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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ON GENDER AND POLITICS

Introduction: Gender and Comparative Methods

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Research methods have been a hotly debated issue in women's and gender studies since the establishment of women's studies as a field (e.g., Bernard 1975; Harding 1986; Jayaratne 1983; Millman and Kanter 1975; Oakley and Oakley 1979). Scholars of gender and politics have been and are engaged strongly with this methodological debate, given political science's focus on power and politics (e.g., Ackerly and True 2010, 2013; Bustelo and Verloo 2009; Goertz and Mazur 2008; Spierings 2012; Tickner 2005), and this section sets out to further contribute to the debate.

To contextualize this debate, it is important to realize that a large share of the methodological criticism gender scholars formulated was directed at the origin of the applied research techniques: their androcentric and positivist roots. To counter the deficiencies of this tradition, feminist scholars have been developing alternate methods and techniques ever since. Since the dominant tradition was positivist and quantitative, the emancipative response of the feminist academic movement mainly included interpretative, qualitative, and action-based forms of doing research. Those latter methods gave voice to women's experiences and allowed new issues to enter the academic domain (Harding 1997; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007; McCall 2005). Moreover, this "discursive and linguistic turn" in feminist research (Bottero 2000; Reinharz 1992) clearly distinguished it from the dominant positivist tradition by stressing, for instance, uniqueness, complexity, subjectivity, diversity, context-specificity, and fluidity. Consequently, and not surprisingly, among mainstream political and social scientists, "gender studies" and "feminist methods" has a strong connotation of postmodernism (see McCall 2005; Reinharz 1992; Spierings 2012).

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More recently, however, two developments have been taking place that direct our attention to the crossover between feminist and systematic comparative methods: First, since around the 2000s, the debate on qualitative and case study methods in political science has been renewed, partly as a response to "KKV" (King, Keohane, and Verba 1994) (e.g., Beach and Pederson 2013; Brady and Collier 2010; Gerring 2007; Goertz 2006; Rihoux and Ragin 2009). This debate has led to the development of a more systematic approach to comparative case studies and medium-n studies as well as a better understanding of the differences between and complementarity of qualitative and quantitative techniques. Second, gradually, a more nuanced epistemological position has gained ground in the debate on gender and methods among gender and politics scholars. This position can be summarized briefly as follows: it is not specific methods that are androcentric, but the way in which these methods are applied and their results are interpreted that lead to severe androcentric bias (Ackerly and True 2013; Goertz and Mazur 2008; Hesse-Biber and Leavy 2007; Reinharz 1992; Spierings 2012). Together, these two developments push the door wide open for gender scholars to use comparative methods in their analyses of policy formation, voting behavior, representation, social movements, and more.

In order to make optimal use of these new comparative methods in studying gender and politics, as well as to prevent their androcentric or otherwise biased application, it is crucial that we reflect critically on what new methods can and cannot contribute to this field. Therefore, this Critical Perspectives section will focus on several new methods and insights in the field of political methodology and how they address questions and principles put forward in the field of gender and politics particularly. Moreover, a critical reflection on how methods and techniques are applied in this literature is needed; it is relatively easy to criticize others for producing biased research, but this criticism is far more legitimate if the standard used in the politics and gender literature is particularly stringent. This means we should not only ride our epistemological high horse, but also lead by example in discussing and applying our methodological choices: what should we practically do when we want to conduct empirical comparative research (see Harding 1986)? The four contributions to this section all address these two issues: (1) How does a particular comparative method engage with principles at the core of the gender and politics literature (e.g., androcentrism [Mazur and Spierings], hybridity and complexity

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[Ciccia], intersectionality and voice [Van der Haar and Verloo], context-dependency [Spierings])? (2) In what way is this and can this method be applied to contribute to the gender and politics literature? They do so for four different innovative comparative methods, including the research phases of comparative concept formation and of comparative causal analysis.

In their contribution, Mazur and Spierings address the notion of causal concepts from a gender perspective. They show how this notion can contribute to stronger, but also more nuanced, nondogmatic, gender criticism on existing (explanatory) research, and they illustrate their argument with reflecting on the conceptualization of democracy in relation to different causal questions, such as those pertaining to democratization and democratic peace theory. Ciccia also focuses on concept formation in her discussion of the potential of fuzzy sets for typology construction. She illustrates how this approach allows nuanced description of social policies without sacrificing the (often gendered) hybridity, complexity, and normative underpinnings of, for instance, welfare regimes. Similarly, Ciccia highlights Qualitative Comparative Analysis' explanatory potential in developing systematic accounts of gendered causal mechanism, which are sensitive to contextual and historical contingencies. Next, van der Haar and Verloo analyze the usage of Critical Frame Analysis (CFA) in studying the discursive content of policy. More particularly, they show which elements of the original method, such as voice and intersectionality, are often dropped by the scholars applying CFA, and they formulate starting points for a further discussion on applying CFA to its full potential. Last, Spierings addresses context dependency in quantitative studies of politicians' and the public's behavior and preferences. He argues that the context dependency of microlevel relationships is not often addressed sufficiently. Focusing on case knowledge, country-disaggregated analyses, and multilevel models, he discussed different ways in which regression analyses can be conducted more satisfactorily.

Together, these contributions go beyond mere criticism of existing techniques, as they present how existing techniques fit with principles at the core of the gender and politics literature. These discussions provide important insights for scholars who want to conduct or assess comparative studies on gender and politics, including information on which technique might be suitable for specific goals in comparative research and practical guidelines for the feminist or less androcentric application of existing techniques in comparative politics.

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