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0521678358 - Feminist Methodologies for International Relations

Edited by Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True

Excerpt

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# 1 Feminist methodologies for International Relations

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*Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern, and Jacqui True*

Over the past two decades feminism has made refreshing, often radical contributions to the study of International Relations (IR). Feminism is no longer a rare import but a well-established approach within IR, as its inclusion in the core texts and scholarly collections of the field testifies. IR students today benefit from the theoretical and empirical space opened up by feminist scholars. Since the late 1980s, feminist scholars have paved the way for serious engagement with gender and theory in a previously gender-blind and theoretically abstract IR field.<sup>1</sup> Despite its increasing recognition, however, the progress of feminist international relations scholarship has been far from straightforward. In a state-centric discipline that is notorious for its lack of self-reflection, developing feminist methodologies and conducting feminist research have been major challenges. However, since *all* power relations are essential to feminist perspectives and to the feminist research process, feminist methodologies are highly relevant for the study of global politics.

*Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* offers students and scholars of international relations, feminism, and global politics practical insight into the innovative methodologies and methods that have been developed – or adapted from other disciplinary contexts – in order to *do* feminist research for IR. Beginning with the first wave of feminist IR, scholars have been making theoretical breakthroughs. Attention to methodology has been vital to the development of feminist IR as a diverse, varied, and *collective* inquiry. While feminist research methods have been the subject of informal discussions, these have been largely unpublished. Most students and scholars are unaware of the methodological rigor underpinning feminist IR research. The *details* of feminist work – details that are necessary to know in order to replicate or further develop a particular IR research agenda – are typically not included in

<sup>1</sup> For example, *Gendered States* (Peterson 1992) established feminist IR firmly within the IR discipline by providing a theoretical account of the new subfield and by presenting a coherent, yet diverse, body of feminist scholarship on international relations.

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published texts or monographs. Indeed, there is no scholarly work that discusses *how* IR feminist research is conducted. Little attention has been paid to building a body of literature on methodologies that would enable feminist scholars to learn from one another. As a result, the significance of methodology for feminist IR and the study of global politics is not well understood or appreciated.

For the first time, therefore, this volume makes a diverse – albeit necessarily selective – range of feminist IR methodological reflections accessible to students, teachers, and scholars in the (inter)disciplines of IR, feminist IR, and women's studies. The differences and debates within these fields fuel feminist methodological inquiry and make a book such as this possible, necessary, and controversial. We expect that this collection will provoke debate and discussion among new and already established scholars. But we also hope that it will be widely used and consulted by those in search of inspiration and suggestions for how to design their research, and by those interested in the methodological conundrums the book evokes.

*Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* aims both to demystify and to complicate assumptions about how feminist scholars of international relations do their work. As editors, we are in the ironic position of writing a definitive text for a field that eschews definition. However, we invite readers to join us in appreciating this irony rather than struggling against it. The politics of defining, studying, and being from the margins has been critical to feminist IR scholarship since its inception. In the spirit of this tradition, this volume's focus on methodology brings to the fore issues of marginalization and difference within the field, as well as the challenges of dealing with the politics of being a feminist IR scholar.

Clearly, *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* contributes to a larger discussion on methodological developments within IR, as well as within feminist inquiry more broadly. Feminist IR scholarship has built upon positivist and mainstream IR methodologies in the service of exploring feminist questions.<sup>2</sup> For example, IR texts, such as True and Mintrom (2001), use a dataset uniquely designed for the study of a feminist IR question: the extent to which transnational feminist networking has influenced national policy change, as indicated by the establishment of new state institutions for the promotion of gender equality. Using regression analysis, also, Caprioli (2000) explores the

<sup>2</sup> Partly because of the nature of the feminist research questions being asked by its contributors, this volume includes examples of only qualitatively oriented research designs.

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impact of gender inequality on state behaviour internationally, a research question that takes as given the conventional ontology of IR (see also Tessler and Warriner 1997).<sup>3</sup> Inglehart and Norris (2003), Apodaca (1998; 2000), and Poe et al. (1997) study questions that could be framed as feminist IR questions but that are difficult to pursue using datasets that were not designed to study such questions. New quantitative indicators such as the United Nations Development Program's gender development index (GDI) and gender empowerment measure (GEM) facilitate feminist IR research by making it possible to compare the degree of gender equality within and across states. As well, Keck and Sikkink (1998) and Carpenter (2002) develop constructivist theoretical methodologies to analyze issues – women's transnational activism and gender constructs in war respectively – that are integral to feminist IR inquiry.

In addition, feminist IR methodologies build on feminist methodologies from other disciplines. There are many excellent texts that address questions of feminist methodology outside of IR from a range of perspectives. These texts include volumes that show the politics and the practicalities of how feminist scholars conduct their work within different fields and approaches through a myriad of methods including oral history, fieldwork, case study, discourse, comparative institutional, and quantitative data analyses.<sup>4</sup> Some of these works ask whether we can we identify a feminist methodology, and if so, what that methodology might entail (Maynard and Purvis 1994; DeVault 1999; D. Smith 1999). Contributions such as these have been useful to feminist IR scholars. Both L. T. Smith (1999) and Basu (1995) draw on feminist post-colonial theorizing and offer a powerful critique of western research traditions and methodologies. L. T. Smith develops counter-practices of research, clearing space for a serious engagement with indigenous knowledges – and ways of knowing; whereas Basu addresses many of the critical problematics of a global feminism that transcends national and cultural boundaries by focusing on women's movements in different contexts. *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* consciously builds on this earlier, interdisciplinary work.

<sup>3</sup> Caprioli (2004) argues that a neofeminist IR based on the quantitative analysis of gender and state behaviour as the dependent variable might make feminism more relevant to IR just as neorealism reinvented classical realist perspectives in the field. But we question this analogy, since, in our reading, neorealism actually reduced the rich historical and philosophical tradition of realism to an ahistorical, scientifically testable set of propositions. This did not result in a diverse or more systematic research agenda as Caprioli assumes.

<sup>4</sup> For instance, see Bowles and Klein 1983; Fonow and Cooke 1991a; Nielsen 1990; Reinharz 1992; Gluck and Patai 1991.

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The distinctiveness of feminist methodologies inside and outside IR lies in their reflexivity, which encourages the researcher to re-interrogate continually her own scholarship. Although this volume includes examples of qualitatively oriented research designs only, such self-reflexivity is important not only in qualitative research. Feminist IR scholars learn from and adapt methodologies used in mainstream IR and interdisciplinary feminist studies, but the methodologies they employ are not merely derivative of them. In a variety of ways, IR feminist studies make an original contribution to methodological thinking, useful for IR scholars and feminist scholars in other fields.

There is a gradual realization, especially among critical and constructivist scholars, of the importance of interpretivist methodologies (see Milliken 1999; Goff and Dunn 2004; Checkel 2004). Many feminist scholars, perhaps precisely because of their marginality in the field and their interdisciplinarity, have been at the forefront of the development of constructivist and postmodern methodologies in IR (see Sylvester 1994a; Prügl 1999). They have had to be particularly creative with the tools of a discipline not intended for the questions feminists ask, and notably eclectic in drawing on tools from other disciplines and sites. Feminist IR scholars have developed not just a toolkit of methods but ways of incorporating ontological and epistemological reflection into methodological choices that lead them to rethink the boundaries of the IR discipline.

Taken together, the chapters in this book build on the collective accomplishments of feminist IR methodologies; they demonstrate the value to IR inquiry of studying from multiple locations and of studying the intersection of social relations in any one location. They address both marginalized and non-marginalized subjects. For non-IR feminist scholars, especially those who do transnational research, the feminist IR methodologies presented here provide rich and unique examples of how to study *up* and *down* simultaneously. They engage with the traditional ontology of IR focused on states, conflict, military, and international institutions. They use insights from researching marginalized sites and subjects in order to revision IR concepts of security, sovereignty, nationality, and global politics. Most of the chapters explicitly consider class, race, ethnicity, and other power relations as they manifest themselves within gender inequalities in global politics (Tiberghien-Chan 2004). Indeed, as the volume as a whole shows, feminism is not about studying women and gender exclusively. Just as states, conflict, institutions, security, and globalization cannot be studied without analyzing gender, gender cannot be studied without analyzing these subjects and concepts.

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Consequently, feminist methodological approaches not only are innovative but also raise new ethical and political dilemmas that expand methodological inquiry. These dilemmas revolve around the power relations between the researcher and the research subjects and the power inequalities among the research subjects themselves. *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations* shows how such dilemmas are particularly heightened in the research sites where feminist IR scholars are most engaged, including conflict zones, the interstices between civil society and international organizations, and political and economic borders. When engaging with these ethical questions, IR feminism contributes to IR and interdisciplinary feminist debates about the merits of different methodological approaches and the potential abuses of power.

As we look over the contributions to this volume, the logic for each chapter's inclusion may not be obvious to the reader. We have consciously worked to include contributions from feminist IR scholars with a variety of academic homes, national origins, ethnic backgrounds, and years in the field. We have aimed to show a range of contributions to feminist methodologies for international relations in terms of research questions and methods, ontological and theoretical perspectives, and regional and institutional sites of study, without either seeking or claiming to be comprehensive. Far from it: since this is the first published volume devoted to the explicit presentation and discussion of IR feminist methodologies, we could not possibly include the full diversity and potentially vast scope of methodological approaches that currently exist or are under development in the field of feminist IR. Thus each chapter should be read as a unique contribution and as part of a collective conversation about feminist IR methodology. Indeed, none of the authors in this volume had the benefit of such a collection when they were exploring their research questions and designing their research projects.

Although this volume reflects feminist IR scholarship which uses qualitative methods, its attention to methodology is also highly relevant for those scholars and students primarily interested in quantitative methods – or indeed employing a triangulation of methods. What makes the scholarship discussed in this book *feminist* is the research question and the theoretical methodology and not the tool or particular method used (see Ackerly and True, this volume). As illustrated by the contributions to this volume, feminist research cannot be reduced to a particular normative orientation or political, ideological agenda (cf. Carpenter 2003: 299).

In sum, the contributing chapters demonstrate that doing feminist research is extremely demanding theoretically and analytically as well as

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ethically and politically. Within IR it sets new standards for methodological rigor that could make a difference to scholarship and to the world we live in. Certainly, a normative purpose drives feminist research efforts, as it does all IR scholarship whether or not consciously or explicitly (see Cox 1981). But feminist normative perspectives are often plural, contingent, and relational, since feminist scholarship is highly attuned to and self-reflexive about power and politics. The volume resists the seduction of giving a fixed, substantive definition of feminist methodology. Instead, it offers an entry point from which to consider collectively many different feminist methodologies engaged by scholars who are interested in studying global politics from a stance that gender matters.

Further, the volume offers a form of collective authorship, not yet professionally rewarded in dominant professional norms, but nonetheless important to advancing IR scholarship. (Within contemporary professional and disciplinary norms, single authorship usually “counts” more than co-authorship, and authorship “counts” more than editorship.) We hope that it will encourage future collective efforts that defy the professional norms that demarcate the field of IR.

### Defining our terms

In order for this volume’s *raison d’être* to be fully grasped, we need to define some of our nomenclature; what we mean by epistemology, ontology, method, ethics, and methodology in particular. For the most part, and unless otherwise indicated, the chapters in this volume share common definitions of key terms associated with knowledge. We consider *epistemology* to refer to an understanding of knowledge – of how we can know – and therefore what constitutes a research question. We use *ontology* to mean an understanding of the world; for instance, what constitute relevant units of analysis (i.e., individuals, genders, states, classes, ethnicities) and whether the world and these units are constant or dynamic and able to be changed through, *inter alia*, research. We see *method* as indicating the kind of tool of research or analysis that a researcher adopts; for example, discourse analysis, oral history, participant observation, and qualitative data collection are all possible methods and are used by the authors in this volume. By *ethics* we mean to highlight the rights and responsibilities that inhere in the relationship between the research subject and the researcher. And we use *methodology* or *theoretical method* to refer to the intellectual process guiding reflections about the relationship among all of these; that is, guiding self-conscious reflections on epistemological assumptions, ontological perspective, ethical responsibilities, and method choices.

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Methodologies take *many* forms. For instance, methodological reflections are those that lead us to consider the relationship between ontology and epistemology. How does our understanding of the world affect our understanding of knowledge? What constitutes an IR question and what it would mean to answer that IR question? Methodology involves reflecting on one's epistemology. What does it mean to have inquired about a subject? It also requires consideration of the relationship between ontology and method. How does the researcher's view of the potential for changing the world affect the way she does her research? And between epistemology and method: what is the best way of designing the research project so as to answer the research question? Ethical issues are part of methodological reflection. They compel us to ask how our own subjectivities, that of our research subjects, and the power relations between us affect the research process. Finally, methodologies shape the choice of and development of methods. For instance, feminist methodological reflections are often directed at the redesign of methods that have been used to explore non-feminist questions in fields where feminist inquiry is relatively new.

Unlike those empirical methods that are designed to generate results that can be replicated by different scholars, however, feminist methodologies likely yield different results in the hands of different theorists. Yet, this non-reliability need not be viewed as a weakness of feminist scholarship (cf. King et al. 1996). Rather, it is an important implication that is explicitly recognized and directly addressed by the collective, self-reflective, and deliberative nature of feminist methodologies. As their research questions and the methods used to address them expand, feminist scholars need theoretical methodologies to guide and examine the research process. This ongoing methodological reflection can be seen as an important aspect of feminist scholarship, which, although not unique to feminism, sets most feminist contributions to IR apart from the mainstream.

Feminist ontologies that expand our notions of world politics to include the personal and previously invisible spheres, and that start from the perspective that subjects are relational (rather than autonomous) and that the world is constantly changing (rather than static), demand self-reflective methodologies as well as the innovative methods and postpositivist epistemologies that this volume features.

A number of chapters in this volume invoke Sandra Harding's scholarship on methodology and in particular the categories she introduced to make sense of feminist epistemologies: feminist empiricism, standpoint feminism, and feminist postmodernism (1987). The reader might ask how this volume's approach compares with previous discussions of



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feminist epistemology in IR that apply Harding's typology. As Laurel Weldon in her chapter clarifies, following Harding, "feminist methodologies are epistemologies in action." In this sense, discussion of methodology may have greater import for feminist research than epistemological debate; and it makes sense that this discussion is occurring after considerable debate about epistemological positions has already taken place within feminist IR. Rather than categorize and divide, our intention in this volume, like Harding's, is to appreciate the coexistence and significant overlap between different epistemological and methodological approaches (for instance, between feminist standpoint and postmodern feminist approaches to international relations). The range of contributions to feminist IR (in this volume and elsewhere) and their creative reinvention of traditional theoretical approaches and methods is a major strength when viewed from the perspective of a collective, self-reflective, and deliberative feminist methodology.

### **The outline of this volume**

Each of the chapters in this volume discusses some aspects of the relationships among ontology, epistemology, methodology, and method, and how they inform and shape their feminist IR research. The volume itself is organized in three main parts that treat different relationships in the methodological process. The first part addresses the methodological conversations between feminist and non-feminist IR, and, in particular, the relationships between ontology and epistemology, and epistemology and methodology. Theoretical engagement with the mainstream discipline leads IR feminists to rethink epistemologies and develop new theoretical and methodological approaches. This engagement with epistemology is itself a methodology for research of relevance to feminist scholars inside and outside of IR. The second part of the volume presents five case studies in which the authors deploy empirical feminist research methods and reflect on the relationships between method and methodology, ontology and method, and ethics and method. Here the feminist researcher takes her theoretical insights to the field to address new research questions; these theories, however, become challenged in the field research process. The third part of the volume offers new methodological frameworks for examining international relations and for further developing feminist international relations. The relationships among epistemologies, ontologies, and method come into focus when the feminist IR scholar turns her inquiry toward engagement with other feminist scholars and is prompted to reexamine her tools of inquiry once again.



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[More information](#)*Part I: Methodological conversations between feminist and non-feminist IR*

Vexed methodological conversations between feminist and non-feminist IR have taken place in recent years, leading scholars to wonder whether there is any common ground.<sup>5</sup> This section comprises three chapters that provide different readings of the intellectual history of feminism's engagements with the International Relations field. Each chapter presents the development of feminist methodologies in IR from a particular stance. The chapters examine the disparities and difficulties surrounding the intersections of feminism "within" IR on the one hand, and feminism "and" IR on the other. The methodological exploration of these intersections contextualizes the contributions in the second and third parts of the volume.

In her chapter, Ann Tickner addresses the question of why feminists do not just adopt mainstream methodologies such as exploring and testing hypotheses about gender hierarchy and state behavior. She argues that feminist scholars ask different research questions from mainstream scholars, questions that have rarely or never been asked before in the field of IR. To answer their questions, moreover, IR feminists have used different methodologies from the social scientific approaches that have dominated the discipline. For Tickner, feminist research is necessarily postpositivist, since positivist methods provide no account of the origin and importance of research questions. While arguing that there is no unique feminist empirical method, she claims that there are perspectives on methodology that are distinctly feminist. Her chapter analyzes two examples of IR feminist empirical research that draw on these perspectives. Thus, the chapter opens the way for a broad diversity of feminist contributions to international relations that are question-driven but not dependent on one methodology or method.

Marysia Zalewski's chapter presents a kind of methodological engagement with IR that is an alternative to Tickner's dialogical approach. Taking a genealogical approach, the chapter reflects on some of the contours and paradoxes of feminist methodologies as they have manifested in the IR discipline over the last two decades or so. The practice and metaphor of "distraction" is employed as a methodological device, one informed by work on "haunting and the sociological imagination" (Derrida and Gordon) along with the "methodology of getting lost"

<sup>5</sup> See, for example, Tickner 1997; 1998; Keohane 1998; Marchand 1998; Enloe 2001; Carpenter 2002; *International Studies Review* Forum 2003 (5, 2: 287–302).

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(Lather) and the thinking strategies of French feminist, Luce Irigaray. For Zalewski, feminist IR methodology narrates the process of search and research, and in this way demands responsibility without affording the production of “comfort texts.” Working with distractions, the chapter itself acts as a performance of a feminist IR methodology by illustrating some of the processes of a deconstructionist feminist approach. Zalewski cautions feminist scholars to be wary of the demands made by mainstream IR, especially in relation to the field’s methodological *fetishism*, yet does not deny the importance of reflecting on the IR question, “What is your methodology?” The excesses of feminism and the “feminine” are deeply problematic for the discipline of IR, yet IR feminism is more powerful precisely when its methodologies are manifold and unclassifiable, as illustrated in the chapters in Part II of the book.

In her chapter, Laurel Weldon outlines an IR method that is informed by a standpoint feminist epistemology and emphasizes the collective aspects of scholarship. She argues that the unwillingness of IR feminists to point out the unique, analytic advantages of marginalized standpoints diminishes the significance of feminism’s methodological contribution to IR, which is not merely to add another perspective. Opening the IR discipline to feminist criticism improves our understanding of international relations and strengthens the “objectivity” of mainstream knowledge. A field’s approach to inquiry and furthering knowledge may be evaluated in terms of both its own internal mechanisms for assessing its knowledge claims *and* its ability to respond to critical scrutiny from other perspectives. Contributing to evaluation of knowledge claims from within and outside the field of IR, feminist perspectives should expect inclusion in IR on *methodological* rather than normative or political grounds. Compared with Zalewski’s postmodern method of distraction, Weldon explicitly argues that IR must take feminism seriously.

### *Part II: Methods for feminist International Relations*

The second part of this volume comprises five chapters that offer self-reflective discussions of the authors’ own feminist research methods applied to critical IR questions of security, military, the state, international justice, and the global order. These studies are informed by a range of feminist theories – often more than one in each chapter. Their subjects range across familiar and marginal sites of international relations in different parts of the world. They introduce a variety of research methods, including qualitative interviews, ethnography, participant observation, oral history, ethnographic life stories, and discourse analysis, in the service of different theoretical and epistemological approaches.