# 140 Research funding and gender: insights from the literature and a Canadian project

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## Research Domains

Academic practice, work, careers and cultures (AP)

## Abstract

In this paper, we explore the interrelations of research funding and gender as represented in the higher education literature. We uncovered three major themes, roughly corresponding to micro, meso and macro level analyses, which we identify as *individual effects* for grant-seekers, *institutional structures* that shape experiences, and influences from *government actions and funding agency practices*. Using a theoretical approach of academic sensemaking, we articulate how these themes from the literature were also evident in a set of interviews conducted with 27 academics in seven contrasting Canadian universities. Participants, most of whom are women, many racialised, are drawn from the fields of education, geography, social work and sociology and selected for their records of success in securing external funding for social-justice themed research. We find that gender, understood intersectionally, has both obvious and subtle impacts within each theme. Institutions and funding agencies must be considered along with individual needs.

## Full paper

In this paper, we explore the interrelations of research funding and gender in higher education literature. Granting structures and cultures have been relatively neglected within the literature on neo-liberalism in higher education (Polster, 2007; Smith, 2010), while studies on women in academe seldom focus on grant-seeking. This paper brings together published studies from these research areas and draws connections to selected findings from a Canadian project about academics' experiences with grant funding. Canada does not have an equivalent of the UK's Research Excellence Framework. Most university funding comes from a provincial block grant and academics compete for project funding from three funding agencies, including the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC).

### Theoretical framework

Our guiding theoretical approach is academic sensemaking (Degn, 2018), concerning the ways individuals and organizations in academe produce meaning in circumstances of ambiguity and rapid change. Academic research occurs in a social context involving disciplinary and departmental expectations, administrative and resource contingencies, and competing responsibilities.

### Literature analysis

Many studies of gender and funding involve quantitative, bibliometric explorations of large data sets (e.g. Ceci et al., 2023; Kozlowski et al., 2022). Complementary qualitative evidence documents how funding works and is integrated with everyday gendered and racialised practices (Acker & Wagner, 2019; Morley, 2018; Rollock, 2021; Sato et al., 2021; Steinþórsdóttir et al., 2020).

We identify three broad themes from the literature:

1. With regard to *individual effects*, grant writing requires allocating extensive time, foregoing self-care, distorting knowledge to fit requirements and coping with emotions associated with success and failure (Barnett et al., 2022; McGinn et al., 2019).

2. Concerning *institutional structures*, 'inequality regimes' (J. Acker, 2006) privilege some researchers over others: for example, women and racialised scholars tend to do more 'academic housework' (Heijstra et al., 2017; Mohamed & Beagan, 2019), which reduces their research time.
3. Finally, *government actions and funding agency practices* mean that 'researchers face a complex and changing environment. . . not under their control' (Luukkonen & Thomas, 2016, p. 100) where biased conceptions of excellence may disadvantage women (Husu & de Cheveigné, 2010; Sato et al., 2021).

**The study**

This Canadian project encompassed in-depth qualitative interviews in 2019 and 2020 with 27 academics in education, geography, social work and sociology from seven universities. Participants, most of whom were women, many racialised, had successful records of securing external research funding for social-justice research. Thematic analyses (Linneberg & Korsgaard, 2019; Saldaña, 2016) of these interviews indicated clear connections to the prominent themes identified in the literature.

**Findings**

The following quotations are illustrative of those in the full paper.

***Individual effects***

*I do find that having children and being the spouse, being a woman . . . absolutely curtails my ability to do research, field research.*

*It was very difficult as a young, single mom. . . . Now I try to take much better care of myself than I was in those days with two little people and school and driving and working and doing a PhD.*

***Institutional structures***

*The institutions, they work very smoothly for a white man of a certain class and all that sort of thing. . . . We move through the space very differently and have profiles that look differently because of that.*

*[The University] supported me in keeping me accountable, but . . . in some ways, it's a constant challenge to be able to bring Indigenous ways of being into the research context.*

***Government actions and funding agency practices***

*Often funders . . . don't understand the relationship building and the protocols that have to take place.*

*I think SSHRC has done a better job than many other organizations . . . in acknowledging and supporting women in their research.*

**Conclusion**

Outcomes of quantitative research on gender and productivity tend to be 'inconclusive and ambiguous' (Nielsen, 2016, p. 2045), while qualitative work generally identifies disadvantages for women. Our study finds frequent challenges, even for women participants selected for success at the 'research game' (Lucas, 1996). Challenges such as controlling one's emotions, working around care commitments or meeting community needs may be too subtle to appear in broader surveys of productivity.

While 'sensemaking' fits nicely with participants' efforts to understand their rapidly changing situations, it remains vague. We suggest emphasis be placed on variations, including nation, region, discipline, funding availability, research policy and institutional priorities, and on changes over time, such as the introduction of equity, diversity, and inclusion requirements into grant-funding arrangements. These broader contextual influences need to be considered alongside an intersectional understanding of gender.

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