have learned by analyzing two decades of data, some before, during, and after an ADVANCE project at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln. Their project made modest improvements in incorporating

more women into most STEM fields on their campus. But the lessons learned from the process of striving to make change was more important than the specific numbers.

Sociologists often focus on changing policies as the primary way to change structure, and they often need engaged and supportive administrators to make such changes happen. Indeed, that was the strategy originally used at the University of Nebraska. When the administration changed—and with it the support to continue revising policies as well as some of the policies themselves—it seemed as if the organizational change efforts had stalled. But what this case teaches us is that the NSF award brings with it a cultural legitimacy for equity efforts, and also has implications for the trajectories of faculty who are early in their careers when they engage in ADVANCE efforts.

Such cultural legitimacy fuels changes in organizational logics. The people hired during the ADVANCE grant value policies that promote equity for women, and over time they become senior faculty. Perhaps the most powerful success of ADVANCE grants is that the structural changes they create (even if temporary) begin to change the organizational logics, and that change can lead to equity efforts mainstreamed throughout university departments, from Human Resources to the Office of Institutional Research. The dynamic relationship among feminist actors funding organizational policy change (via NSF) legitimates those goals, and can begin to shift organizational culture itself. And of course, once the cultural beliefs have changed, then, once again, the policies seem to follow.

Other articles in this issue also focus on organizational cultural logics. Nelson and Zipfel show how the concept of implicit bias was useful for organizational change because it is demonstratable, relatable, versatile, actionable, and seemingly impartial. They argue that because this concept could be translated into action within scientific discourse, it has become ubiquitous in organizational change efforts in the higher education sector. Thébaud and Taylor show that even in the twenty-first century the “specter of motherhood” as antithetical to scientific careers leads young women to leave the academy, even before they are mothers. The cultural belief that women scientists must eschew motherhood drives many away from STEM careers. It is not only beliefs about motherhood, however, but also about meritocracy that can complicate efforts to change universities. Bird and Rhoton find that some women scientists fully endorse meritocracy and believe that other women do not succeed because they do not meet the criteria—they are just not good enough. Thus, women scientists cannot be presumed to be allies in gender equity work because not all of them endorse projects to specifically focus on women. Lockhart’s research uncovers an intriguing pattern: the conceptualization of gender itself within a scientific field can either encourage or dissuade young women from entering the discipline.

The actual policies that promote faculty equity also need to be addressed. Misra et al. find that white women faculty perceive that their workloads are unequal: they believe they do more service, teaching, and mentoring than their male colleagues do. Women of color believe that their departments are less likely to credit their work through departmental reward systems. Policies must be transparent and reward the work that faculty do to retain women in scientific fields within the academy. Laube reminds us, through in-depth interviews with faculty she interviewed early and then later in their careers, that feminist sociologists are particularly well suited to participate in, and evaluate, attempts to transform universities.

This special issue shows that the insights from feminist sociological research are vital for attempts to create more equitable universities. We must change structures and policies. But we should also pay close attention to how those policies begin to change cultural logics, and how that cultural change can simmer undetected for years. And then those seeds planted with ADVANCE grants can produce fruit in new organizational policies years later.

Barbara J. Risman is editor in chief at *Gender & Society*. She is a liberal arts and sciences distinguished professor of sociology at the University of Illinois at Chicago.

Julia McQuillan is Willa Cather Professor of Sociology at the University of Nebraska. She uses a variety of research methods to better understand the mechanisms that contribute to social inequality (e.g., by gender, race/ethnicity, and social class), primarily in health, public understanding of science, and Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) fields. She works in multidisciplinary teams, using mostly social psychological theories, and seeks to advance knowledge that will guide intervention efforts to increase equity in society.