

Sample Student Writing: Disciplinary Conventions of Research and Writing

Grade this group received on this assignment: B+

Positive aspects of this work: the students effectively summarize their chosen scholar's publications, they do a nice job drawing parallels (showing commonalities) across the scholarship they analyze and explaining some of the broader aims of this research, and they make a decent effort to explain some of the conventions of research and writing in their particular field of study—here, Women and Gender Studies—offering a detailed discussion, for instance, about the merits of ethnographic research methods.

Problem-areas with this work: the students' thesis is not clear, and their explanations of the conventions of research and writing in their major is pretty thin. For example, they never explain what they mean by "hands-on research," or "finding paper trails," or "culturally sensitive future research," and they neglect to explain why they think these conventions characterize most scholarship in Women and Gender Studies. Similarly, they make mention of "capitalizing on first-hand knowledge" (that is, integrating personal anecdotes), "multi-level processes," and ethnographic methods and a supplement to traditional social scientific research, but they never explain whether and how these are generalizable conventions in the field.

The field of Women and Gender Studies utilizes a wide range of writing conventions to satisfy the rigor of the academy while still remaining sensitive to the variety of topics researched. Within the field, heavy attention is paid to the topics of gender within social movements and politics, sexuality and gender, violence against women, and feminist theory- to name a few. Professors and researchers in this field routinely implore blueprint introduction paragraphs to guide the research, signposting throughout the text to mark clear transitions, and a heavy reliance on feminist theorists to support their findings.

Professor Lorraine Bayard de Volo was first the Assistant and later the Associate Professor for the Departments of Political Science and Women's Studies at the University of Colorado at Boulder from 1998 to 2006. Her research covers various subfields within this discipline such as ethnography, mothers as activists, as well as gender and power relations in Latin America. Bayard de Volo asks various questions within each subfield, such as, "what is the logic to focusing on mothers," "to what contexts do states respond with maternal frames," "how power dynamics circulating at the micro-level connect with those occurring regionally, nationally, and globally," and "what ethnography can bring to the study of politics." Each of these questions is heavily explored and plays off of one another throughout her texts.

A main topic of exploration for Professor Bayard de Volo focuses on the idea of mothers- specifically in Latin America- as apolitical actors in political movements. Much of her research centers on the idea of the grieving mother serving as a tool that informs both social movements and political revolutions. In her article, "Mobilizing Mothers for War: Cross-National Framing Studies in Nicaragua's Contra War", Bayard de Volo examines the benefits militaries receive from the maternal framing of issues. She argues that maternal framing benefits the military by: "1) channeling maternal grievances, 2) disseminating propaganda through 'apolitical' mothers, and 3) evoking emotions and sympathy nationally and internationally" (Bayard de Volo 715). This article's purpose parallels with the focus of many of her other published works. Not only does she examine the use of mothers in social movements, but in political realms as well. In this piece Bayard de Volo brings in her past

research on maternal framing and links it to the then current situation in Nicaragua. The aim of this publication is to delve deeper into the development of framing strategies, which she has previously focused on, specifically as how they apply to maternal activism. As mentioned, she uses this piece to refine her previous findings about framing strategies further- here she discusses the need for framing strategies to be recognized as gendered, states that its application should not be limited to social movements, and points out the need for further analysis of cross-national framing studies. This publication mainly serves to educate other scholars in the field of Women and Gender Studies that study dynamics of war, revolution, gender and power. It also aids researchers examining the use of traditional female roles in a politicized frame. Overall, this research topic is highly representative of her complete works and highlights many of the topics she focuses on in both her research and teaching preferences.

Bayard de Volo utilizes many of the writing conventions found throughout the Women and Gender Studies discipline that are expected in research publications within the field. Throughout "Mobilizing Mothers for War" Bayard de Volo makes heavy use of signposts. She breaks the paper down into different sections according to questions already posed in her introduction. This introduction paragraph is not only full of guiding questions that she aims to answer throughout the publication, but it is also comprised of relevant background information on the topic, as well as notes directing the reader to outside publications that give greater detail. These strategies are found throughout her publications and in many of the other works found within the discipline. Additional conventions employed by Bayard de Volo appear to hold true for many of her publications. Bayard de Volo can often be found in the country of focus completing hands on research- whether that be finding paper trails or interviewing individuals relevant to the topic, capitalizing on first hand knowledge relevant to the topics.

Bayard de Volo frequently employs the ethnographic method in her infra-political research as a means for acquiring unique and rare insights regarding the matters of power relations and resistance that women often experience in the workplace, and also as activists in political movements. Bayard de Volo emphasizes the importance of Ethnography as a means of studying specific political processes, stating in her publication of *Participant Observation, Politics, and Power Relations: Nicaraguan Mothers and U.S. Casino Waitresses* that "such methods are particularly well suited to the study of certain political processes, yet in the disciplines slowness to adopt the method, we bar ourselves from accessing certain types of information, asking certain political questions, and gaining certain insights" (Bayard de Volo 2017). The insights provided from this method of study tend to be those that most other ordinary methods of research are incapable of producing, insights of "multilevel processes". Bayard de Volo explains that such insights, apart from holding intrinsic value, "lay the groundwork for culturally sensitive future research, policies, and political action." She advocates the vital importance of ethnography despite the fact that it is "far from a common method in political science" and therefore feels that political scientists are in danger of "falling behind the cutting edge of political research" (Bayard de Volo 217) due to the discipline's seemingly apathetic approach to adopt and engage in the practice of ethnography. She notes the benefits of the ethnographic method in relation to the study of multilevel processes- processes that occur not only on the macro level but on the micro levels of politics as well. To illustrate this, she refers to the few years she spent working as a cocktail waitress in three different casinos in Reno, Nevada for the purpose of conducting a first-hand observational study regarding the overtly sexualized perception

of women as cocktail waitresses and the common misconception that they possess a natural subservience to men and how these women felt overall given their circumstances; whether or not they felt objectified given the “skimpy” uniforms that they are often required to wear. She also spent a few years in Nicaragua for the purpose of studying the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs organization, a political movement led by mothers who had lost a son in the Contra war, and Bayard de Volo primarily focuses on how these women were mobilized by the Sandinista state and the corresponding meaning that the mothers attached to their role in the political organization.

One example that Bayard uses in this article of the ethnographic method, and its capability to link macro and micro level processes of politics, is found in her study of the Mothers of Heroes and Martyrs organization, particularly within their involvement in the earlier years of the Contra war as members of the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN). At the macro level, she conducted a “discourse analysis of dominant representations of women, femininity, and motherhood by comparing pro and anti-state newspapers, as well as other texts produced by the FSLN,” (Bayard de Volo 222) which allowed her to trace the ways in which the Sandinista state and anti-Sandinista groups appealed to women over time and how this was linked to the mother’s organization at the micro-level. In her closer, more personal examination, Bayard de Volo states that the FSLN recruited these women so that they could accompany the bodies of fallen soldiers to their respective homes so that their mothers and families may experience a sense of closure, and these mothers would also comfort the grieving mother and console her through the grieving process. As Bayard de Volo contends, this was not their only task, as these women (who were also mothers that had lost a son in the contra war) were also expected to “lessen the family’s resentment toward the state and its new draft” (Bayard de Volo 222) in order to prevent the enemy from taking advantage of the family’s grief. From this linking of the macro and micro level processes through ethnography, Bayard de Volo exemplifies how we are able to gain a better understanding of how death in war is experienced at the “ground level by those most profoundly affected, dead soldier’s loved ones” (Bayard de Volo 223) instead of relying on statistical information that is typically more heavily focused on the impact on foreign policy in general, a much vaguer topic.

Ethnographic methods have played a significant role in Bayard de Volo’s work so much so as to prompt her to dedicate an entire article to their defense. In her article, *From the Inside Out: Ethnographic Methods in Political Research*, Bayard de Volo presents a three-point argument in support of ethnographic methods. This argument 1) “suggest[s] that the marginalization of ethnographic methods leads to... certain types of research questions... [being] undervalued by the discipline, 2) argue[s] that the usual criticisms of ethnographic methods are rooted in inaccuracies,” and 3) “suggest[s] that a positive agenda for incorporating [ethnographic methods] into graduate curricula should be a central part of reform in the discipline” (Bayard de Volo 267). Bayard de Volo challenges the marginalization of ethnographic methods by acknowledging their ability to bring attention to the “inconsistencies between outsider and insider beliefs... which ultimately may provide great insights into questions of power and perception.” It is these inconsistencies that allow for a greater understanding of how factors like race, gender, or sexuality can influence social and political factors, both domestically and internationally (Bayard de Volo 268). Additionally, Bayard De Volo, in her publication of *Participant Observation, Politics, and Power Relations: Nicaraguan Mothers and U.S. Casino Waitresses* points to how the traditional scientific method sometimes takes certain truths for granted rather than asking “why” at every given, yet relevant, opportunity: “In

contrast to the dominant scientific method, whereby the hypothesis is developed before the evidence is analyzed, ethnography engages us to continually ask “why”... Particularly effective in encouraging the researcher to ask “why” with regard to processes that the researcher or the local population has taken for granted as neutral or “the way things have always been.”

In order to straighten out the inaccuracies that ethnographic methods are criticized through, Bayard de Volo acknowledges that, while alone, ethnographic methods may not produce abundant amounts of useful data, when combined with other research methods, ethnographic methods prove to yield constructive and quality results. Rather than conducting random sampling or controlled-environment studies, ethnographic methods focus on a particular demographic and maintain consistent analysis of that demographic throughout the term of research (Bayard de Volo 269). Bayard de Volo subsequently provides four examples— Laitin (1998), Susan Stokes (1995), James Scott (1985) and Clarissa Rile Hayward (2000)— of ethnographic methods being employed in multi-method research projects within political science (Bayard de Volo 270).

Bayard de Volo concludes her argument, not only by claiming that neglecting to teach students “is a sure-fire way to ensure that ethnographic methods will remain underutilized,” but by proposing ways in which students can enrich their careers within political science, and beyond, through the utilization of ethnographic methods. Through the use of ethnographic methods of study, students will gain hands-on experience with the communities they engage in study with. Additionally, given the communities of focus are abroad, students will have the opportunity to learn a foreign language, which allows for a greater expansion of opportunities in the future. Finally, Bayard de Volo states that the use of ethnographic methods bears the possibility for “cross-disciplinary collaboration” on common areas with other disciplines of study (Bayard de Volo 271).

The relevance of Bayard de Volo’s research topics are further defended by the journals they are published in. Bayard de Volo is frequently published in top journals, including *Gender and Society*, where “Mobilizing Mothers for War: Cross-National Framing Studies in Nicaragua’s Contra War” is found. *Gender and Society* ranks as number one within the field of Women and Gender Studies and 40th within sociology journals. It is peer reviewed by many and only publishes two percent of submissions (*Gender and Society*). Bayard de Volo has also been published in *PS: Political Science and Politics*, “which is the only quarterly professional news and commentary journal in the field and is the prime source of information on political scientists’ achievements and professional concerns” (*PS*). Clearly, Lorraine Bayard de Volo’s credibility in the field is unquestionable due to the level of respect the sites of publications her works can be found in.

Works Cited

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