

# Why Citation matters: Ideas on a feminist approach to research

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## Introduction

Research in academia today has a highly standardized and institutionalized approach to citation with only a few generally accepted forms on how to reference our work. As students in the field of social sciences, we learn this at an early stage of our studies as we are constantly reminded of the importance of citing correctly. Following the logic of continuous progress in scientific research, where each work builds on each other, we learn that it is necessary to thoroughly reflect on the work that has already been done on a specific question, to be able to draw new conclusions from enquiring, criticizing or highlighting new aspects of a problem.[1] This makes it possible to distinguish the authors ideas from someone else's while acknowledging the impact of previously published work, not only to avoid plagiarism but also to give credit to the source of our ideas and to be able to evaluate the stringency of our argument (Logik des Zitierens).

What we often don't realize is that the knowledge we consume, produce and reproduce in this process isn't neutral. As Pat Thomson puts it in a blogpost: "Who cites who is not a neutral game." (2018). A lot of the scholarship produced in social sciences is still highly dominated by white, male cis-gendered authors, while especially women and people of color continue to be underrepresented and marginalized in academia. Carrie Mott & Daniel Cockayne even point to "citation cartels", where authors agree to only cite each other's work to boost their impact in academia, leading to the overall exclusion of particular voices and bodies from what bell hooks calls a "white heteromasculine hegemony" (Mott/Cockayne 2017, p. 955). Drawing on this argument and some of the research that has been done on the politics of citation, I will be reflecting on some of the citation practices in academia today and point out a few challenges that arise with the current highly institutionalized system of citation social sciences, especially when trying to assume a feminist and gender-sensitive approach to research.

To develop my argument, I will first draw on Sarah Ahmed's inspiring book "Living a feminist life" (2017), as well as the blog that she was writing alongside with it, where she develops a set of ideas on what it means to be feminist and addresses the challenges that arise with it. Here she follows a strict citation policy and reflects on how the references we use influence our writing. Her work helps to understand citation as a form of academic politics that reproduces hierarchies of knowledge. I will use her argument to show specifically how women of color have continuously been excluded from generalized forms of knowledge production as publication and citation practices continue to reproduce institutional racism and sexism (Chakravartty 2018, p. 254). As a political science student, who is used to writing papers following academic standards, I will use this also to reflect on some of my own work, asking myself, who am I citing and why? Lastly, I will try to elaborate some conclusions on how these questions impact the research that is done today and how we can improve on the challenges that were mentioned, moving towards a more inclusive citation practice that takes into account various forms of knowledge that have previously been excluded.

## Sarah Ahmed – Living a feminist life

"Living a feminist life" (2017) is a rather personal account of the author Sarah Ahmed, a scholar of color who became a lecturer in women's studies after acquiring a PhD in critical theory. Through the book, she reflects on her personal and intellectual journey of becoming a feminist and, as the title suggests, what it means to live a feminist life in a world that is still in many ways structured in a patriarchic way. She draws her inspiration specifically from reading black feminist and feminist of color scholarship and tries to create a link between a theory of feminism and the everyday experiences of women dealing with racism and sexism, arguing that feminism can never be restricted to the field of academia but rather has to be brought "home" into women's personal spaces. In this way she also critiques the mainstream of academic research as well as sexism in academia.

For Sarah Ahmed, it is highly relevant, where we draw our ideas and knowledge from and what we produce and reproduce as researchers. Interestingly, she also talks about feminist theory as “world making” (Ahmed 2017, p. 14) as it guides how we generate knowledge and how we position ourselves in this world. One aspect that addresses in this regard is how we cite our work, as she describes citations as “feminist bricks”, helping us to build a world, where all bodies can be accommodated (p. 16).

*“In this book, I adopt a strict citation policy: I do not cite any white men. By white men I am referring to an institution, as I explain in chapter 6. Instead, I cite those who have contributed to the intellectual genealogy of feminism and antiracism, including work that has been too quickly (in my view) cast aside or left behind, work that lays out other paths, paths we can call desire lines, created by not following the official paths laid out by disciplines.”*

— Ahmed 2017, p.15

The argument made here, is very similar to the one made in the beginning: we cite previously published work to acknowledge the impact of their ideas on the development of our own ideas. Sara Ahmed cites to “acknowledge our debt to those who came before” (p. 15). At the same time, she describes citation in one of her blogposts “as a rather successful reproductive technology, a way of reproducing the world around certain bodies”, (Ahmed 2013) pointing to the hierarchies that prevail in academia. Especially in producing (feminist) theory researchers often tend to fall back on a “citational chain” (Ahmed 2017, p.8) where theorists cite other theorists who are already well established on the field and continuously stick to a similar epistemological position. Oftentimes this will be the work of white male scholars who form the mainstream of academic research and who continuously reproduce a similar epistemological position, rarely allowing for alternative forms of knowledge to enter the discourse. Sarah Ahmed specifically wants to avoid this epistemological trap through developing her own citation policy, which she also agrees is sometimes very blunt. This way she tries to give room to voices and ideas that have previously excluded in the epistemological mainstream of most disciplines.

## The invisibility of alternative epistemologies

As mentioned above, the mainstream of academic disciplines is still controlled by an elite group of white men, whose interests shape the themes and paradigms of traditional scholarship (Hill Collins 2000, p. 251). Their interpretations of the world are reinforced through citational chains or even citation cartels, where authors agree to only cite each other to boost the impact of their work. And while much research has shown, that women, people of color, and those othered through white heteromale hegemony continue to be underrepresented and marginalized in the politics of knowledge, this doesn't mean that there have not been other forms of knowledge produced that have had an impact on academia as well. Patricia Hill Collins refers to U.S. Black feminist thought in this context as “subjugated knowledge” that often stands in contrast to traditional epistemologies. She points out, that even though Black feminist scholars have become much more visible in academia, their knowledge claims are often still validated differently, especially when those claims contradict the interests of those controlling academic institutions (p. 252). This has in many instances led to Black feminist scholars to turn to alternative ways of producing and validating knowledge, that do not fulfill the typical political and epistemological criteria of the mainstream of academic disciplines.

One way of validating knowledge claims outside of traditional academic principles is based on the “collective experiences and accompanying worldviews that U.S. Black women sustained based on our particular history” (p. 256). Patricia Hill Collins uses this as an example to specifically object to positivist methodologies of knowledge production that “aim to create scientific descriptions by producing objective generalizations” and in which scholars explicitly distance themselves from lived experiences, values or emotions. Instead, she emphasizes the importance of lived experiences in what she calls a “collective wisdom” (p. 256) that Black women have oftentimes needed to be able to sustain themselves against “the dynamics of intersecting oppressions” (p. 257). Aside from that Hill mentions “belief in connectedness and the use of dialogue” (p. 260) when she quotes bell hooks who said: “Dialogue implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (p. 260). Both of them center around Black women's strong sense of community as Hill points to the dimension of solidarity and support in traditional African-American institutions like Church or Family. She also stresses that most knowledge claims from Black feminist scholars do not come from a single person but are worked out in community or in dialogue with others.

This again brings us to the difficulty of conventional citation systems. As mentioned above, they tend to reproduce the mainstream of academic research, favoring white male authors in a “white heteromale hegemony” while further marginalizing other voice, especially those of feminist scholars of color. Through this highly institutionalized system alternative forms of knowledge production are being excluded from academic disciplines. Even though they will be considered valid knowledge by various criteria that goes beyond traditional epistemological systems, the work of Black feminist scholars is oftentimes denied the status of “credible research” and would therefore also not appear in references and citation lists of other scholars. This prevents Black feminist scholars from academic recognition, as citation counts are still an important measure in determining academic impact and scholarly reputation (Baker 2019). It also becomes difficult to include forms of alternative knowledge generated through collective lived experiences, in citations, when we can't associate them to a single author or a group of authors who claim to be at the origin of the proposed ideas. James Boyle calls this the “conceit of romantic authorship”, or rather “the idea that individuals (and even corporations) create out of thin air rather than borrow from a rich

public domain of freely circulating sources and inspirations.” (Sunder 2007, p. 99) which is a notion that comes out of western knowledge production with a reference to intellectual property rights. (Due to the scope of this paper, the notion of intellectual property rights and their critique will not be further elaborated here.)

## Why we should care

After recognizing citational systems as an oppressive tool that favors whiteness and continues to leave out particular voices and bodies (Mock/Cockayne 2017, p. 955), P. Chakravartty et al. point to one important question: “Why would white scholars listen?” (p. 262). While it may sound blunt at first, I think it is an important question to ask and reflect on. As researchers or students, we always have a reason for how and why we chose the topics we investigate. Especially in social sciences we also have a certain responsibility towards the questions we decide to address and to the impact our research has. We navigate in a system of social hierarchies and in between power relations where we have to learn to position ourselves and question our interests and priorities. Of course, it is oftentimes easier to move with the flow of mainstream academia, where the chance of being published, recognized and ultimately successful in academia is much higher when following the established citational chains. But this also means that we reproduce oppressive structures that silence other marginalized voices. P. Chakravartty et al. talks about “the larger structures of racial inequality in the academy and society at large” and a social order that has been “detrimental and dehumanizing” for decades (p. 262). This certainly goes against the imagination of (western) knowledge being a neutral and non-violent sphere of rationality. To understand and analyze the social and political world, it is necessary to recognize these connections.

Even as I was writing this essay, I noticed that a lot of the literature I found on the related topics was written by white (male) scholars, who are rarely directly affected by the oppressive system in which they work. But as I made an effort, to dig a bit deeper and find articles and books written by (feminist) scholars of color, I realized that in many ways I have also benefited from this effort as it has encouraged me to look at the topics I address from a different perspective. Sarah Ahmed put it very beautifully when she reflects on her intellectual journey while writing “Living a feminist life” (2017)

*“Perhaps citations are feminist straw: lighter materials that, when put together, still create a shelter but a shelter that leaves you more vulnerable. That is how it felt writing this work as well as speaking from it: being in the wind; being blown about, more or less, depending on what I encountered. The words I sent out danced around me; I began to pick up on things I had not noticed before. I began to wonder how much I had in the past built an edifice to create a distance. Sometimes we need distance to follow a thought. Sometimes we need to give up distance to follow that thought.”*

— Ahmed 2017, p. 16

## Moving towards a more inclusive system of citation

Lastly, I want to acknowledge that citations can also function as a “powerful corrective” (Baker 2019). This has led Mott&Cockayne to advocate for a “conscientious practice of citation” (Mock/Cockayne 2017, p. 968) that can help to dismantle and deconstruct dominant power structures in social sciences. They ask the question: “how do we rethink citation as a progressive technology rather than one that serves to make invisible particular bodies and voices?” (p. 965). Borrowing the term “performative” from Judith Butler, they suggest understanding citations as a performative practice, instead of viewing citations as a measure of academic impact. They point out what can be gained from failing to follow disciplinary norms of citation and engaging with other voices who have typically been made invisible or silenced by the larger system:

*“Instead of understanding citation as a metric of influence and impact, we outline practical and conceptual ways to resist these neoliberal leanings by thinking conscientiously about citation as a form of engagement.”*

— Mock/Cockayne 2017, p. 964

Looking more specifically at how to do this, especially as a student of social sciences who is used to engaging closely with the materials presented, I have found a blogpost by an Australian teacher, who has come up with a list of a few questions to ask ourselves when reflecting on our list of references with which I would like to close my argument (Reference lists as sites of diversity? Citations matter. 2018):

- How does this list of references situate my work in the field? With what kind of scholarship am I aligning my work?
- From what nations, cultures and classes do my references come? To what extent do they represent Euro- or Anglo- centric ways of knowing and being?
- What is the gender mix of my reference list?
- Whose voices are silent? Whose scholarship have I ignored or excluded?

## Conclusions

Citational systems are a powerful tool that work to reproduce a discipline (Ahmed 2013) while upholding oppressive systems of racism and sexism in academia. Much research in the field of social sciences has shown us that particular voices and bodies, as well as alternative forms of knowledge that are being produced, continue to be marginalized and excluded from the mainstream of academic knowledge, leading to a rather narrow body of work that is considered credible. Specifically, feminist scholars of color have been excluded in a system that favors (male) whiteness. It is therefore necessary that we reflect on our own practices of citation and knowledge production to avoid reproducing these systems of oppression, which we wish to dismantle. While of course, this goes way beyond our practices of citation and is not done with checking our reference lists, it is still one important step towards a more conscientious engagement with those voices that have been othered in a “white heteromasculine hegemony”.

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