I was a constructivist long before I had ever heard of that term. As a young child, I would lie in bed and look up at the ceiling. I loved to imagine a miniature version of myself walking, in defiance of the laws of gravity, on the ceilings of all the rooms throughout my house. I was able to look down at the members of my family going about their normal routines in the “real world.” Because I was so tiny (and walking around upside down on the ceiling), they could not see me. I loved imagining this upending of reality.

I was not interested in received wisdom in any aspect of my childhood. I respected my parents but didn’t ask them to help me with the questions that were constantly swirling in my head. I was raised Catholic and went to Mass and confession weekly, but I didn’t turn to the church for answers about anything. School was for memorizing material, learning formulas, and socializing with friends. Thinking was something I did on my own time.

As a burgeoning feminist growing up in a time and place that valued traditional gender roles, I would question all the givens about the presumed superiority of boys. When people said boys were inherently better at sports or had more innate physical prowess, I would get frustrated. These claims weren’t objective. They depend on all kinds of assumptions, like the rules governing specific sports, the physical traits we choose to value, and how we define physical prowess. Why was a tall basketball player who could dunk considered physically superior to a tiny gymnast who could do flips on a balance beam? Why were speed or strength presumed to be more important indicators of athleticism than flexibility or endurance? Although I couldn’t have articulated it in these words at the time, I understood that common views of athleticism and physical prowess weren’t simply based on objective facts. They also reflected pre-existing biases and subjective ideas about what people valued.

My innate curiosity, skepticism, and desire to think for myself have fundamentally shaped my path as a scholar, one that I forged step by step on my own rather than following a detailed, planned-in-advance professional roadmap.

For my undergraduate education, I attended Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, a school just over an hour away from my hometown. I started college thinking that maybe I wanted to be a lawyer or a broadcast journalist, for no real reason other than it seemed like a reasonably ambitious choice for a smart young woman from smalltown Ohio. I decided to major in Communications to keep the broadcast journalism door open. Relatively quickly, I learned that this path was not the one for me. I appreciated learning technical skills; learning how to splice audio tape to produce a recorded radio program was fun. But these courses did not
feed my mind or soul. In contrast, my liberal arts and honors courses had me on fire. I read Albert Camus’s *L’Étranger* in French—a painstaking endeavor for a first-year student whose French skills were not very well-developed. I still remember the concluding line of the final essay I wrote about the novel. “Moi, je ne suis pas étrangère.” Decades later, I have enough self-awareness to recognize that I may not have been telling my professor—or myself—the truth. Our entire class celebrated the end of the semester with a wine and cheese party at our professor’s house; these were different times, and the legal drinking age in Ohio was still 18, at least for a few more months. I was reading books that examined questions involving race, gender, and class and engaging in challenging discussions in my English and honors courses.

For my first two years of college, I just kept taking classes that interested me, with an emphasis on language and literature courses. At the time, students were allowed to take up to 21 credit hours without additional charges. My recollection is that I took the maximum number of credit hours each semester. I did not choose my major—political science—until my junior year. The political science major required 24 credit hours, and I did not take a single hour beyond that requirement. Within my major, I dabbled across subfields. Generally, I was more interested in global issues than American politics. Still, my only international relations courses were American foreign policy, Latin American politics, and several courses on European politics and history, most taken during my junior year semester abroad in Luxembourg. In addition to my political science major, I completed minors in American studies, English literature, and French.

I chose political science because I was interested in the courses, not because I knew what I wanted to do with the degree. My early fall semester during my senior year included the following: wandering around a huge career fair held in the university’s basketball arena trying to figure out which tables to stop at (and scrupulously avoiding the CIA recruitment table even though I was sort of curious); an unsuccessful attempt to make it through the initial screening of potential campus candidates for a Fulbright Scholarship; a terrible first- (and last-) round interview for a job at Proctor & Gamble in which I mostly wanted to ask about opportunities to volunteer in the community; and ongoing indecision whether I should apply to law school (that LSAT was not going to take itself.) I knew what I loved, but I didn’t know what I wanted to do.

One beautiful fall evening, I was walking across campus when I had an epiphany. I wanted to be in college and keep learning forever. I decided at that moment that I would pursue my PhD so that I could become a professor. This was a big and important decision. But I would need to take the GRE and complete applications soon, and I didn’t even know what field I wanted to study. As usual, I was finding my way step by step. Truth be told, I loved literature more than I loved political science. But I also worried that pursuing my PhD in English might kill my love of literature. I ended up deciding on my path based on rather more pragmatic considerations. I observed that women comprised the majority of faculty in the English Department. There was only one woman in the Political Science Department. That settled it. I could make more of a difference in political science.

That left the question of exactly what subfield I should pursue and where I wanted to go to graduate school. I knew I was more interested in global issues than American politics so my decision to pursue international relations as my primary area of study was relatively easy. But where should I go to school? I honestly didn’t even know where to begin. I was a meandering, self-driven student and didn’t have a strong relationship with my advisor, largely because I hadn’t been assigned as a major advisee until the fall semester of my junior year and was studying abroad that spring semester. These were the initial days of the World Wide Web, and I was not an early adopter of technology. So, I couldn’t rely on internet searches as my students would today. Mostly, my research involved asking a few faculty members for ideas and requesting brochures and pamphlets from schools that ended up on my list. After I took the GRE and received relatively strong results, I also started receiving unsolicited information from graduate schools.

As the constructivist that I did not yet know that I was, I ultimately made my choice based on a couple of key words. In combing through the brochures and materials that I had received from schools across the country,
I observed that most international relations programs included *international security* as a focus of study. Then, I received the materials from the University of Notre Dame, and they described their program in *peace studies*, one of the few in the country at the time. This two-word shift in perspective resonated so deeply with me that I knew where I wanted to attend graduate school. I grew immensely as a scholar and a person during my time as a graduate student at the University of Notre Dame, where I completed my Masters in Peace Studies as well as my PhD in Government and International Studies. I arrived at Notre Dame in 1990 as a practicing—and still searching—Catholic. In 1995, I left as an agnostic with a deeper commitment to the social justice tradition in Catholicism, even though I was no longer part of the Church.

My coursework at Notre Dame gave me a broad, interdisciplinary foundation in international relations. At the time, the graduate program in the Department of Government and International Studies reflected a more interdisciplinary approach to the field rather than a disciplinary one. Notably, my PhD is in Government and International Studies, not Political Science. Notre Dame’s interdisciplinary curriculum, coupled with my coursework in Peace Studies, meant that my graduate training in international relations expanded well beyond prevailing approaches in many graduate programs prioritizing realist views of international security. Without fully understanding the implications of my decision, this is why I had chosen Notre Dame over other programs.

My broad, interdisciplinary training in international relations fundamentally shaped by subsequent paths in both teaching and scholarship. My courses with Gil Loescher sparked my interest in humanitarian issues and refugees.\(^1\) From George Lopez, I learned about economic sanctions and peacebuilding.\(^2\) From other faculty, I gained not only substantive knowledge in the field but also important lessons about pedagogy and how to approach scholarship with an open, critical mind. Above all, I am grateful that the University of Notre Dame allowed me to forge my own path rather than encouraging me to ascribe to or replicate the scholarly agendas of my mentors.

From Alan Dowty, I learned to have robust, constructive scholarly discussions that bridged disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological approaches to scholarship on global issues. Because of his work on state efforts to restrict freedom of movement,\(^3\) I asked him to supervise my dissertation, which looked at how domestic politics constrain governmental efforts to regulate international migration through an examination of US immigration policy.\(^4\) We applied different lenses to this topic, and I learned from Alan how the best mentoring can involve allowing younger scholars to find and follow their own intellectual paths rather than training them to apply or expand on an established scholar’s work.

Bob Johansen taught me to find and trust my own writing voice. In reviewing drafts of my dissertation chapters, he pushed me to distill and feature the central elements of my own argument while still acknowledging and citing the pertinent scholarship of others. To this day, I remember his insights. Following his guidance, I strive to allow my own arguments to drive my writing while appropriately acknowledging the important work that has already been done by other scholars. I also try to share his wisdom when I work with students who are finding their own writing and scholarly voices.

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\(^4\) Debra L. DeLaet *US immigration policy in an age of rights* (Greenwood Publishing Group, 2000)
Sharon O’Brien taught me to look for contested perspectives on international law and how universally accepted principles are interpreted and applied in divergent ways by different actors.\(^5\) I will never forget lessons from her international law class. The key assignments for this class were legal briefs in which students were assigned to groups representing different actors in a case involving a contested global issue. For our first assignment, the case involved the legality of Iraq’s invasion of Kuwait in 1990. When she assigned me to the group representing Iraq, I almost started to cry—in front of the entire class—and protested that I couldn’t represent the human rights-abusing government of Saddam Hussein. She insisted that I remain in this group. She was correct to do so. No amount of research could have shifted my condemnation of the human rights atrocities perpetrated by the Hussein regime. Nevertheless, I was surprised that our group’s research disrupted my certainty that Iraq had no rationale for its invasion and was at least somewhat compelled by the argument that Kuwait had violated Iraqi sovereignty by engaging in slant-drilling. The larger lesson has always stuck with me. It is essential to examine competing political and ideological perspectives if one wants to understand—and potentially disrupt—the underlying dynamics that drive conflict and violence. I have been teaching international law for almost three decades, and I still use a version of Sharon’s assignment in my class.

During my final semester at the University of Notre Dame, I was invited to teach my own course. I opted to develop a course on human rights, a topic on which I had not had any formal coursework. I had been exposed to the concept of human rights in my courses with Gil Loescher on global refugee and humanitarian issues. But I had not read any scholarship on human rights. I discovered the edited volume by Richard Pierre Claude and Burns H. Weston and assigned the second edition for my course.\(^6\) I read and learned along with my students that semester and deeply appreciated the interdisciplinary contributions in the collection. Following this introduction to the subject, I have continued to apply interdisciplinary frameworks to human rights in both my scholarship and teaching.

Aside from teaching this human rights course during my final semester at Notre Dame, my primary areas of teaching and research grew not out of my graduate training but out of my teaching experience at Drake University, where I began my career as a professor immediately after finishing my PhD in 1995. Going on thirty years later, it seems likely I will finish my career at Drake. For the most part, I am grateful that my entire career has been at Drake University, a place that offers faculty a great deal of freedom in developing both their teaching and scholarly agendas. I was hired primarily to teach international relations courses, with an emphasis on peace and security.

Despite the fact that human rights was not in the job description for my position and that I had never taking formal coursework on the subject, my department supported my commitment to teaching a human rights course. Over time, the study of human rights has become the primary substantive focus of both my teaching and scholarship. Except on sabbatical, I have taught my Human Rights and World Politics every year since I arrived at Drake. I also developed a course on Racial Justice and Human Rights in the United States, which is part of my regular teaching repertoire. Recently, I developed a course on Comparative and Transnational Human Rights that I hope to teach again in the future. I led the creation of a Human Rights Studies minor for our department, and it has become a popular interdisciplinary program for majors as well as non-majors. Most of my scholarly work, including my human rights book, has grown out of my teaching. My forthcoming book, which is intended for both undergraduate and introductory graduate courses on human rights, offers a comprehensive, multidisciplinary overview of the field that goes beyond an emphasis on international law and global politics as frameworks for understanding human rights.\(^7\) It is distinctive from other introductions to


human rights in its emphasis on gender equity, sexual orientation and gender identity, and systemic racism as critical human rights issues.

One of the guiding questions for the essays in this series asks scholars to consider how evolving scholarship in their field has changed their interests. The truth is that my scholarship has shifted more in response to engagement with my students than to the work of other scholars. Indeed, many of my publications have grown out of questions and challenges posed by students. I wrote my very first publication about the absence of protections against sexual orientation discrimination in response to a student who asked why neither international law nor our class material addressed this issue. This question is an important one that required me to think more critically about gaps in international human rights law.

Another student once asked me why I had become interested in human rights. I found it surprisingly difficult to answer this question which pushed me to reflect deeply on my own motivations. I ended up connecting my deep interest in human rights to my observations of racism, sexism, and homophobia in the small town I grew up in. This insight led me to devote more time to thinking about human rights discrimination and violence in the United States rather than focusing primarily on human rights atrocities perpetrated in other countries.

In one of my classes, an international student asked why the international community condemned female genital mutilation but not male circumcision, which prompted me to write my article on male circumcision as a human rights issue and has contributed to my ongoing and evolving work on non-consensual, non-therapeutic genital modification interventions performed on children, including not only female genital cutting and male circumcision but also interventions performed on children with variations in sex traits.

Outside of the classroom, interdisciplinary scholarship spanning many fields has fundamentally shaped my evolution as a scholar. The feminist turn in international relations, especially the work of J. Ann Tickner, has shaped both my teaching and research agendas. Charli Carpenter, who served as a visiting professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Drake from 2001–2003, also influenced my research agenda as I began to delve more deeply into the intersection of gender and human rights issues. I was particularly influenced by Charli’s invitations to look beyond traditional feminist interpretations of global gender issues that portrayed women as victims and men as perpetrators of human rights violence. Partly due to Charli’s influence, my scholarship prioritizes gender rather than biological sex as a category of analysis and looks at the ways gender-based violence and discrimination harms men and people who do not fit into the gender binary as well as women.

During this same period, a departmental colleague was teaching a seminar in which she explored diverse theoretical and methodological approaches in the field of political science. She invited me to speak to her seminar about constructivist approaches in the field. It was the first time I’d heard someone describe me as a constructivist. Her characterization of my work made complete sense to me. Yet, it was not a label I applied

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to myself. It seemed especially strange to embrace this label given that I had not read let alone engaged deeply with foundational constructivist work. My lack of engagement was not due to disinterest. Constructivism simply wasn’t part of the curriculum when I was completing my graduate courses, and I didn’t know it existed. At this point, I had received tenure and promotion so had more space in my schedule for exploration. I decided that it was time to finally engage with the work of constructivists like Alexander Wendt. Reading Wendt was like finding my intellectual home after engaging in scholarly couch surfing for years. It helped me feel a sense of place in the field. It was gratifying to explore conceptual and theoretical rationales for arguments and insights that I had previously found intuitively.

At present, if forced to place a label on myself, I would describe myself as a feminist constructivist (or perhaps a constructivist feminist) scholar of international relations. Yet, I resist static categorizations and rigid disciplinary boundaries. I have been inspired by scholars from many fields. In human rights studies, I have found the work of anthropologist Sally Engle Merry and historian Carol Anderson incredibly influential. More recently, I have been inspired by the interdisciplinary scholarship of B Camminga, who specializes in Transgender Studies, Queer African Studies, and Migration and Refugee Studies. Morgan Carpenter, a bioethicist and intersex activist, also has expanded my understanding of intersex rights, and his writing has enriched my ongoing writing about non-consensual, non-therapeutic genital cutting. All of this interdisciplinary work has pushed my human rights scholarship in more critical directions and has led me to examine structural racism and structural gender inequities more deeply.

Even as I can see my retirement somewhere on the horizon, I know that I have not finished evolving as a scholar. Metaphorically, I often still find myself upside down on the ceiling, observing the world as it is traditionally understood from a critical vantage point that utterly shifts what I see. I recognize that there will always be gaps in my knowledge. Whether my feet are firmly planted on the ground or, defying gravity, rooted to the ceiling for an upside-down view, I cannot fully see spaces that I do not occupy. In my scholarship, I continue to strive to challenge or destabilize the givens presented by prevailing scholarly views in my field. I also try to remain open to learning about the gaps in my understanding that I have not yet recognized. Ultimately, my aim is to engage in scholarship that contributes to global efforts to achieve human rights and gender equity for all.

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