

My Limitations as a White British Man...

Written by Matthew A. Hill

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MATTHEW A. HILL, APR 16 2012

I recently went to a conference on women and the Americas to advertise the engagement forum for the Women and US Foreign Policy Interview project. When I presented the material, I was challenged on aspects of its methodology. Specifically, had I thought about the impact of my role as a white British male in interviewing women? In the discussion a number of important issues were raised and it got me thinking about the rationale for the project and who it is supposed to help.

I have faced a number of difficulties, as all researchers do, when designing, developing and implementing a project. How do I obtain my data, for example, or will I have significant findings? In addition to these issues, the project's main objective is to create a resource for other researchers to use so I have to ensure that I please my audience. And the difficulty here has been in determining who that audience should be. How is the project going to appeal to political scientists, historians, and gender specialists? A key priority is to encourage as many researchers as possible to get involved in the project because this is the metric that determines its usefulness. However, there are two extremes of the polar to contend with. On one end, do I expand the areas of research in order to have more people in more academic fields interested in the interview data? The problem with this approach is that, in appealing to as many fields as possible, there will only be limited space to ask questions important to each one. It could mean that no-one obtains the necessary data for the resource to be worthwhile using. On the other end, does the project limit which research fields use the interview material? The problem with this is that whilst detailed questioning of the interviewees is possible it means that there will be less fields covered and thus less people interested in the material. Consequently, it will become more difficult to carry out the project's priority to have an impact in academia. The solution as ever lies at neither extreme but somewhere in the middle.

And this middle ground is achieved by interesting researchers that want to examine US foreign policy in four ways: the role of women in an organisational set-up that has historically been biased towards women; from a perspective that I would call traditional IR and international politics (i.e. non-gendered); the role of women implementing US foreign policy; and the impact of the product of US foreign policy on constituents of a country, in particular from their perspectives as women.

And so, at this conference, I realised that the name of this project does not reflect its overall focus. Before I worked on the project, it had originally been labelled an oral history project. With the term 'oral history' comes a whole load of methodological issues that need to be accounted for, and whilst this project does that, it also has to account for the needs of others, such as political scientists. Sometimes for researchers it is the data being discussed that is important and not who or how it is being delivered.

And what about who is asking the questions? The very fact that I am a British white male is going to, in varying degrees and for varying reasons, impact responses from people. Madeleine Albright has had years of experience working alongside, for and above men and thus these identities will have limited impact compared to interviewing a woman from a traditional society where interactions with males is limited to family members. These factors will obviously play a greater role in how they respond to the questions.

There is scope for discussion that no material should be taken out of context, and removing the gender dynamic from the material is one aspect, and I encourage people to air their views on this. The point is the project faces a reality

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that some of the target researchers do not always take gender as a necessary level of analysis. For some researchers, for example, interested in international politics, it is the voice of Madeleine Albright as the Secretary of State that counts and not her gender.

It is important to mention at this point, that in understanding this project any relevant analytical framework will play a dual role. It will frame the interview process, including question formation and be applied by researchers when examining the material. The project's only control is in the former, it has no control, nor should it, over how the material is analysed. It is up to each individual researcher to choose their analysis.

Whilst I agree that gender should, along with other factors, be considered when determining the context of an interview, should I be driving one particular political agenda on researchers by constructing questions through one particular ideological lens? Take traditional foreign policy analysis and gender as two examples. If I do not consider the multiple needs of these fields in the construction of the interview questions then it is possible I will be implicitly driving one particular agenda. The consequent danger is that I would have supported creating an environment conducive for a reductionist reading of politics. Whilst I do not want to perpetuate what could be described as a male-dominated understanding of the relationship between women and US foreign policy I also do not want the project resources to be solely useful for gender analysis.

The project has acted in two fundamental ways to ensure that this debate is discussed. First, I decided to openly discuss the evolution of the project in order to demonstrate that I am conscious of the role that I, and other factors, play within the acquisition of the interview material. Second, I have changed the title of the project to reflect its actual identity; it is now called the Women and US Foreign Policy Interview Project.

You can see why I have a headache! Your thoughts are not only appreciated but are essential for me in understanding my role as both a researcher and facilitator.

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Read more from Matthew A. Hill in his e-IR blog, Reflections on American Politics from an Outsider.

About the author:

Matthew A. Hill is a senior lecturer in International Relations at Anglia Ruskin University. The aim of this blog is to examine US politics and pick an idea not fully-formed and run with it to see where it goes. Sometimes it will wither away but other times it will inspire to think about the idea further. Your input is encouraged and welcomed.