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**Revisiting Methodologies and Approaches in Researching
Sexual Violence in Conflict.
Introduction**

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Introduction

Revisiting Methodologies and Approaches in Researching Sexual Violence in Conflict

This collection of papers debates how methodological choices affect what we can know about wartime sexual violence, and how this knowledge might influence policy making. These questions are examined from different disciplinary perspectives and cases by reflecting on methodology in terms of epistemology, ontology and axiology. Considering not only the surge in global policy initiatives and media attention on sexual violence in conflict, but likewise, the continued interests from researchers globally, it is essential to revisit debates around methodologies and the effects this has on those who are the subject of the research and interventions.

Readers interested in so-called ‘conflict-related sexual violence’ will appreciate that while the phenomenon is not new, the way we think and talk about it, and hence, how we do research and practice in relation to such violence, has dramatically changed since the mid-1990s. Rape in war was long seen as a by-product of war, as part of repertoires of violence that also included pillage and looting (Enloe 2000, 108). This changed in the mid 1990s, when the horror of rape camps in Bosnia, and of ethnically motivated systematic rape in the Rwandan genocide, were widely reported in the Western media. This led, slowly but steadily, to a persistent campaign within feminist circles to place rape as a weapon of war on the agenda of global policy and intervention. As she recounts in her contribution to this Special Issue, in the late 1990s Skjelsbæk found 140 studies of sexual violence in conflict carried out across the twentieth century, while today, a simple search in google scholar shows more than 1,5 million results on ‘conflict-related sexual violence’, and more than 500.000 on ‘rape in war’. This is indicative of a shift in focus: from the idea that such violence is to be expected, inevitable, and ultimately, not deserving societal and political address, to the idea that such violence constitutes the worse crime a woman can experience that can and should be prevented.

The Bosnian and Rwandan examples reinforced the emerging paradigm that rape was being used by armed forces as a weapon of war to fragment and destroy communities, sometimes to ethnically cleanse, and always to terrorise, i.e., as a ‘part of a systematic political campaign with military purposes’ (Skjelsbæk 2010, 27). The idea of rape as a weapon of war has gripped the field of conflict related sexual violence, and is by now one of the main points of debate and contention between and among scholars, activists, and policy makers. The heightened attention from scholars and activists fed directly into the development of international norms and UN Security Council resolutions (Cohn, Kinsella and Gibbings 2004, Heathcote and Otto 2014), as well as in International Criminal Law (De Brouwer 2005) and has helped put sexual violence in conflict on the global agenda, attracting funding for intervention and research. Yet, it has also led to separation in studies of conflict-related sexual violence on the one hand and of peacetime violence on the other. Scholars have started to point to some perverse consequences of the exceptionalization and prioritization of such violence over other forms of conflict related repertoires of violence on the one hand and over other forms of gender-based violence on the other (Baaz and Stern 2013, Boesten 2014, Engle 2014, Kirby 2013).

The attention to conflict-related sexual violence in global institutions and its accompanying reduction to an acronym, CRSV, has also changed the demand for research. As sexual violence in conflict became part of a securitization discourse, it became a subject in the field of conflict studies -a field dominated by quantitative political science. This suits the global efforts to address CRSV. In this era of evidence-based governance (Engle Merry 2016, 10), the newly created policy spaces for addressing CRSV emphasise the need for comparable quantitative evidence: how many women are affected and in which conflicts, and what makes some conflicts more prone to CRSV than others? Answering these questions would help policy makers make evidence-based decisions regarding prevention, intervention, and accountability. Hence, the rise in quantitative perspectives in research is influenced by governance bodies' demand for quantitative evidence. As such, the attention that CRSV as a problem receives from governance spaces influences the research that is produced, and vice versa -the evidence that is produced influences the interventions that are subsequently designed.

This collection of papers addresses the difficulties of researching sexual violence in conflict and the consequences for policy in light of above mentioned changes. The surge in attention to sexual violence in conflict in global policy in recent years clearly raises a series of questions regarding what we know, how we know it, and how our methods and approaches affect the politics of intervention. The authors of this collection are all well-established researchers in the field interested in how research and evidence is used and interpreted in global policy; how meaningful quantitative evidence can be when there is so little reliable data available; how problematic the collection of qualitative data can be; what the heightened global attention for sexual violence in conflict means for the analysis, policy, and prosecution of sexual violence, and for the victim-survivors of such violence; and how complex forms of evidence can be translated into complex policies. These questions have become particularly salient after the London Summit to End Sexual Violence in Conflict held in 2014, hosted by then UK Foreign Secretary William Hague and Angelina Jolie, and are of continuous relevance, especially considering the recent announcement of a follow-up Summit to be held in 2019.¹ All the papers draw on original research carried out by the authors and focus on the methodological challenges they faced.

This introduction outlines the tensions and methodological questions in contemporary research on conflict-related sexual violence drawing on the six contributions in this Special issue of Social Politics. Two caveats: first, this is not a comprehensive account of the challenges faced; for example, the specific methodological challenges of the data used in quantification and in large scale comparative exercises are discussed elsewhere (Hoover Green 2012, 2013, Cohen and Nordås 2014, 2015). Nevertheless, together, the six articles here presented provide an overview of the main methodological challenges in the field of conflict-related sexual violence research. Second, these challenges are unlikely to be unique to the field of conflict-related sexual violence, and hence, the articles could be read by those interested in similarly complex social phenomena that have seen a surge in attention from policy, media, and academia. For example, in the article on research fatigue and silences in qualitative research (Boesten and Henry, this volume), examples are drawn from CRSV

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-continues-to-lead-on-preventing-sexual-violence-in-conflict>

research as well as from HIV/AIDS research in the mid-2000s, when there was overwhelming attention to groups of people living with HIV in Africa. As such, the methodological challenges here discussed will speak to a much broader audience of scholars than those studying conflict-related sexual violence.

The methodological tensions and challenges that authors identify are strongly related to the shift of seeing sexual violence in conflict as part of the broader patterns of gender based violence, to an exceptionalization of rape in war as ontologically different (Boesten 2017). Susan Brownmiller, in her seminal book *Against Our Will* (1975), discussed sexual violence in war and in peace, in domestic and public spaces, in diverse historical and geographical contexts, as grounded in the same patriarchal misogynist values. *Against Our Will* provided a ground-breaking documentation of the pervasiveness and ubiquity of sexual violence against women. Importantly, especially in 1975, Brownmiller did not only consider wartime rape as political act, but saw all rape as political since the ever-present threat of sexual violence led to a clear hierarchy between the sexes. She identified what we now would call a *rape culture* and a *continuum*. Whereas a rape culture refers to the socio-cultural norms and values that create a permissive environment for rape, a continuum of violence refers to the linkages between different forms of gender-based violence (Boesten 2017, Cockburn 2004, Kelly 1988, Moser and Clark 2001). Many studies, specific and contextualised, followed Brownmiller's ground-breaking work in seeing an over-arching pattern of violence against women and inequality that linked different forms of gendered violence together.

The thesis that rape was used as a weapon of war in some conflicts was a logical outcome of the scholarly work done in the 1990s. If women are perceived as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation, and men are seen as the protectors of that nation, then raping women is a very effective way of unsettling communities, humiliating both women and men, and even changing the ethnic make-up of population groups (Yuval-Davis 1997). The wars of the 1990s confirmed this idea, as women's bodies were so clearly used and destroyed for reasons related to collective identity. Perhaps the most powerful consequence of this thesis was that if rape was a weapon of war, then it was not a biological or even structural phenomenon, and hence, was not inevitable. If rape was a tool in waging war, then it could be stopped. So, this idea of rape as a weapon of war took root, became a slogan for activism, the underlying assumption of conflict-related sexual violence, and a focus of International Criminal Law. In particular, sexual violence became the focus of the global Women, Peace and Security Agenda and the United Nations Security Council Resolutions (UNSCR) that followed (Engle 2014). Inger Skjelsbæk in her contribution to this issue briefly discusses the content of some of these UNSCR; suffice to say here that UNSCR 1325, issued in 2000, initiated the formal securitization of conflict-related sexual violence in global conflict and peacebuilding discourse, policy, intervention, and indeed research.

The securitization of CRSV has raised concerns about the exceptionalization of rape in war as divorced from peacetime violence and inequality and of other war-related gendered harms, as this simplifies understandings of rape in war, as well as overlooks the gravity and scale of everyday sexual violence in homes and communities (Boesten 2014, Eriksson Baaz and Stern 2013). There is also a concern that the exceptionalization of rape in war as something that can be ended as part of war replaces a more sophisticated and necessary gender analysis of war itself, and gendered agency within war. This critique is most

prominent among feminist scholars of International Relations. In such an analysis, gender relations contribute to militarisation and war in the first place (Cockburn 2010, Heathcote and Otto 2014). Both these concerns insist on explicit gender analysis –whereby gender is understood as constitutive of social relations, and hence of power relations, inequalities, and violence. Lastly, there are concerns about the excessive demand for quantification of evidence, which feeds into the previous two concerns (Davies and True 2015).

The increased attention to conflict-related sexual violence has also created a hyper-visibility that has not only made visible a problem but also given space to voyeurism and dark imagery (Buss 2009, 2014), or even fetishization (Meger 2016), obscuring individual accounts and the complexity and nuances involved (Houge and Skjelsbæk 2018, 25). Boesten and Henry, in their contribution to this Special Issue, discuss some of the consequences of such hyper-visibility, or even just ‘hypes’ (Hillhorst and Douma 2017) for the ethics of qualitative, interview-based research. But this hyper-visibility has not only added additional ethical questions to an already complex field, but created a range of further methodological challenges. Following Kirsten Campbell’s categorization of these challenges (this issue) in ontological, epistemological and axiological questions, the next section briefly discusses the articles in this Special Issue.

Ontological, epistemological, and axiological challenges

Ontology: what is our subject matter?

Most research starts by defining the main concepts used, in this case, sexual violence. This is not an easy task, as individual interpretations often differ from legal definitions and legal definitions will differ across countries and judicial administrations. Socio-cultural differences in understandings of what sexual violence is change and evolve. As such, until not so long ago and in most countries, rape in marriage did not exist as spouses should always be sexually available, street harassment was not seen as sexual or violent, and in many countries marriage between victim and rapist was used as a way to ‘resolve’ incidents of rape. Some of these challenges continue to exist in some parts of the world, and will shape individual experiences. While what is defined in any given social or legal context as sexual violence will influence individual interpretations of experiences with such behaviour, a lack of a commonly understood definition does not necessarily mean that the experience does not exist.

In conflict-related sexual violence research, however, few researchers ask what sexual violence is according to its victim-survivors. Holly Porter, in her contribution, asks this key question: how do we understand the phenomenon ‘rape’, and how does our understanding match the experiences of victim-survivors? While most researchers clearly define how they employ the concept, often based on legal and socially understood definitions, few ask what rape means to those who experience it. Porter questions how concept and experience differ, what constitutes the boundaries of an embodied experience and how that might shape our conceptual understanding. Drawing on her ethnographic work with Acholi communities in Northern Uganda, Porter argues that, for the Acholi, rape is thoroughly existential, ‘a sexual transgression of a person’s *being*’. Discussing existing legal and socio-cultural understandings of rape alongside Acholi women’s experiences also highlights the

need to think first about the existence, or not, of bodily autonomy. To what extent does the experience of forced sex relate to contemporary global definitions of ‘rape’? What are the consequences of such lines of enquiry, and the possibility of ambiguous answers, for the understanding of rape, and for responses to ‘conflict-related sexual violence’? Porter concludes that the experience of rape is closely related to the different ways of being in the world, and hence, that such configurations should be part and parcel of the research in order to understand socio-cultural understandings of rape as a human experience. How we as researchers understand rape cannot and should not determine how rape is experienced.

Kirsten Campbell also starts with the ontological question, and looks at the words and definitions most used in research on conflict related sexual violence, sexual violence in armed conflict, and wartime rape. She argues that these different words expand and contract the actual acts referred to, and shape the questions asked, the types of data collected, and of course, the comparability of studies. Using definitions deployed by international criminal law does not solve the problem, as international legal definitions are debated and change. Furthermore, and more in line with Porter’s concerns, Campbell asserts that fixed ideas about the nature of perpetrators, victims and conflicts also limits our understanding of sexual violence, while adding categories (men as victims, women as perpetrators, types of conflicts, and types of places) does not resolve the problem either. The point is to interrogate how identity categories, as well as studied conflicts, might be constituted by gendered and raced structures -not only within the local context, but as constituted by researchers’ assumptions as well.

Doris Buss gives an excellent example of such an interrogation: she asks how the concept of conflict-related sexual violence in the Democratic Republic of the Congo has become a separate ontological category in global policy that leads to and is grounded in particular ideas about both sexual violence as well as conflict. In particular, Buss analyses the emergence of a particular discourse in relation to conflict-mining-related sexual violence in two major policy spaces, the OECD Due Diligence Guidance for Responsible Supply Chain of Minerals from Conflict-Affected and High-Risk Areas and section 1502 of the Wall Street Reform Act in the United States, that guide normative standards governing corporate involvement in mining and mineral supply chains from conflict-affected or fragile states. Importantly, Buss shows how such perspectives effectively exceptionalize some gender violence, and normalizes -and hence, legitimizes- others.

Epistemology: how do we know what we know?

This leads us then to the question of epistemology: how do we know what we know? According to most contributors to this Special issue, there is one major epistemological divide among contemporary social science scholars researching conflict-related sexual violence: on the one hand there is a critical feminist scholarship that relies on qualitative methodologies building on the broader field of gender violence. On the other hand, there is a more recent body of research that is positivist and seeks to quantify evidence and provide insights that feed into global policy. As Inger Skjelsbæk observes, these approaches are not mutually exclusive as they are grounded in an ethics of engagement that aims for social justice, but how social justice is perceived and how to get there may differ.

Skjelsbæk traces the quantitative contribution to CRSV research to the late 2000s when a group of quantitative political scientists at the Peace Research Institute Oslo (PRIO) turned their attention to CRSV. The resulting database, known as the Sexual Violence and Armed Conflict data base (SVAC), is central to this new perspective and how it has influenced global research and policy related to CRSV (see Cohen and Nordås 2014). Skjelsbæk also distinguishes between a critical feminist and a positivist epistemology in CRSV research, looking beyond the methodological difference of quantitative versus qualitative research methods, and instead seeing one epistemic community aiming for social justice, divided by different epistemological approaches to how to do research and what findings to prioritise, with differing consequences for research and practice. CRSV is messy and complex, and the different approaches in the current field are ultimately, Skjelsbæk suggests, grappling with the same complexity of a problem that is difficult to objectify.

Ultimately, the epistemological tensions are more complex than a divide between qualitative and quantitative methodologies, or even between critical feminist versus positivist epistemologies among scholars, as approaches and ideas about 'data' shape and are shaped by ontology and axiology that are in turn shaped by powerful policymaking entities. Doris Buss shows how ideas about what is valid data are infused by existing racial and gendered structures of power and imaginations of the Other, specifically looking at how corporate policy has adopted certain data as providing a direct causal link between conflict-mining and sexual violence. Examining the data presented, Buss argues that such causal links cannot clearly be established, as too many other factors around gender violence and conflict mining, as well as around data gathering, are overlooked or purposefully dismissed. Hence, the creation of a category 'conflict-mining-related sexual violence' has a political function beyond the actual issue of gender violence, and is supported by what is seen as valid data. Buss draws on postcolonial and feminist perspectives to advocate for an epistemology that recognises underlying structural biases. This requires, she argues, digging into the micro-contexts of how, when, and where 'sexual violence' and 'good data' are defined, unpacking how these are shaped by social orders which are themselves constituted 'in and through the categories of violence, forms of subjectivity, and knowledge formats that are authorised' (Buss, this volume).

Axiology: what values shape what we can know?

Campbell picks up on Buss' argument to scrutinise what is seen as appropriate 'fact-finding' in the shift from qualitative to quantitative research in the 'data-demand culture'. Campbell takes particular issue with the impossibility of aggregated data (or indicators, as Engle Merry suggests, 2016) to capture patriarchal cultures and institutions, specific vulnerabilities of targeted groups, and the contested and highly political nature of data collection in and after conflict. This is why Campbell adds the challenge of axiology to our questions of ontology and epistemology: she observes that great part of the epistemological and ontological tensions in contemporary research on sexual violence lies in a commitment, or lack thereof, to a feminist perspective, or a gender lens. Dismissing a gender analysis, or equating gender analysis with gender equality (or with women), limits the questions asked. And so, the dominant 'securitization of sexual violence' discourse may have attracted necessary and welcome attention to a huge problem, but it also tends to depoliticise or even invisibilize the gendered power dynamics underlying both sexual violence in war and in peace, as well as the research field and the policy spaces (Davis and True 2015). Following Buss, Campbell

insists that we have to look at how the world we study, as well as the questions we ask, are infused by the multiple biases that make sexual violence possible in the first place. Skjelsbæk also picks up on an axiological tension as she discusses how our normative objectives shape the research we do.

Following the axiological questions, in the last two articles of this Special Issue, Baaz, Gray and Stern, and Boesten and Henry, ask how normative objectives shape research and vice versa, especially in our desire for first-hand narratives in qualitative research. Baaz, Gray and Stern question their own desires for certain answers in research on perpetrators of gender violence, while Boesten and Henry unpack ethical concerns in relation to a persistent focus on the narratives of victim-survivors. The first undertake an admirably uncomfortable self-reflection about how our own intellectual desires may obscure less comfortable explanations of violence that we were not prepared for or that we do not welcome. Baaz, Gray and Stern find that the desirable truths we may find may become discursive tools to intervene and explain gender violence -such as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, or rape as weapon of war-, sometimes to the detriment of alternative explanations. Researching their own analysis of perpetrators' narratives of gender-based violence, the authors note how political the questions we ask and the answers we want are, and how these feed into the answers we get.

Boesten and Henry question researchers' search for first-hand stories of sexual violence survivors, particularly in some regions and some conflicts -especially where there is overwhelming attention for CRSV. Even if such research does have, in Skjelsbæk's words, a strong ethics of engagement and a final objective of social justice, the risks of over-research, re-traumatisation, and appropriation are real, and shape the research findings. Interrogating their own research experiences, Boesten and Henry observe that overlooking the possibility of research fatigue on the one hand, and/or the silence that some victim-survivors may prefer, is also likely to affect the researched population in unwelcome ways. Why we do research, with what objectives, and with what methodologies, need to align with the expected effects on individuals and communities, and the interventions (or absence thereof) directed at them. Both these last two articles, then, turn our ethics of engagement around by asking the uncomfortable question of how our own intellectual desires to use our research for the purposes of social justice may have undesirable effects.

Ways forward

The discussed methodological challenges are profound and field-defining in a constructive manner: thinking through the methodological challenges we face should push our reflexivity as researchers, and help rethink our practice. Porter, asking what it is we are researching, suggests we should not necessarily redefine sexual violence in legal terms, but rather listen more carefully to our informants. Interviewees are not only subjects of information, they can be theory builders, they can help us rethink our categories and definitions, and unsettle any predefined knowledge. Campbell argues for a reconstructive methodology that builds new ontic, epistemic and ethical ways of knowing, an approach she calls the Gender Justice Methodology. Her proposal aims for embedding the idea of feminist transformation in our research, i.e., instead of pretending to be 'objective' we should aim to deploy our research

to be transformatory in terms of gender justice. Doris Buss advocates for postcolonial feminist epistemologies to unpack underlying assumptions in the data that is requested, the objectives to be met, the questions asked, the data collected, and the concepts developed.

Skjelsbæk, looking at the epistemological divides in conflict-related sexual violence research, finds comfort in a shared ethics of engagement in an epistemic community that strives to address sexual violence in conflict from different angles. The diversity in approaches should not be seen as an obstacle, but an asset: they speak to different policy agents, and hence, should enrich the field and expand the different routes to social justice.

To avoid that the hyper-visibility of conflict-related sexual violence becomes a burden on affected populations, Boesten and Henry advocate for a feminist reflexive methodology. Such an approach urges researchers to raise a series of questions about the need for and potential consequences of interviewing and the potential availability of alternative sources, and about the geopolitical context in which we do research, ask questions, and find informants. Baaz, Gray and Stern take the feminist self-reflection a step further, and urge us to look at our own ethico-political desires. Our own positionality matters, and shape our emotional and affective responses to the answers and explanations that respondents might give. The authors observe we can become uncomfortable towards certain answers, or, alternatively, too comfortable: we may happily agree with particular explanations, obscuring any alternative explanations. Thus, the authors ask researchers to be not only attentive to and critical of feelings of discomfort, but also to potential feelings of comfort and ease.

As indicated above, this Special Issue does not pretend to present all possible methodological issues and trends in contemporary conflict-related sexual violence research, nor do we believe we have the final word on the solutions to the challenges identified. However, together the articles provide a good overview of some of the current debates in scholarship around conflict related sexual violence and how these challenges can have very concrete effects on the populations studied and the interventions designed. Ultimately, all those working in this field, either as researcher, policy maker, or practitioner, strive to prevent sexual violence and mitigate the effects on victim-survivors as Skjelsbæk points out. As these papers suggest, it matters how we do this.

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