Translating Gender Politics Scholarship into Practice: Views from Inside and Outside the Discipline

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Nearly 40 years ago, the women's movement — my own passionate engagement in it, my delighted, mystified questions about what the movement and feminism were doing not just to change women's rights but also to change women's and men's whole conception of women as political actors (questions I could later phrase in the language of political psychology, though I could not do so then) — drove me from biology to political science. Freshly armed with an undergraduate biology degree from Georgia Tech (the student body of which, at that time, was more than 99% male), working the graveyard shift as a medical technologist, and spending my days marching, rallying, and lobbying for passage of the Equal Rights Amendment and many other feminist policy proposals in those heady days, I began to realize that the intellectual life I had always assumed I would pursue in biomedicine had departed from my imagination, to be replaced by an overmastering desire to study political science and, in particular, to study the political psychology of gender, as we came to define the inquiry.

I joyously entered graduate school in political science, blithely assuming that the discipline was ready to welcome my questions about sex, gender, and politics — only to find that political science, like Georgia Tech, was not yet quite comfortable with women, either the few actual women then in its midst or the subject of women and politics. Much in the discipline was beginning to change, and the pace of change would continue to accelerate, because some farsighted and generous senior scholars like my own mentors, Roberta S. Sigel and M. Kent Jennings among others, supported a new generation of energetic young scholars who, like me, were determined to achieve a place in political science research for gender as a critically important theoretical and analytical construct (see Tolleson-Rinehart and Carroll 2006).

Even in those earliest days of gender politics research, characterized (rather unfairly) as "add women and stir" — that is, research that carried out the very necessary work of rescuing women's political involvement from the almost total neglect it had received from political science, demonstrating that such involvement was there, and was not some faint

replication of men's behavior (as *The American Voter* had put it in the 1950s) — we intended our scholarship not only to represent the joy of inquiry for its own sake but to have practical use as well. We were social scientists and theorists who embraced scholarly rigor. Indeed, we characterized the omission of sex and gender from political analysis as itself a lack of rigor on the part of the discipline. We believed in the power of scholarly research to illuminate the world and to better the condition of all people. We thought in those halcyon days that our work would help women — and men.

From the mid-1970s to the present, gender politics scholars have realized a great deal of the promise of the endeavor. We have limned the orthodox canon of political philosophy (Okin 1979) and, from Simone de Beauvoir onward, created exceptionally distinct feminist theories from several quite different perspectives; we have developed theoretical frameworks from which to understand gender, political participation, and political engagement (for instance, Burns, Schlozman, and Verba 2001; Lawless and Fox 2005; Sapiro 1984; Tolleson Rinehart 1992); we have amassed an impressive history of women's political leadership inside (Banaszak 2010) and outside (Barakso 2004; Gelb and Palley 1982) government; we have crafted shrewd criticisms of gendered social, economic, and legal policy on everything from the origins of the gendering of the welfare state (Josephson 1997) to an understanding of the role of state feminism as an institutional dynamic (McBride Stetson 2002); and we have generated sophisticated and convincing empirical theses (Carroll 1988). This very brief epistemological accounting can in no way do justice to the field's full record of achievement.

"You're a Feminist. Wouldn't You Be Really, Really Happy If Sarah Palin Became President?"

Gender politics research has not yet attained the apotheosis of contribution to civic education and scholarly understanding that we know it can. In recent years, we have seen pundits pronounce feminism dead, in a climate that journalist Susan Faludi vividly labeled a backlash (1992). The young men of Generation X are less egalitarian than are their Baby Boom fathers (Tolleson-Rinehart 2009), in what appears to be an ideological regression from the relatively egalitarian mean we thought the public had reached by the end of the 1990s. During the 2008 Democratic presidential primaries, one heard college students — who certainly would have described themselves as progressive — signifying

their preference for Barack Obama over Hillary Clinton with the phrase "bros before hos." At the same time, at least some gender politics scholarship had retreated so far into the inner chambers of academe as to be unapproachable even by many other academics, much less policymakers and the public. And too often, despite the elegant subtlety of the theoretical frameworks we have constructed around sex and gender, and the rich findings we have generated, scholars in other disciplines — and even in other subfields of political science — do not make as much use of our research as many of us would like.

I was asked the question about a prospective President Palin twice in one day around the time of the 2010 midterm elections. First, I was asked by a third-year psychiatry resident, as I had lunch with the residents before delivering a "Grand Rounds" lecture on the Affordable Care Act to the Department of Psychiatry at the University of North Carolina School of Medicine. Later that afternoon, one of my own students asked the question in virtually identical terms during the core health system class I teach to medical students earning joint M.D.-Master of Public Health degrees.

The young physicians in training with whom I spend much of my day, all Generation Xers or Millennials, seem to have been mistaught about women in politics by Chris Matthews, with his insistence, as relentless as it is groundless, that "disappointed Hillary supporters" are Sarah Palin's and Chistine O'Donnell's voter base (RealClearPolitics 2010), rather than taught by gender politics scholars who can help them understand the context, history, and ideological nuance of the uses of sex and gender in politics. Most of these doctors-in-training are passionately committed to serving vulnerable populations; they have a keen sense of social justice and they want to make a difference. The fact that very few of these exceptionally bright and well-educated people, women as well as men, ever connect any of these schemas to women's position in society often bemuses me. On that day when I was asked whether Sarah Palin's election to the presidency would not fill me with delight, I thought hard about how to create the "teachable moment": how to explain, in just a few words, that the women's movement had made Sarah Palin and Christine O'Donnell possible, by achieving our goal of removing barriers to women's entry into the public sphere, but that this did not mean that most of the women's movement's adherents would agree with many of Palin's policy positions. Because of my own work on gender consciousness, I wanted to provide the "toplines" voting and attitudinal snapshots that would help them understand the sources of diversity in women's views, and I tried to invite them to put the pieces of the puzzle together from their own perspectives.

I was gratified by the seriousness with which they took the opportunity to think about these questions, and sorry that they had not, apparently, found many opportunities to do so before this.

Translating Gender Politics Evidence into Civic Practice

We are now in the midst of a scintillating renaissance of gender politics scholarship, evidenced by the wonderful work of new young scholars who are imaginatively deploying gender as an analytical and theoretical construct in every subfield of political science. We are attracting gifted students to gender politics, and we are training them well. We have much more to do, however, to create the kind of space within civic education that gives everyone, not just the small number of people who want to become gender politics scholars, more reflective ways to think about women, men, and the polis. In my own field of political psychology, I believe that our largest unresolved questions arise from the continuing need to understand how attitudes toward gender roles and gendered political socialization continue to intersect, how generational transmission of beliefs such as egalitarian or traditional gender roles is enhanced or thwarted by popular culture, and when and under what circumstances movements like women's movements wither and are reborn. These scholarly questions, compelling in their own right as endlessly fascinating intellectual puzzles, also have a role to play in public discussion. Indeed, the scholarly versions of these questions have their roots in the searching discussions of young women and men everywhere who were first stimulated by, and then became the leaders of, the women's movements of the twentieth century.

In health affairs today, one of the dominating policy paradigms is "translating research into practice" for the purpose of delivering "evidence-based medicine." Although the biomedical world has not yet settled on a single definition of "translation," most see it as moving knowledge along a continuum, from initial discovery to application in clinical settings to change in practice and policy. This metaphor is applicable to gender politics scholarship as well. While we continue to generate new knowledge, what more can we do to see that the fruits of our inquiry are available to the broadest possible communities? How, for example, can we contribute to giving all the Millennial generation — not just those who sit in our gender politics classes — richer, more reflective opportunities to think about the meaning of gender and its

uses — and misuses — in political culture? How can we reach out to our colleagues in other disciplines, to share our unique insights into the political implications of their own questions? Surely, women's health is one obvious example of an endeavor that can only benefit from transdisciplinary collaboration.

Scholarship should always, of course, be whole in itself; the inquiry alone is inherently valuable. But political scientists generally, and, perhaps, gender politics scholars particularly, have always been aware of the potential of their work to have practical value as well. I look forward, as *Politics & Gender*'s book review editor, to facilitating the critical exegesis of new scholarship that can translate gender politics research into evidence that women, men, and the world's political systems can use.

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