

Unmasking: The Role of Reflexivity in Political Science

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As a discipline, political science's pace in tackling themes of racialization and gendering in our research methods—or the field more broadly, for that matter—has been glacial.¹ As other scholars note, this is in part due to the working assumption within the discipline that race arises and exists on the periphery of 'real politics' (Hawkesworth 2016; Smith 2004). This disembodied account of politics (Hawkesworth 2016) upholds the myth of 'neutrality' within the discipline. Accordingly, the discipline presumes to operate from a place of racelessness (Fujii 2017; Hendrix 2002). In practice, however, the default subject position of a presumed racelessness is actually whiteness (Fujii 2017; Hertel, Singer, and Van Cott 2009; Mazzei and O'Brien 2009; Townsend-Bell 2009).

The resulting effect is the normalization of a set of ideas, grammars, and practices that reinforce the discipline's epistemological authority, thereby codifying the status quo. Further, it obscures how the structures of political science are entrenched in power relations of dominance and subordination that render invisible the viewpoint and lives of others. For example, with few exceptions, the scholarship is not conversant in the racialized and gendered experiences of Black and Latinx self-defined women in the Americas. A review of the table of contents from the discipline's prominent journals can attest to this lacuna.

For Dr. Lee Ann Fujii, my doctoral supervisor and mentor, addressing disciplinary shortcomings started with two important interventions: the adoption of reflexivity as a central praxis and the diversification of the racial and gender demographic within the discipline. She reasoned that reflexivity, a practice requiring the active and ongoing process of self-examination at the individual and epistemic level, could bring issues of racialization and gendering to the forefront of the discipline's methodological and epistemological considerations.

In a meeting prior to my departure to conduct fieldwork, Dr. Fujii gave me the following indispensable advice:

Who you are, your experiences, your perspective, how you experience(d) the world, and how you make sense of the world has informed your research project.

As a Black woman in Canada you are likely to have a different viewpoint from your white male counterpart.

Use it. Do not shy away from it.

Tell us how that informs how you see the world.

That is what I want to read about.

— Doctoral supervisory meeting,
Lee Ann Fujii to Lahoma Thomas,
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Dr. Fujii's assertions are a reminder that our research does not emerge absent the influence of our identities. Our subjectivities—that is, the inner ensemble of our affect, thought, knowledge, perceptions, and experiences (Luhmann 2006)—leave an imprint at every step of the research process, thereby shaping the knowledge we are able to, and do, construct (Banks 1998; Collins 1986). Reflexivity thus requires the discipline to seriously take on the process of self-examination as a methodological practice—to explicitly examine how each practitioner's personal history, ideological commitments, beliefs, values, assumptions, and subject location(s) as researchers affect all facets of the research process, from inception to conclusion. In concrete terms, we should be asking ourselves how our positionality informs the conceptualization of the research project, the development of methodological practices, the researcher's interactions with others, the collection of data, the recounting of research informants' experiences, the interpretations of these, and the decisions about what to publish and what to omit.

The practice of *Relational Reflexivity*—an active ongoing process of self-examination, attuned to how power is reinforced through particular subjectivities (Thomas 2018)—has been key to my methodological approach to studying the role of respect in the relationship between criminal organizations and residents living in the communities the former control. A commitment

¹ Notable exceptions include Fujii (2015, 2017); Hawkesworth (2016); Alexander-Floyd (2012); Townsend-Bell (2009); and Yanow and Schwartz-Shea (2006).

to *Relational Reflexivity* demanded that I interrogate my subjectivity as a Canadian-born Black woman of Caribbean descent while conducting research in the inner-cities of Kingston, Jamaica, among people with whom I share a sense of racial and cultural affinity. This made me attentive to ways in which one's movement through different geographical, socio-political and relational spaces reconfigures and reinforces the dimensions of one's subjectivity. The analytic richness of this process provided important insights into how relations of respect operate as a site of power that fluctuates in complex and unexpected ways. For example, I became attuned to the role respect plays in the political behavior and strategies of residents, beyond the cost-benefit calculations.

Taking stock of my biography made me acutely aware of the influences on my 'insider-outsider' status as a researcher (Collins 1999; Mullings 1999) and attentive to how the residents I interviewed—primarily black women living in the inner-city communities of Kingston, Jamaica—were not represented in the conventional models of political science.

If we take seriously the proposition that our subjectivities influence how we research and explain the world, we can reason that the dominant theories in political science have emerged from a particular raced and gendered perspective. Acknowledging this fact makes it evident that to develop a full picture of the social world requires scholars with diverse biographies.

Dr. Fujii's advice to me was only one aspect of her deep epistemological and methodological commitment to advancing political science by disrupting its core assumptions and expanding the idea of who the legitimate producers of knowledge are. The case for racial diversity in the field of political science should not be a matter of institutional desire to signal inclusivity; those are often fleeting interventions that can produce informal departmental quotas and overworked racialized scholars. Rather, the diversification of the field of political science is a necessary course of action if the intellectual commitment is to accurately understand and explain our social world.

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