Resistance and Replication: Feminists as Insiders and Outsiders in the Knowledge Economy

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My work (scholarly, teaching, and service) has always centered around issues of diversity and inclusion in academia, and the presence and voice of women (and feminists) in academia. I have focused on the United States and on sociologists in particular.

During sommersemester 2015, I was a visiting Fulbright Scholar at the University of Graz. During that time, I was inspired to being thinking more carefully about feminists who work on the borders of academia and who interact with the institution, but may not be OF the institution. I also began exploring a bit more carefully how women in various disciplines might do gender equity work.

One of my current projects entails talking with women from a variety of countries who are somehow engaged in gender equity work related to academia. Some are inside as professors, some as institutional researchers, and some are outside the institution, but engaged in gender research related to academia.

Talking with these women is pushing me to think carefully about how we construct and maintain borders and how we reconfigure them. I am continuing to question the foundations and biases on which our institutions (academia in this case) are built, and to further examine assumptions about presence and voice in the academy. How do we reshape boundaries and transform the academy (and thus the social world)?

To take up a stream in STS – these questions could be framed broadly as about queering the academy. How do we disrupt the dominant discourses and practices, and challenge normative assumptions? How do we engage in resistance instead of replication?

Disruption happens in diverse ways and with different targets. It may take the form of demand making -- attempting to influence or change laws, policy, and increase institutional access –what many of us think of as “politics-as-usual.” Such action opens the doors to institutions of higher education for women and other marginalized identity groups, provides support for claims demanding equal treatment, and influences institutional policies and procedures. Other times disruption is about meaning-making – engaging in discursive politics that suggest new ways of thinking about things, creating new knowledge, and shaping the debate.

The diverse disciplines, locations, and identities of the women I have interviewed are pieces of a mosaic that constitute a complex, yet connected, picture of the gendered institution of academia. Their multiple and diverse perspectives reveal an array of interconnected issues. Regardless of their structural position or individual identities, they are all insiders AND outsiders in various ways. Their presence and voice has the potential to disrupt the borders as they resist the replication of exclusionary practices, but they are also constrained by their positions and others’ assumptions.
It is important to acknowledge that the lack of diversity (and I think we really need to talk about inclusion so we can focus on culture and a sense of belonging/being welcome, rather than numbers) is not the PROBLEM OF WOMEN (or LGBTQ+ people, or feminists, or people of color – some of whom are women), but the problem of the institution. And, diversity isn’t only about counting people, it is about welcoming and expecting diverse experiences and ideas. As such, the rules, practices, and policies of institutions need to change.

First -- We must begin with the knowledge that academia is a gendered institution. AND that this gendered institution is built on the notion of a disembodied ideal worker (who most closely resembles a white heterosexual man (Acker 1990) AND an awareness that individuals who may reject stereotypes and support equality may still hold unconscious biases that shape their understanding and evaluation of others.

This means that there are structural constraints and cultural biases that shape individual experience. Organizations possess gendered ideologies, policies and procedures, cultures, interactions, and identities (Acker 1990). SO we have to create change strategies targeting all of these areas. There are a number of hidden problems that must be made visible as we work toward more inclusive institutions. These concepts help us see below the surface and get to the root of the problems that must be given attention.

Gendered Organizational Logics are the taken-for-granted, and often presumed gender-neutral policies and practices of organizations that create and reproduce hierarchies of power and meaning (Acker 1990; Britton 2000).

Implicit bias manifests as unconscious, negative ideas about certain groups held by individuals who may otherwise reject stereotypes and support equity policies.

Gender Schemas are implicit or unconscious assumptions about gender differences that affect our expectations and evaluations of women and men. The assumptions may lead to evaluation bias. For example, women (especially women of color) in academia (and especially in certain fields – engineering, computer science) are ALREADY Presumed Incompetent (Gutierrez y Muhs et al 2012) OR are already under suspicion because they are making a claim that their presence is legitimate, that they belong, that they are smart and competent and they should be listened to.

This talk focuses on what we can learn about inclusion and making change by using the cases of three differently situated women (all outside the U.S.). I will consider issues of disruption, insider/outsider status and borders, and the importance of structure. The three women are 1.) The Engineer Researcher 2.) The Independent Scholar and 3.) The Feminist and Gender Scholar inside the Academy.

The Engineer Researcher

One of my recent interviews was with a woman who is an Engineer in a research institute who is also involved in a gender equity projects outside her institution. The presence of women in such positions is certainly important (questions don’t tend to be asked if they are not present), though it is interesting to consider how they engage in disruption.

One of the key questions is might it mean when women who are engineers engage in work on gender equity. This woman is Inside the academy, but not inside feminist scholarship, and as a
woman in engineering is a bit of an outsider in her field. What does it mean when women work on feminist/gender projects (perhaps in a work group or on a project) but aren’t actually gender scholars and perhaps don’t really identify as feminist and do not identify as feminist scholars?

Certainly, engineers may be feminist, but the nature of their field makes it difficult for them to be what many of us would think of as gender scholars. What might feminist engineering look like?

Women in engineering are already rare and thus relative outsiders in their own discipline. Certainly they must be even more outside if they are openly feminist. Yet – presence matters. Engaging in feminist practice matters (even if one is not a “feminist engineer” – being a feminist AND an engineer matters). Conversation open up. There is “someone” to go to. “Someone” who asks questions. Someone who must be considered before speaking. These are small things – but if enough people pause before verbalizing a sexist comment, or think before they make assumptions, we move toward change.

The engineer I talked with revealed a very different analysis and perspective than what I tend to hear from gender scholars (who are typically in the social sciences or humanities). She noted: “In the beginning it was just the work that you have to do. Because I was not so interested. But with the time one starts to think about maybe we are superior gender. Once you have a family and you see how the man at home is complaining...but I can say here at the Institute (because of my superior) I think we have very good actions in this field on Institute level. And with the last project, XXX, we have an office where everybody can come and we can talk about it. We are more free to talk about it.”

Yet talking about “it,” is constrained. In her situation, the head of the institute is a woman, so she suggested there may be some inequity for men. “We have to talk about the position of men in our institute because we have a female at the top. ... So, yes, they are struggling for their rights. Especially in our group.” Yet she recounts several observations that indicate men may not really be “struggling for their rights.” She recounts:

Once a Minister of Infrastructure came to the Institute (a woman). The people around this event were all males except the top players – the Minister and the Director – it was a situation where the males started to rumor around. They “have to wear trousers, not skirts” because it was the opening of a plant on the roof of the building. And they said, they have to go on the roof now so they should not wear skirts they should wear trousers. So – somehow we are males, we wear trousers, we can go on the top, we can open the plant, but I don’t know if they can go on the roof of the institute because they wear skirts...

AND – while a woman may be at the top, men dominate middle management and they do not tend to promote women into their ranks. Perhaps, she suggests, “the men think it’s better to recruit a male than a female.” And then she reflects that “there are challenges, but in general I think there are mechanisms (to address the issue).”

The assumption is that if there are policies in place, gendered concerns are, or will be, addressed. There was a good deal of discussion of “gender balance,” – of collecting data and compiling reports. It is difficult to see how culture of gender inequality is addressed. In this context, gender equity or
gender balance is a Human Resources concern. They count people and organize lectures and workshops. But do people really respect the Human Resources department?

As in other disciplines (and perhaps not wrongly) one must be a “good” engineer first. This means before one can resist, one must replicate the structures and assumptions already in place in order secure a place inside. The engineer I interviewed reflected on this juggling act.

It’s interesting because this is not my main role...and we (women) are aware that we want to be good engineers so when we meet for a coffee we talk about engineering issues, not just gender issues. Gender issues is just one of the things...but it’s important.

...Because if you are not a good engineer they will say you are just talking about that (gender issues). You were a good engineer once when you worked with us, but now you are just talking about some strange things.

She also expressed some skepticism about whether her colleagues would listen to someone outside of engineering talk about gender equity issues in the field.

When it comes to engineers – it’s better when engineers talk about gender issues than gender scientists. Because if you are a gender scientist, I think engineers will not take you seriously... But if you are engineer and you are feminist or you are aware of gender issues then you can influence more than the people around you.

Yet, she also noted that it required outside intervention to be able to bring these ideas in (and you’ll recall she, herself, was also not interested before she became involved in outside projects.

If we didn’t receive the money (for the outside projects), it was not possible to change something here. And not just change, but to talk about it, to promote. To let in the ideas or promotional material. Because we have these speakers for research grants we someone let these ideas enter the institute.

The question emerges, then, as to whether engineers are best equipped to assess gender equity issues in their own field. Additionally, we must also consider the value of the presence of women in such fields and the ways this presence may (or may not) impact the gendered culture of the discipline.

**The Independent Scholar**

BECAUSE it is such a challenge for women in STEM to be feminist engineers, chemists, computer scientists, etc., social scientists may often be the researchers who enter these spaces to analyze, assess, and propose strategies for change.

As alluded to above, it can be challenging for social scientists to engage in conversation with so-called hard scientists. Feminist social scientists likely have a rather different epistemology, a different perspective and analysis from engineers, for example. A commitment to positivism can conflict with a social scientific perspective that says “Hey- we’re trying to understanding people in the social world. The social world is a messy and complicated place.”
Sometimes these “outsiders” are literally outside the academy. They are not professors or researchers with academic positions, but independent researchers or freelancers working on projects funded by governments or other organizations. As such, they are on the border of academe. They are not inside, but not exactly outside either. They may be invited in (if briefly), but then the project is over and they are once again on the outside.

A freelance gender scholar I recently spoke with explained that she clearly sees her work as activism. This is a much different understanding and integration of identities than expressed by the engineer. She explains, “It always was a kind of activism – it never was only for academia. It was always how can we change things? I don’t want to say I’m satisfied with this. I want to look behind it and think how can we change it. Small things, maybe.”

She sees an opening, possibilities for disruption, when outsiders enter the academy to do work with gender equity, but she also wonders what happens when they leave how much impact this brief presence has had, noting that “If there is nobody coming from outside they don’t have the opportunity to think about this. This kind of research is interesting because we bring inside academia new discussion. And when it’s finished nobody will discuss any more…”

I’m curious how much impact this type of work has on institutions. I can imagine some policy changes, some increase in numbers of diverse people, but I really wonder about cultural change...How much do those borders get stretched?

This freelance work by those on the outside has consequences for individuals as well. When she started this work many years ago, this gender scholar had the feeling she could always work in really interesting projects, but it is getting harder because the political (read money/grants) support has changed. She thought she would always be able to do “practical or research projects, but I never was in an institution so now I’m still freelancer and it’s really... The older I get, the harder it is to get – I miss a continuing place where I always have to get into new institutions to get to know how they work, how they think, what’s the logic, and then you – if the project is finished you leave it and it’s hard really to keep your own – it’s always up and down.”

This work on the border may be freer in some sense because the constraints of being dependent on the institution while also critiquing are not so strong. So, resistance may seem easier. But, how free is the choice to stay at the border? What if one really wants a position inside? How easy is it to make holes in the border or re-position it? Such a person may affect the institution BECAUSE they are on the outside. Perhaps because they are viewed as slightly more objective? OR Perhaps because they are not dependent on the institution for their livelihood? But what happens when they (or the project) leave? AND it is certainly a precarious position for the individual.

**The Feminist Inside the Academy**

Feminists and gender scholars inside the academy also have interesting possibilities and constraints. They are positioned inside the academy, but their political commitments may put them outside the mainstream. The final case I will share is that of a social scientist and professor I recently talked with, a feminist outsider within. While she identifies as feminist, she describes feeling concerned about getting pigeon-holed as someone who ONLY does gender scholarship, or ONLY works on issues
related to women. She sees the benefit of being identified as that kind of an expert, but also pushes again it as she has a range of interests.

This particular scholar has worked quite a lot (through various projects) with engineers and scientists on issues of gender. When she reflects on this work her status as an outsider become visible. She says:

It’s really interesting having conversations with people who are used to researching objects and material things and they want to apply this same kind of approach to researching people. And so you are kind of having to at least explain your position as a social scientist that you don’t necessarily kind of feel that research can do that. Or you at least have to acknowledge that the methodology has an impact on the results and things like that. Which you know they MUST be aware of anyway from doing their own research.

But it’s interesting having to talk to people – and [even one gender-focused project I’m on] – there are engineers on that project and there are interesting dynamics. One of the engineers is a professor so she’s very senior and eminent in her field and it’s interesting to have that dynamic in this research team where there’s quite a lot of social scientists who are perhaps more junior but have more experience researching gender.

As someone inside the academy who is often an outsider because others see her as the gender scholar, she thinks about how her work might contribute to changes in the academy. She thinks about how to resist and reframe, while also considering the need to be successful according to a set of already existing standards if she wants to stay, and thus to replicate. She reflects, “I like the word disruptive because if you’re going to change things that’s what you need to do and that’s what it’s about isn’t it? Doing action research – is you’re trying to make some changes. And people aren’t always pleased or welcoming of those changes.”

Sometimes disruption and resistance is as basic as asking questions. First, of course, it must occur to someone to ask a question. This might be an argument for more diversity since those who feel as though they do not belong or who have had different experiences than the majority may see things that are invisible to others because of their relative privilege. In this way, presence can be important. As this gender scholar notes,

It’s always interesting to ask questions or say, “Why do we do it that way?” So, for example, the university had advertised fellowships – grants provided by the university for people to do research full-time. -- So I was involved in making sure that when they advertised the fellowships that they talked about things like the possibility of getting help with childcare and those kinds of markers in marketing or advertising of positions that make it explicit that it’s open to everybody.

She comments that universities are very focused on “excellence,” on the concept of people being excellent. And again, the importance of asking certain types of questions becomes clear:
“What do you mean by excellence exactly?” Do you mean somebody who hasn’t had any career breaks who moves around a lot? Is that what you mean? (laughter) Because you know, this is a problem. So it is interesting and it’s been quite rewarding to just make a tiny bit of difference, you know? And hopefully they’ll be more – more women kind of doing really well in the university. Not kind of feeling they’re the only one who, heaven forbid, might have children. You know?

Insiders and Outsiders

All of these women are both insiders and outsiders, always navigating the borders, sometimes resisting, sometimes replicating, and always disrupting (if only by their presence).

They are at times outsiders to the institution, critiquing its gendered structure and questioning institutionalized practices that serve to perpetuate inequalities based on a host of intersecting social categories (e.g., race, ethnicity, age, class, sexual orientation, religion). In doing so, they disrupt longstanding assumptions about the production of knowledge, who belongs in academia, and how institutions welcome, or do not, certain types of people. They are also sometimes insiders, institutional actors conforming to (at least some) norms and supporting the mainstream structure to which they are accountable. Managing their multiple statuses can be challenging, as they must answer to their institutions and funding sources, as well as to themselves and their commitment to equality.

The structure of higher education constrains feminist practice, but also provides opportunities for conventional demand-making politics and discursive protest. The women I have spoken with, both in these recent interviews and in my earlier research (Laube 2010), describe how they live their ideals, engaging in demand-making politics designed to alter the structure of the institutions in which they work, live, and play, as well as discursive protest, aimed at re-forming culture by introducing new insights and interpretations of social life. Perhaps “queering” the academy in a very broad sense?

Differences in Institutional Structures

These opportunities and constraints, the ability to resist and disrupt, and the reality that structural and cultural biases get replicated, are all a reflection of the gendered structure of the institution (and society). Examining structural differences by comparing the U.S. and Europe, for example, can highlight these gendered structures and reveal something about resistance and replication.

The first point of comparison is the relative presence and institutionalization of Women’s & Gender Studies in the academy. There are about 440 programs and departments in the U.S., nearly half of all in the world. Feminist scholarship is institutionalized. It is literally inside institutions and also institutionalized in the sense that it must conform to institutional standards. Though – in many ways it can’t so it remains on the border.

When Women’s & Gender Studies is common inside institution it has some kind of legitimacy and it has a particular space from which to disrupt. It has a presence and a potential voice. It Resists and Replicates (example of Gender & Society). When the academic discipline is common and expected, so too is feminist scholarship.
It is somewhat less common for WGS to exist in most universities in Europe. Feminist/gender scholarship may not be structurally present (much less welcome) in institutions with NO academic program centered on gender scholarship. The scholarship may exist on the OUTSIDE – perhaps in the work of freelance or independent scholars or perhaps in research projects that may “enter” for a limited time and then exit again. The degree to which these limited-term projects may impact institutional cultures and structures requires careful examination.

**Opportunities for Advancement**

Another key difference between the systems is related to the opportunity for advancement within the professorate. In the U.S. the status of Full Professor comes as a promotion. Anyone who can meeting the criteria (as judged by their peers – loosely defined) can earn this status. From what I understand, here it is much more typical for Full Professor to be a finite number of positions and thus not accessible to everyone. (and filled mostly from outside – which leads to issues of mobility – and also consistency on which to build a program).

I think it is also useful to ask a variety of questions about the structure of academia. Why do we do things the way we do? Why CAN’T we have diverse career paths? Why CAN’T we have part-time tenure track positions? It is worth considering a whole range of possibilities that might support more diversity and contribute to the production of knowledge.

**Resistance and Replication: Why Presence Matters**

The work of individual feminists, as part of the collective effort of so many, has made it possible for women and others from marginalized groups to claim their places inside mainstream institutions and attain positions of power. Their presence redefines these jobs from “men’s” to humans’ and encourages others to believe that they can be present as well.

Discursive protest has shifted women’s experiences (as well as the experiences of LGBTQ+ and people of color) from the margins toward the center, criticized sexist research methods and analyses, and demanded recognition and representation of diverse people.

Women, people of color, LGBTQ people, feminists - do not simply demand to belong in mainstream institutions, they do belong. By presenting alternative ways to think about the world, they can influence policy both within the university and outside it (e.g., paid family leave, sexual harassment policies, violence against women), impact discussions in the media (e.g., letters to the editor, relationships with journalists), and support work in the community (e.g., domestic violence shelters, public schools, movement organizations). Clearly, this is resistance.

The collective presence and disruption of feminist academics has altered the institutions in which they work, disciplines to which they are connected, political movements to which they are committed, and societies in which they live. Ground breaking research and theory, continued pressure for the acceptance of diverse scholarship, movement into positions of authority, and transformative teaching pedagogies have all contributed to disciplinary, institutional, and societal change. Whatever the form of protest, (demand-making or discursive) it has been disruptive.

While this kind of protest (this queering of the academy – in a very broad sense) may not always look like what we think of as activism, choices made by individual actors in concert with many others
have implications that reach far beyond a particular institutional realm. When outsiders assert their right to be present; to have their scholarship respected; to be paid the same as their insider counterparts; or to create women’s studies programs, they engage in demand-making activism. They assert, with the backing of the law, that they have the right to be full and equal participants in the institution of higher education. These sometimes below-the-radar, and sometimes extremely public, challenges to accepted ways of doing things disrupt the day-to-day business of the university and hold those in power accountable for their decisions. While they certainly challenge the structure of higher education by making demands, much of this protest is about ideas that have the potential to “change the world.” This discursive activism strives to “reinterpret, reformulate, rethink, and rewrite the norms and practices” of their institutions and society (Katzenstein, 1998, p. 17).

This is the work of so many insiders and outsiders, the people at the borders (in these cases feminists). When they contest the use of the word “man” to refer to all humans or conduct campus-wide surveys on the climate for women, they challenge the everyday assumptions and norms of their workplaces. When they ask their students to consider alternative explanations for social phenomena and expose them to new ways of thinking about society, they disrupt students’ understanding of the social world. When gender scholars conduct research about women and articulate ways of experiencing the world that have yet to be acknowledged, they disrupt taken-for-granted interpretations of social life. When they construct meaning through a feminist lens, contest the assumptions of the mainstream, and then press for change and challenge established roles, they disrupt existing social structures. In order for their voices to be heard, they must be allowed to be present. Thus, we must continue to challenge the boundaries and borders, to bring outsiders in, and to transform the gendered structure of the academy.

References


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