

EVALUATION OF PROJECTS OF RESEARCH ON WOMEN

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What is more important to know: on the one side, the effects of the introduction of the capitalistic mode of production in Brazilian agriculture on women's status in society or, on the other side, the effects of women's knowledge of their bodies on their sexual fulfillment? Although many of you may have no doubts about this choice I will dare to say that both deserve consideration. And they are nothing but a dramatic example of the formidable task of weighting different criteria when evaluating research projects covering such a wide and complex area as research on women, where parameters have not been established yet.

The Research Competition on Women, established by Carlos Chagas Foundation with a grant from Ford Foundation, can be used as a case study of evaluations where two complementary needs have to be met: (a) assessment of very complex criteria, and (b) combination of heterogeneous, and sometimes even contradictory, criteria. I would like to describe the process that was followed and hear your reactions on the procedures we have chosen.

First of all, I would like to place the problems of evaluation within the larger context of woman-related activities in Brazil. The last six years have seen a growing interest and awareness of women's role in Brazilian society, both on the part of social scientists and of more action-oriented feminist groups. Since 1974, a growing number of social scientists has begun to analyse women's roles in Brazil and to organize activities which would bring their findings and concerns to the attention of the social science community, policy makers and the Brazilian public.

The Carlos Chagas Foundation and the Research Competition on Women have played a part in this evolution. The genesis of the Chagas activities related to women dates to 1974, when a small group of Chagas researchers started doing research on women's education and women's participation in the scientific community. A series of seminars, courses, and publications soon followed. The range of interests widened to include a variety of projects related to women. In 1975, a special issue of

the Chagas Research journal was dedicated to women's studies. In 1976, Chagas staff were requested to testify before the Congressional Inquiry Committee devoted to Brazilian women's problems. The first volume of an annotated bibliography on Brazilian women was published, and the second volume is being prepared for publication.

The research competition on women was established with a grant from Ford Foundation in 1977. Emphasis was placed on the stimulation and support of research on women in several ways: attraction of researchers who had not yet been involved in research on the topic; support for imaginative and original research topics; stimulation of woman-related research in diverse geographical regions, and support and training for less experienced researchers. "Openness" was the overarching priority, with the goal of supporting training and research in new areas.

There was also a concern with beginning to build a coherent body of knowledge related to women in Brazil. While a growing number of people were beginning to carry out research, they were largely unknown to one another, which impeded a more cumulative outcome of isolated projects. With the competition, the Chagas Foundation has increasingly become the center of gravity for research on women. This brings us the responsibility for filling the gaps between isolated research projects and for a balanced distribution of attention among all key areas.

A third objective was that of legitimation of the study of women within scientific disciplines. Women's studies present a challenge to the old scientific paradigms that do not have enough flexibility to include the problems related to women's specific roles in society. This challenge may represent an important contribution to the revitalization of disciplines dominated by old models. However, we face a paradox because the successful instillation of new ideas to the traditional academic community depends on the accumulation of a respectable body of knowledge and this respectability is usually attained through the very practices that seem to be in need of change.

The announcement of the competition has been very widely disseminated to universities, graduate schools, independent institutions and the press. The response to the announcement has been overwhelming: instead of the expected 20-30 proposals, we have received 127 in 1978, and 132 in 1980.

In both occasions, the actual selection of proposals followed a two-tiered process, that was planned to combine the advantages of independent judgements by specialists and of collective assessment by a committee which has an overall view of all applications.

Fourteen outside specialists were contracted as first readers. They were chosen for their different theoretical and methodological perspectives, and came from the fields of anthropology, sociology, health, literature, psychology, education, history and political science. Each specialist read at least 10 and at most 30 proposals, and selected the top 20 percent. Each proposal was read by two independent readers. If it was selected by at least one of them, it entered the final round of the competition, when it was judged by a six-number advisory committee.

This committee is broadly representative of the social sciences and includes members from other parts of the country. All members of the committee read all projects selected in the first round of the competition and rated each one of them on a scale ranging from 6 (a project that should not be funded), to 10 (a project that should be funded, by all means). A final meeting of the committee made the final decisions, discussing the cases in which there were disagreements, and cutting budgets in order to support a larger number of projects.

From the objectives mentioned above, two main criteria were derived for project evaluation and a complex set of considerations were weighted to arrive at the final selection.

The main criteria were:

- a) relevance, or potential contribution to change of women's status in society. (This contribution may be direct or indirect and changes are also broadly understood);
- b) scientific soundness, both in terms of theory methodology.

In addition, final selection took into consideration:

- a) overall distribution of topics to be funded;
- b) geographic representation of research and researchers;
- c) project's possibilities of funding elsewhere;
- d) emphasis on little studied or more imaginative topics as opposed to very narrow or descriptive studies;
- e) an interest in encouraging a number of action-oriented projects, with chances of more immediate application.

It can be seen that none of these is an entirely objective criterion. An evaluator's relevance is another's

irrelevance. Sound methodology in a discipline may be unacceptable in another, and so on. These problems are shared with all scientific research but are especially acute in women's studies for two reasons. First, its multidisciplinary nature calls into question procedures that are standard practices in a given discipline and brings the extra problem of reaching a balance among different disciplines. Second, its concern with social change requires criteria that go beyond academic validity and enters a realm for which no established parameters exist.

That is why we rely heavily on the independent overall judgements of scholars broadly concerned with social change. Their knowledge of their areas of specialty is our best guarantee against serious mistakes and the evaluation of several independent readers is the safety net against subjectivity bias.

I wish I could stop here and let you believe that our efforts were successful in avoiding all mistakes. Unfortunately, the first competition is already two years old and I will have to admit the existence of errors both of type I and of type II.

Type I error: we have not funded at least one project that deserved to be funded. This was a project on child labor by a noted sociologist who was a close friend of some committee members. In avoiding protectionism very stringent criteria were applied and her project was not selected. With funds from other sources she carried out the study, which was outstanding. If at least our criteria for rejection had been availability of funds elsewhere . . .

Type II errors: of 20 projects funded, at least 3 did not seem to have measured up to what was expected of them. Two of them were high-risk projects but the result of the third was unpredictable. This was a very sound project sent by someone with an excellent academic curriculum, which was simply not carried out. Funds were suspended when preliminary reports were not presented. The other two were conducted with meager academic results. Both of them, however, may have had other important effects. One, carried out in one of the less developed regions of the country, may have had some multiplier effect in a university where resources are so scarce and in the training process of the researcher. This kind of effect, however, is hard to measure. The other may have contributed to political action related to the day care center campaign, but this again is hard to measure.

Now, the sunny side of the story. Fifteen articles are now being published in a book, which will bring together exciting ideas on a wide range of subjects. From conditions of work of Brazil-nut shellers to sexual repression in colonial Brazil, from the informal power of women in low-income neighborhoods to women's representation of female sexuality, and many other subjects, researchers are working diligently on the production of fresh insights to help change the situation of women in society and, by extension, society itself.