

Interview - Matthew Kearns

Written by E-International Relations

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This interview is part of a series of interviews with academics and practitioners at an early stage of their career. The interviews discuss current research and projects, as well as advice for other young scholars.

Matthew Kearns is a doctoral candidate in the School of Geography, Politics and Sociology at Newcastle University, UK. His research interests concern the representations through which state militaries recruit their personnel and how they produce and perform diverging constructions of gender. Through this, his research speaks to wider feminist debates concerning military masculinities and their potential to become displaced in changing security contexts. He has recently published work in the *International Feminist Journal of Politics* on gender, visual securitization and the 2001 war in Afghanistan.

What (or who) promoted the most significant shifts in your thinking or encouraged you to pursue your area of research?

Like many within feminist IR I owe a lot to Cynthia Enloe. I distinctly remember being a first year undergraduate, reading *Bananas, Beaches and Bases* and realising the importance of looking to everyday experiences and sites rather than simply the state-centric theories I was being introduced to. Enloe's work also motivated me to become interested in military masculinities, which is the key concept underpinning much of my work. I have also been incredibly encouraged by the wonderful community of critical military studies scholars such as Victoria Basham, Claire Duncanson and Amanda Chisholm (I could list many more!) who have built such a vibrant area of scholarship. Finally, most shifts in my thinking concerning military masculinities and gender more broadly have come from the work of poststructural feminist IR scholars such as Laura Shepherd, whose work continues to inform my own.

Your PhD thesis investigates the relationship between military masculinities and recruitment practices in the British Armed Forces. How do your conclusions help us understand the broader implications of this for gender relations across the Armed Forces?

My thesis contributes to understanding how military masculinities are (re)produced through the British military's recruitment appeals – for example by privileging a white male ideal within many campaigns. I am equally interested in the conditions through which this relationship between masculinity and military service might be complicated or troubled. This is a question which motivates many feminists (see for example the work of Annica Kronsell or Claire Duncanson), but British military recruitment is an interesting site to ask this because of ongoing recruitment shortages. I see such shortages as potentially disrupting the military's gendered culture, as they can provoke the expansion of recruitment to social groups that are typically marginalised by the military and who conflict with the normative ideal that underpins military masculinity. I suggest that this creates the continuous possibility that recruitment might renegotiate the relationship between gender and military identity in ways that challenge or contest this ideal and create new normative ideals of soldiering which such groups can embody. My conclusions therefore illustrate how recruitment is a site of both change and continuity for gender relations across armed forces.

The Armed Forces' Future Force 2020 programme will likely change the military's recruitment process, how will this affect the relationship between masculinities and recruitment practices?

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Future Force 2020 is fascinating for lots of reasons, but for me the most notable is the greater reliance upon reservists within the armed forces (particularly the Army). This matters as reservist military identities are fundamentally different to that of a regular member of the military, not least as they embody both a civilian and a military identity. Feminist scholarship on military masculinities has typically not confronted the question of reservists and their gender identities, and I feel we know very little about this at present. I am therefore very interested to see the findings emerging from the Future Reserves Research Programme, such as Victoria Basham and Sergio Catignani's recent paper demonstrating how the emotional labour of reserve spouses is key to enabling their military participation.

You recently published an article on gender and visual securitization in the 2001 war in Afghanistan. Do you think media text and images create or reinforce constructed gendered and racial stereotypes?

I argued in the paper that the interplay between the visual and the textual can produce certain subjects as referent objects of security. I suggested that Afghan women were visually securitized through the interplay between foreign policy discourse, media discourse and visual representations in photojournalism to visually produce them as deserving of security and therefore justifying military intervention. Consequently, I would argue the interplay between the visual and textual discursively produced (rather than reinforced) the constructions of gender and racial hierarchy, through which the visual securitization proceeded. Through their intertextual location, images can therefore produce a way of seeing subjects which constitutes them as legitimate referent objects, illustrating how security can function as a field of vision that produces the very threats and insecure subjects it purports to name.

Do you think initiatives such as The Aftermath Project can disrupt visual securitizing moves and provide a new objective way of visualising war?

I think alternative ways of seeing and visualizing war always have the potential to allow us to think otherwise about attempts to securitize certain populations, although I would reject the possibility of an objective way of depicting war and its consequences. Projects such as the one you mention can be understood as disruptive as they visualise the human consequences of conflicts in ways which might resist or complicate iconographical representations of suffering and victimhood that underpin western photojournalism. For me, the wider question becomes one of agency; how can such subjects be visually represented in ways that transgress beyond their representation as passive victims in need of (western) intervention and actively acknowledge their own agency? In this sense I'm very interested in the rich area of scholarship within visual IR which engages with this difficult question, such as Sophie Harman's recent work on film as a research method and Roland Bleiker and Amy Kay's work on pluralist photography.

Linking these ideas to your PhD thesis, do you think the British Army's new recruitment advertisements, such as *This is Belonging*, serves to tackle or worsen militarised masculinities?

The new recruitment advertisements have attracted a lot of attention, both within academia and more widely, because they arguably represent a sharp break with more traditional recruiting images by placing diversity at the front and centre of their message. For me, the need to diversify recruitment to the British military – both as a political aim and a pragmatic necessity due to shortages – has the potential to subvert or challenge the military's gendered culture, as I mentioned earlier. This is not because such diversity messaging is new or inherently progressive. In contrast, I argue that the military understands the labour of 'diverse' social groups as a commodity which it can source and manage through its recruitment appeals in ways that mask its role in perpetuating classed, gendered and racialized inequalities. Yet by understanding such recruitment campaigns as continuously performing (in a Butlerian sense) the military's gender identity, there is the potential that it cannot always reconcile the increased recruitment of such groups in ways which uphold its masculine culture. I am therefore interested in how recruitment difficulties, such as the ones *This is Belonging* is a response to, have the potential to alter gender's relationship to military identity in ways that don't always succeed in perpetuating military masculinity.

What are you currently working on?

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I'm currently writing a book chapter on the geographies of military masculinity (in *A Research Agenda for Military Geography*, Edward Elgar, forthcoming 2019). Although my home discipline is International Politics I have been in a geography department for the last three years, and thus geography has exerted a significant impact upon the way I think about my work and how it can be developed further. I'm particularly interested in exploring how the military's different understandings of space, for example within the recruitment appeals of different service branches, impacts military masculinities and their relationship to military identity. Although feminists have acknowledged that military masculinities vary greatly between the Navy, Army and Air Force, this has yet to be flushed out in empirical terms. Consequently, I think geographical concepts such as space and scale have a lot to offer when seeking to do this and tracing how military masculinities are made meaningful through the spatial relations in which they are located.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars?

Try to pursue the ideas and arguments which matter most to you and not simply what you think others want you to do, or what you think 'sells' best within the context of the discipline. I think that's a difficult piece of advice to give as there is immense pressure on young scholars to publish quickly and in high-ranking outlets, often when they are on precarious contracts with heavy teaching loads and little time for research. Sometimes it seems easier to frame your work in ways that are most convincing to the wider discipline and appease wider structures such as the REF and grant applications. Yet I still believe that the greatest pleasure in academia is the ability to pursue your own ideas and interests. It is important for young scholars to keep that in mind and continue to remember what brought them to academia in the first place when deciding what to study and how to study it.