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Emancipation and Epistemological Hierarchy: Why Research Methods Are Always Political

<https://www.e-ir.info/2020/11/22/emancipation-and-epistemological-hierarchy-why-research-methods-are-always-political/>

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Feminist International Relations (IR) scholarship has typically had a troubled engagement with the mainstream of IR, with a great deal of disagreement stemming from differing methodological commitments (e.g. Tickner, 1997; Waylen, 2006; Weber, 1994). Whilst feminist scholars have fruitfully employed methods from across the methodological spectrum, feminist IR has tended towards post-positivist methodologies, having largely rejected scientific and economic methods, which dominate IR's mainstream. A plurality of feminisms exist within IR, however all can be considered united by their focus upon "social differentiations based on sex (presumably 'empirical' distinctions between embodied males and females), or more recently, gender (socially constructed distinctions between privileged masculine and devalored feminine characteristics)" (Peterson, 2004:36). Equally, all feminist researchers can be said to strive for a more gender-equitable society in which the subordinate position of women, and those denigrated by their association with the feminine, is eliminated (Benería, 2016:58; Peterson, 2004:40).

Tickner (2007:4-5) outlines four main methodological guidelines which inform the feminist research perspective: (i) research questions are designed to be useful and (ii) less gender-biased than traditional inquiry; (iii) research affords centrality to issues of reflexivity and subjectivity of the researcher, and (iv) commits to the emancipatory function of knowledge. Researchers' choice of method, that is, a technique or tool adopted for gathering and analysing evidence, proceeds from their consideration of methodology, considered here to be "guiding self-conscious reflections on epistemological assumptions, ontological perspective, ethical responsibilities, and method choices" (Ackerly et al, 2006:6; c.f. Tickner, 2005:3). This essay is committed to the virtues of methodological plurality, however it will argue that research methods are always highly political from the feminist perspective because some — typically marginalised — methods are more compatible with advancing feminist research goals than others.

The essay will proceed as follows: firstly it will argue that different research methods possess differing degrees of emancipatory potential, a key tenet in the feminist knowledge-building project. This is because producing emancipatory research necessarily requires methods that are ontologically destabilising, which positivist social scientific methods are not. Secondly, it will be argued that it is possible to identify the operation of a masculinised epistemological hierarchy within the discipline of IR. Under this hierarchy, a strict conception of what constitutes 'valid' knowledge has afforded hegemony to methods considered to embody masculine characteristics, and a correlative disqualification of traditionally feminine ways of knowing. This dangerous dominance of scientific and rational knowledges is antithetical to feminist goals, because it universalises a particular male experience, to the exclusion of feminine experiences. In both respects, research methods are highly political from the feminist perspective, because they have huge implications for the ability of researchers to achieve their stated goals, and real-world consequences for the lives of women.

Emancipatory potential

As Tickner indicates, emancipatory knowledge building is central to the feminist research agenda. That is, to employ Marx's adage, countering the problem that "the philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways: the point is to change it" (Marx, in McLellan, 1977:158), or in Coxian terms, a commitment to produce theory that "allows for a normative choice in favour of a social and political order different from the prevailing order" (Cox, 1981:128).

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Feminists argue that different research methods have varying capacities to enact emancipatory change to the prevailing social and political order, because there are some questions that simply “could not be asked within the epistemological and methodological boundaries of positivist social science” (Tickner, 2005:2177).

Conducting research that does not tacitly accept the current order of things requires the researcher to ask questions that challenge the traditional ontology of IR, and in the process, destabilise “foundational concepts, conventional dichotomies, familiar explanations, and even the discipline’s boundaries” (Peterson, 2004: 42). Emancipatory feminist scholarship involves examining the cultural, historical, symbolic, linguistic and representative ways in which gender constitutes, and is constituted by, the practice and theory of international relations. Traditional social scientific methods, with their goal of producing nomothetic statements based on positivist epistemological commitments, take for granted conventional categories and units of analysis, reproducing them in the process (Jackson, 2015:945). Feminists therefore problematise the scientific treatment of socially and historically contingent phenomena — like gender, knowledge, the state, or the economy — as unitary, monolithic, and unproblematically identifiable, rather than as discursive and social constructs. In this respect, the feminist approach shows the conventional ‘black box’ conception of international relations to be highly problematic: an understanding of international relations as consisting of unitary, atomised states in an anarchic and asocial international system leads to an acceptance of the “natural violence of international anarchy” (Hooper, 2001:1). Under this conception, it is inevitable that the criteria for successful state behaviour or political outcomes are those conforming to the “masculine virtues of power, autonomy and self reliance” (ibid). Feminist researchers adopt an understanding of theory and practice as mutually constitutive, thus the ontological and epistemological starting points that methods adopt are highly political. Methods have the potential to produce practical knowledge, reshape political understandings of oppressively-deployed terms like ‘security’ or ‘violence,’ and influence national foreign policies in practice. Furthermore, methods also have political implications for the non-feminist, non-critical mainstream of IR, a discipline that is “not noted for its metatheoretical rigor or critical self-reflection” (Peterson, 2004:42). By working with unstable categories and casting doubt over the universality of IR’s long-accepted ontological foundations, the methods adopted by feminist scholars are potentially highly destructive to the familiar assumptions at the core of IR’s mainstream.

‘Masculine’ science, situated gazes, and the epistemological hierarchy

Aside from the qualities of the research that particular methods produce, another way in which research methods can be considered political is in the qualities of the research process itself. Feminist researchers identify the operation of an ‘epistemological hierarchy’ in IR, under which there is a valorisation of knowledge that is strictly understood to be more ‘credible.’ An exemplary instance of this hierarchy in action is Robert Keohane’s suggestion that, in order to convince “non-believers” of feminist IR’s “validity,” the feminist research programme should adhere to broadly scientific methodology, lest it remain marginalised (1998:196-197). This stance is highly problematic to feminist scholars, who find that the epistemological hierarchy is itself constructed according to the hierarchy of privileged masculine over denigrated feminine.

The epistemological pillars of Enlightenment thinking, rationalism and empiricism, represent the elevation of a particular, historically specific human experience to a position of presumed universality — namely, the experience of a minority subset of elite, modern European males (Peterson, 2004: 37). In this respect, Tickner (2005:7) notes that “the periodisation of history and our understanding of the timing of progressive moments do not always fit with periods that saw progress for women.” Fittingly, the qualities epitomised and privileged in ‘scientific’ positivist and rationalist epistemologies — inter alia, systematicity, reliability, objectivity, dominance over nature — are all qualities associated with masculinity. In line with the privileging of masculine characteristics, the mainstream of IR research has typically taken issue with epistemologies that are considered to entail the ‘demasculinisation’ of instrumental rationality, in which feminisation is equated with degradation (Peterson, 2017:333).

Challenging the dominance of scientific methods requires interrogation of the entire tradition of Western metaphysics, and its reliance upon hierarchicalised, essentialised and gendered binaries by which the epistemological order is sustained. Feminist poststructuralist and deconstructionist scholars in particular argue that the valorisation of ‘masculine’ scientific methods is dependent upon the devalorisation of non-scientific methods associated with feminine characteristics (Poovey, 1988; Colebrook, 1997:82). By deconstructing asymmetric binaries like

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rational/emotional, fact/value, or objective/subjective, feminist methodologies are able to incorporate traditionally feminine ways of knowing. Feminists emphasise, for instance, understanding intellectual and emotional intelligence as mutually constitutive rather than oppositional, and embracing the value of knowledges which embody non-scientific qualities like disorder, dependence, and feeling (Tickner, 2005:10; Peterson, 2017:332). Feminists have embraced distinctly empathetic and interpretive methodologies, employing, for instance, narrative ethnographies, interviews, and cross-cultural case studies at the micro-level, eschewing statistical analysis of macro-level, government-generated data (Tickner, 2005:14). These methods may be deemed scientifically inadequate in their inability to produce generalisable, systematic, or replicable hypotheses, however they succeed in making visible the lives of the marginalised, and reflect the reality of an ontologically unstable social world. These so-called 'feminine' ways of knowing offer enrichment to the most commonly-utilised concepts of international relations, like 'security' or 'peace,' and a deeper understanding of state actions at the personal and practical level.

Once the historical specificity of scientific concepts like rationality is understood, scientific knowledge's claim to objectivity and universality is cast as highly problematic. Scientific knowledge is "always, in every respect, socially situated" (Tickner, 2007:11). Feminists recognise that knowledge is deictic: it is never produced, deployed, or understood in an objective or disinterested manner. For this reason, Haraway terms science's presumed ability of the researcher to gaze objectively upon the object of their research "conquering" because it "signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White" enabling the "unmarked category [to] claim the power to see and not be seen, to represent while escaping representation" (Haraway, 1988:581; Conboy, Medina, and Stanbury, 2006:282). Essentially, this 'objective' position is in reality highly situated, and thus is capable of producing only situated knowledge which reflects androcentric interests. For feminists, methods are always political because those methods proclaiming objectivity fail to account for the fact that they are produced within a particular social situation, that is "systems of meanings, social identities, roles, norms, and associated behaviors, traits and virtues" (Anderson, 2000).

In response to Keohane's challenge to feminism to formulate a scientific research programme, Tickner (2005:4) argues that many feminists endeavour to emphasise, rather than reconcile, the feminist project's estrangement from conventional scientific knowledge-building, because of the androcentrism inherent in scientific theoretical inquiry. As it pertains to method choice, this is clearly a political decision: in order to have a truly transformative effect on the discipline, feminists must embrace devalorised ways of knowing. For the foreseeable future, this choice will likely entail feminist IR's relegation to the disciplinary margins. This also has serious political consequences in a tangible sense for feminist researchers, with the epistemological and methodological hierarchy equally manifest in "publishing, employment options, promotions and academic acclaim" (Peterson, 2017:330; 2004:44, also Maliniak et al, 2013).

Conclusion

This essay has argued that research methods are always political from the feminist perspective for a number of reasons. Firstly, the ability of theory or research to effect practical, emancipatory change is inherently political, thus it follows that choice of research methods with differing emancipatory potential is also a deeply political matter. Feminist IR typically adopts methods that threaten the very ontological foundations of the discipline, so a difficult relationship with IR's mainstream seems inevitable. Hegemonic positivist and social scientific methods are unattractive to feminism because they lack emancipatory potential, on account of their unquestioned acceptance of the oppressive ontological givens underpinning IR's conceptual foundations. Secondly, research methods are political from the feminist perspective because the methods feminists tend towards are largely excluded or denigrated by virtue of their association with devalorised feminine characteristics. By identifying the entire scientific enterprise as inherently androcentric, feminists are suspicious of specifically scientific knowledge produced by such methods. The dominance of masculine ways of knowing has the highly political consequence that it obscures the marginalised feminine experience, which it is a central aim of feminism to make visible.

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Emancipation and Epistemological Hierarchy: Why Research Methods Are Always Political

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Date written: May 2020