

Introduction

The gender lens and innovation in the social sciences

Fiona Jenkins, Marian Sawer, Karen Downing, Australian National University

Abstract This collection turns a spotlight on gender innovation in the social sciences. Eighteen short and accessibly written case studies show how feminist and gender perspectives bring new concepts, theories and policy solutions. Scholars in five disciplines— economics, history, philosophy, political science and sociology – demonstrate how paying attention to gender can sharpen the focus of the social sciences, improve the public policy they inform and change the way we measure things. Gender innovation provokes rethinking at both the core and the margins of established disciplines, sometimes developing new fields of research that chart new territory. These case studies celebrate the contribution of feminist and gender scholars and the impact of their work within and beyond the social sciences.

Keywords Gender innovation • case studies • philosophy • political science • history • economics • sociology • interdisciplinarity

How is our understanding of social, economic and political questions transformed when we apply a gender lens? In this book we turn a spotlight not so much on the flaws of gender-blind social science as on the positive contribution being made by gender innovation. By offering a series of case studies that exemplify major new insights, we show how new approaches to old questions arise from paying attention to gendered differences in experience, opportunity, and outlook; or how entirely new questions and areas of study can arise from critically examining the presuppositions of the social sciences.

The case studies presented here all reveal how the application of a gender lens has sharpened the focus of the social sciences, offering gains in understanding and new approaches to problems. They reveal, for instance, the ways in which gender research can improve our response to climate change or disaster management, and enable recognition of the importance of care-giving to the economy. A gender lens also changes our approach to calculating GDP, measuring poverty, evaluating electoral systems, or telling the stories of our nation-states.

This gender innovation has had more impact in some areas of social science than others. Each of the case studies begins with the gaps in knowledge that existed in a particular subject area before

gender perspectives provided new insights. They are loosely grouped into the disciplines of philosophy, political science, history, economics and sociology, to provide the context for a wider discussion of how, in each of these fields, questions of gender arise in distinctive ways. We also highlight the wide variation in the impact of gender innovation on mainstream areas of these disciplines. Our project grew from an interest in assessing and interpreting the evident differences between disciplinary fields in the extent to which feminist and gender perspectives have transformed their thinking. Our research suggests that there are strong correlations between the extent of women's progress and the relative degree of transformation of these disciplines. Disciplines that perform poorly at achieving gender parity – for instance, economics, philosophy and political science – also miss out on the valuable insights of gender innovation.

In this introduction we begin by acknowledging some of the existing work on the practice of feminist research across the social sciences, before introducing our case studies and what they tell us about gender innovation in different disciplines.

Feminist research practice

There are a number of excellent surveys of feminist research practice that show how social science can be improved by taking gender into account. These include the classic *Feminist Methods in Social Research* published by Shulamit Reinharz in 1992 and the more recent *Handbook of Feminist Research* edited by Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber.¹ Both drew attention to the wide varieties of method being used by feminist researchers across the social sciences, arguing this diversity was a strength not a weakness. While feminist researchers have tended to favour qualitative and mixed-methods approaches rather than purely quantitative ones, they have drawn on the full range of methods found in the social sciences with the possible exception of rational choice. Rational choice theory provides a framework for modelling social and economic behaviour, for example through the mathematical framework provided by game theory, and has spread beyond economics into political science and elsewhere. It presents difficulties for feminist researchers in being based on methodological individualism (the assumption of the autonomous rationally-choosing individual) rather than looking at the broader social structuring of choice by factors including gender and race relations.

Despite the variety of method, a common feature of feminist research practice is the 'feminist research ethic' – emphasising the need for reflexivity about power relations and the values the researcher brings to their research.² In the past, explicit acknowledgement of values sometimes led to judgements that feminist research lacked legitimacy, that it was not 'objective'. In response, feminist researchers identified the unacknowledged values often causing distortions in social science research. Reflexivity may entail disclosure of embodiment and standpoint, including lived experience of discrimination and marginalisation but also of relatively advantaged locations; such disclosure adds to

rather than detracting from the value of research by acknowledging the situation in which it is conducted. Feminist research, moreover, avows its ethical and political commitments in undertaking enquiry that will increase understanding of the nature and source of gender inequalities in order to change them. This normative component and emphasis on reflexivity are unifying characteristics of feminist research, which otherwise now varies widely in its methods and approach.

One change that has taken place in feminist research practice over time has been an increased focus on 'intersectionality'. This meant expanding the analytic construct of gender to encompass the intersection of gender with identities relating to race, class, sexuality, disability, ethnicity or other attributes. The concept of intersectionality was introduced by Kimberlé Crenshaw to bring into focus the distinctive experience of African American women and the intersecting identities and privileges that complicate gendered power relations.³ The concept was quickly taken up by gender experts as well as scholars and practitioners began to refer to gender equality policies as 'gender+' policies, to emphasise that other axes of inequality always intersect with gender.

Queer theory emerged in the 1990s, challenging in various ways assumptions about the 'normal' alignment of gender, sex and sexuality as well as binary thinking about natural sex difference. Key theorists such as Judith Butler argued that the social regulation of gender through 'heteronormative' practices fails to take account of the possibilities for organising gender experience and relations differently.⁴ Queer theory has stressed not just the social construction but also the materiality of gender as embodied and 'performative', and therefore has criticised the familiar assumption that gender is socially constructed whereas 'sex' is simply a given bodily identity (male or female). Sex, on this influential account, is not simply a biological fact, but becomes embodied in ways that are highly variable (see discussions by Roberts and Jolly in this volume).

Another change arising from shifting the focus toward a broader and more complex understanding of gender and power has been the increased attention paid to the construction of masculinities, the nature of 'hegemonic masculinity' and its variation over time and place. Here insights about heteronormative and patriarchal social orders are brought together with insights about the way power reproduces itself. Like other feminist research this has been closely tied to policy applications such as violence prevention and the role of men and boys in achieving gender equality.⁵

Queer theory, attention to masculinities and gender+ have all advanced the understanding of gender and its relationship with power. A dominant but still too often unacknowledged focus on some men's experience and life worlds continues to shape both the social sciences and public policy. Gender innovation takes place not just by exposing this bias but by offering fresh and productive perspectives and new analytic tools.

The gender innovation case studies

Our case studies of gender innovation come from the five disciplines, that are the subject of the recent Gendered Excellence in the Social Sciences project – namely philosophy, political science, economics, history and sociology. The GESS project has been researching the relationship between the status of women in these social science disciplines and the integration of gender innovation and feminist research. It has employed a complex framework, comparing the recognition of women and of feminist scholarship across the five disciplines and four countries – Australia, Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States. The project has amassed a wide range of data, including academic workforce statistics, recognition indices and bibliometrics.⁶ Its publications (including special journal issues and books) have included comparative work on the differences between disciplines in mainstreaming gendered knowledge, viewed against the differences in women's presence and leadership across disciplines and across countries.

One aim of the project has been to identify the kind of gender innovation taking place in the social sciences and the extent of its impact on how disciplinary knowledge is produced. An international conference hosted by the GESS project in 2016 identified significant innovations and the extent of their integration into disciplinary mainstreams. It found, for example, that in the disciplines of economics and political science the public policy impact of feminist scholarship tended to be greater than impact within the discipline itself. The case studies presented in this book have their origins in the gender innovation strand of the GESS project and illustrate how gendered approaches have resulted in new knowledge, both theoretical and applied. Despite the very different disciplinary contexts, there are common themes, such as the need to expand existing concepts so that they more satisfactorily explain complex problems.

Philosophy

Philosophy has been and remains one of the most male dominated of the academic disciplines.⁷ Despite the fact that feminist philosophy has been a highly productive and influential sub-field, its impact to date has been felt beyond rather than within the discipline. The contribution of feminist researchers highlighted by our two case studies in philosophy address ethics and epistemology, and both have wide implications for social science research, social policy and social relations but have enjoyed only limited uptake within the central academic journals of the discipline.⁸

The approach described as an 'ethics of care' was first developed in the 1980s as part of a wave of feminist revaluations of moral philosophy. By demonstrating how the history of philosophical thinking on ethics systematically downgraded virtues associated with women, feminist approaches both invited a reappraisal of the foundations of the discipline and offered new recognition of essential

dimensions of human life. Gaining a better understanding of the value of care work is a major theme in other case studies in this volume, proving to be a missing piece in many accounts of the economy. Recognising how unpaid care and paid work interact also leads to better historical understanding of women's roles and identities. This case study discusses the impact of the ethics of care on a wide range of areas including security studies and environmentalism.

Likewise, the concept of 'epistemic injustice' offers a rich and influential account of how knowledge is beholden to social relations. Philosophers have traditionally thought of knowledge in highly individualised and abstract terms. This feminist approach shows how knowing relies upon relations of testimony and trust which are down-played in conventional accounts of knowledge. As such, it can be chronically distorted by gender, race and class relations. All of these lead to unreasonably high credibility attaching to some speakers and low credibility to others. It is a form of injustice that has had significant effects on policy, on science and on medicine, as the case study shows. Epistemic injustices, we would argue, have detrimentally shaped all the university disciplines and further afield, our social, legal and political institutions.

Political Science and International Relations

The political science and international relations case studies of gender innovation throw new light on the operation of political institutions and political recruitment. Conceptual tools that take gender into account have been refined from existing approaches in the discipline, including discourse analysis, with its emphasis on the politics of framing, and new institutionalism with its emphasis on informal rules, as well as more quantitative approaches.⁹ New knowledge concerning electoral systems, candidate quotas, parliamentary practices and gendered electoral violence has been generated – often with immediate policy impact. While political science once assumed that politics was a male domain, it now helps promote gender equality and gender+ equality projects. Our case studies illustrate the different ways in which a gender lens has contributed to the discipline.

However, while gender innovation in political science has brought new insights and significant policy impacts, much of this work has concerned the institutions and actors that are the traditional focus of the discipline. In contrast, in international relations (IR), gender innovation has extended the traditional boundaries of the discipline beyond the state actors and geopolitical dynamics once seen as its proper domain. As illustrated by our case study on security studies, gender research in international relations has encompassed a broad range of non-state actors and introduced new perspectives from below.

Regardless of these differences, feminist political science and feminist IR scholars have shared a positive orientation towards creating 'useful' knowledge in partnership with civil society actors and policy practitioners at both national and transnational levels. They have participated in, as well as studied, the dissemination of gender equality norms.

History

History as an academic discipline developed alongside nation-states during the nineteenth century with the invariable result of ‘masculinist’ narratives of nations emerging from the blood of soldiers and the wisdom of founding fathers. However, in comparison with the other disciplines in this volume (apart from sociology), feminist work in history has made great strides toward fundamentally reshaping the discipline. This change correlates with a better level of women’s representation as scholars in the academy, especially in Australia, the subject of our history case studies.¹⁰ This diversity and impact is partly explained by feminist history’s openness to theory. Wherever it is practiced, it is characterised by interdisciplinarity and a strong commitment to questions of method and philosophy. This can be seen, for example, in the historical studies of masculinities world-wide, which have been heavily influenced by the work of Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell.

Australia’s traditional national narratives were particularly masculinist which, perhaps, goaded feminist historians to produce sharper critiques. The three history case studies in this collection bring to the fore how feminist approaches to history in Australia challenged notions of the public sphere in general, and of the nation-state in particular, as both the sole domain of men and the only place in which to find the drivers of historical change.

It is worth noting that feminist historians in Australia have not confined themselves to ‘women’s history’. They have written on the history of race, popular culture, the anti-Vietnam war movement; on soldier settlement, settler colonialism, and colonial concepts of honour and virtue; on Aboriginal pastoral workers; on the impact of the US civil rights movement on Australian activism; on migration and multiculturalism; on trauma and the impact of war on women and children as well as on men. In their quest to reveal women in history, feminist historians have necessarily grappled with gender’s intersections with race and class and other axes of identity and oppression. In so doing they questioned the traditional subjects of history and the authority of traditionally accepted sources – in short, they interrogated the foundations of the discipline itself. They have been at the forefront of consequent new fields of history such as transnational history, environmental history and history of emotions.

Economics

The dominant neo-classical economic paradigm, based on the rational choice model discussed earlier, has provided little scope for considering the social structuring of choice or the non-market elements of the economy. This has meant that gender innovation in economics has largely taken place outside the mainstream organisation of the discipline, and has drawn more heavily on other disciplines.

Partnership with policy practitioners has been another characteristic of the work of feminist economists.

Our economics case studies illustrate the boundary crossing and interdisciplinary nature of feminist economics. The landmark critique of the measurement of economic activity, which inspired much feminist economics, was Marilyn Waring's *Counting for Nothing*. Waring was a young politician with a political science degree, who became enraged when chairing a parliamentary public accounts committee to find that gross domestic product (GDP) took no account of unpaid household and caring work or environmental values. This created the kind of distortion of public policy shown in our case study where the sale of milk formula for babies contributes to GDP but breastfeeding does not, despite its public health benefits.

Such distortions affect all areas of public policy and leads to decisions such as the privileging of occupation-based superannuation over the more neutral old-age pension. It has taken the innovation of gender budgeting to raise awareness that because of the differing participation of men and women in unpaid work and their differing location in paid work, budgetary decisions can never be assumed to be gender neutral in their impact. Austerity budgets, for example, will always have disproportionate impact on women because women are more dependent on the public sector for employment, services and income support.

Our case study of individual deprivation research shows how poverty measures that rely on household income assume the pooling of household resources and neglect factors such as time burdens, lack of support networks and lack of control over earnings. Over the past 30 years, gender innovation in the study of financial arrangements within families has shaken the assumptions about the pooling of resources that used to underpin social policy.

Sociology

Sociology, like history, is a discipline that has been relatively receptive to feminist approaches and has also advanced significantly through the insights developed through queer, intersectional and gender+ perspectives. Of all the disciplines we include here, it has the highest rates of integration of gender research into its mainstream work and also the highest rates of women's participation at over 50 per cent. Our case-studies provide a glimpse of the very wide range of approaches and methodologies that exist within the discipline.

The concept of 'emotional labour' is a case in point. Women's delivery of 'emotional labour' – care, concern, a smile – appears within the labour market as something that is at once non-commodifiable and an expected service. The consequent under-recognition of skills used in service work has been a major driver of gender pay gaps. The concept of emotional labour is now being incorporated into job evaluation systems and has been important in pay equity cases. The systematic undervaluing of skills regarded as the natural attribute of women is closely linked to the undervaluing of relations of care we have seen in our other case studies.

How women respond to stresses inherent to lives under such conditions is an equally under-recognised aspect of their health needs. The case study on smoking as a gendered activity draws attention to the role this activity plays in asserting a certain picture of the self. Smoking forms part of a culture of consumption organised by desires and ambitions that marketeers have perhaps been more adept at understanding than many social scientists. In this case study, application of a gender lens requires us to think in complex and critical ways about how we understand empowerment, risk and well-being. Similarly, in the context of assessing and mitigating disaster risk, our case study demonstrates the importance of paying attention to masculinities. Running against the grain of approaches that focus on the disproportionate impact of disasters on women and the need to empower women in decision-making, this study emphasises the importance of men's organisations in raising awareness of how traditional masculinities can hinder disaster risk management.

Like these, the final case study in sociology invites us to reflect on difficult questions of value. It examines the role that is being played by the toxic chemicals that are now common in our environment, affecting 'natural processes' including those associated with reproduction, sex-determination and sexual behaviour. In a world in which these aspects of biology have all become subject to extensive technical interventions, can we see the changes introduced by toxic chemicals as self-evidently bad or disruptive of a natural state of organic life? While charting the very significant role played by female scientists and journalists in documenting and protesting such assaults on the environment and our bodies, this case study also uses a gender lens to question assumptions about what is natural and normative for us as sexed and embodied beings.

Extending the scope of the gender lens

Our final case study in the volume explores how the relatively new and immensely challenging topic of climate change has become a site for trans-disciplinary investigation. Here gender innovation brings together the natural sciences, social sciences, the arts and humanities, to catalyse activism and political change in response to rapid environmental destruction. Although this volume primarily looks at gender innovation in relation to disciplinary paradigms, it also shows how often interdisciplinary and trans-disciplinary perspectives have been needed to shed light on complex inequalities, such as those that shape the experience and realities of climate change. New fields of research have been developed that cannot be returned to any disciplinary home, but represent new territory.

Our hope for this volume is that it will speak to new readers of gender research, introducing them to gender innovation that is making a real difference in the social sciences and beyond. Feminist and gender perspectives are not simply about 'diversity' but represent critical standpoints essential to the progression of the social sciences. Feminist methodologies recognise that not only are the social fields we study structured by gender and other inequalities, but so too is the position of the researcher.

By attaching importance to reflexivity, awareness of power relations between researcher and research subjects and orientation towards achieving social change, standpoint becomes an integral aspect of the knowledge social scientists pursue. As we see in the authorship and editorship of this volume, most research using a gender lens continues to be done by women. We hope that wider recognition of its importance will bring the gender lens into much wider use, enabling the social sciences to better address the urgent problems of today's complex world.

¹ Shulamit Reinharz (1992) *Feminist Methods in Social Research*, Oxford University Press; Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ed. (2012) *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, 2nd edn, London: Sage.

² Brooke Ackerly and Jacqui True (2010;2019) *Doing Feminist Research in Political and Social Science*, 2nd edn, London: Palgrave.

³ Kimberlé Crenshaw(1989) 'Demarginalizing the intersection of race and sex: A black feminist critique of antidiscrimination doctrine, feminist theory and antiracist politics', *University of Chicago Legal Forum*, 140: 139–67.

⁴ Butler, Judith (2006) [1990]. *Gender trouble: Feminism and the subversion of identity*. New York: Routledge.

⁵ R. W. Connell (1995) *Masculinities*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin; Ingeborg Breines, R. W. Connell, Ingrid Eide (2000) *Male roles, masculinities and violence: A culture of peace perspective*, Paris: UNESCO.

⁶ <http://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/gess/>

⁷ Katrina Hutchison and Fiona Jenkins (2013) *Women in Philosophy: What Needs to Change?* Oxford, Oxford University Press.

⁸ Rebecca Pearse, James N. Hitchcock and Helen Keane (2018). 'Gender, inter/disciplinarity and marginality in the social sciences and humanities: A comparison across six disciplines'. *Women's Studies International Forum*, Vol 72, Jan-Feb, 109–126.

⁹ Marian Sawer (2020) 'Feminist Political Science' in Dirk Berg-Schlosser, Bertrand Badie and Leonardo Morlino (eds) *The Sage Handbook of Political Science* Vol 1, London: Sage, 96–113; Marian Sawer and Kerryn Baker (eds) (2019) *Gender Innovation in Political Science: New Norms, New Knowledge*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.

¹⁰ Martin Crotty and Paul Sendziuk, *The State of the Discipline: University History in Australia and New Zealand: Report to the Australian Historical Association Executive*, March 2018; <http://genderinstitute.anu.edu.au/gess/workforce-Australia-comparison>