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Queer experiences within the bounds of International Relations

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Queer Experiences Within the Bounds of International Relations

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Abstract

In this commentary, from our positionality as members of the LGBTQA Caucus executive committee, we consider the academic and embodied barriers that stand in the way of a more inclusive IR from the perspective of queer and trans scholars in the discipline. We offer our reflections from our positionalities as queer scholars applying queer theory in IR, including our work in the Caucus to support LGBTQ + scholars in the discipline as a means of confronting what continues to be a very narrowly accessible space – geographically, financially, socially and linguistically. Relatedly, we consider the embodied experience of not belonging to the discipline of IR; an experience that many LGBTQ + scholars will recognise.

Keywords

queer, queering, international relations, feminism

Being queer in IR can be very curious.¹ Attending the largest academic conference for the discipline, the annual International Studies Association (ISA) convention, where the majority of the convention is devoted to traditional ideas of security, is a reminder of just how marginal queer ideas of security, peace and the international continue to be within IR scholarship. For context, in 2021 the International Security Studies section was allotted 140 panels while the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, & Allies Caucus (LGBTQA) Caucus had only three (ISA 2021). Whether from our own internal voices, the voice of activist friends or of scholars outside the discipline, the curious question, ‘Why do you do IR?’ is an understandable one. This is especially true for those of us who openly identify as LGBTQ +² while conducting anti-normative queer research with queer and trans community, subverting the expectations of our peers both within and outside IR.

The answer to ‘why do you do IR?’ must be considered within the especially limiting and normative discipline of international relations (Weber 2014). Queer IR questions not only normative understandings about gender and sexuality in global politics, but also allows us to ‘deconstruct and then reconstruct established IR concepts and theories’ (Thiel 2018). These dynamics challenge the ability for many queer and trans scholars and their disruptive Queer IR scholarship to ‘fit’ within the discipline of IR.

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Here we consider the academic and embodied barriers that stand in the way of a more inclusive IR for queer and trans scholars in the discipline, from our positionality as queers and as members of the LGBTQA Caucus executive committee (Chadi et al. 2023). We focus our reflections here on our experiences of being a part of the Caucus working to support LGBTQ + scholars in the discipline as a means of confronting what continues to be a very narrowly accessible space – geographically, financially, socially and linguistically. We recognise that the discipline of IR is not the same as the organisation of ISA and its Annual Conventions, which continue to be very exclusionary to most. Recognising we are among the privileged few able to access this space which continues to be privileged as a leading site of ‘doing IR’, we consider the experience of not belonging to the discipline of IR; an experience that many LGBTQ + scholars will recognise.

A Decade of the LGBTQA Caucus

The Caucus’s stated mission is to, ‘promote fair and equal treatment of members of the LGBTQ + community in the ISA and in the profession of international studies, in areas including but not limited to graduate school admission, financial assistance in schools, employment, tenure, and promotion’ (ISA LGBTQA Caucus, nd). An important part of this includes also working to combat discrimination and provide support for LGBTQ + faculty, students and professional members of ISA. As such, while many join the Caucus for the same reason ISA members would join any affiliation of a specific academic community, there are additional commitments that come with being on the Caucus’s executive committee. The Caucus was chartered in New Orleans in 2010 and, in the over 10 years since the inaugural meeting, has served as a community to recognise emerging and eminent LGBTQ + scholarship while also working to provide support to LGBTQ + scholars.

Both of us sought involvement with the Caucus because we are openly part of the LGBTQ + community. While supporting queer IR scholarship is a central role of the Caucus, and there has been an important shift with an increase in publications about sexuality, queer IR, and LGBT politics (Picq and Thiel 2015), we also think it is important to trace how this reflects (or not) the experience of being a queer person in IR.¹ Some IR scholars have reflected on queer visibility in IR (Lind, 2014). We find that although IR scholarship has opened up to consider some of our community’s work, particularly around lesbian and gay rights,³ the ethical commitment to take queer critique seriously remains undervalued and in some spaces continues to be either wholly absent or actively opposed. At the same time, we are motivated to illustrate some of the ways forward which compel queer scholars like us to both forget and reimagine IR.

Taking Queer Questions Seriously in IR?

In 2013, at the International Feminist Journal of Politics’ second conference – (Im)possibly Queer International Feminism – queer scholar Cynthia Weber posed the question, ‘Why is there no queer International Relations theory?’ Weber easily dispelled three likely answers: 1) that the lack of engagement with Queer Studies in IR was from a lack of interest in IR, 2) that there is a lack of relevant IR theoretical work drawing on queer theory or 3) that the work which does exist is too interdisciplinary to have IR’s key questions at the core. Instead, Weber offered the provocation that ‘IR scholars doing queer international theorising might have given up on submitting their work for Disciplinary IR’s approval either because they have internalised Disciplinary IR’s judgement of themselves and their work as failures or because Disciplinary IR (with few exceptions) publishes a form of Queer International Theory that evacuates their queer international theorising out of existence’ (Weber, 2015: 45).

The state of LGBTQ politics and queer IR is changing (Weber, 2014; Sjoberg, 2014; Wilcox, 2014; Barkin & Sjoberg, 2020). A 2010 survey on LGBT people and research in Politics and International Relations disciplines found that ‘LGBT issues are undeniably a part of the discipline’, with 27% of

respondents reporting that they engaged with LGBT topics in their research to some extent (Novkov & Barclay, 2010: 100). LGBTQ politics has greater acceptance in the discipline than queer theory, perhaps because it is deemed harmonious with the theories, concepts and normative goals of liberal IR (liberal institutionalism and liberal human rights frameworks, for instance) (Novkov & Barclay, 2010; Richter-Monpetit 2018; Thiel, 2018). However, within this, lesbian and gay rights – the ‘L’ and ‘G’ of ‘LGBTQ’ – have received the lion’s share of scholarly attention (Weber, 2016 104–142). There remains a need for substantive engagement with bisexual, trans and queer rights in IR.

Importantly, queering in IR brings into question dangerous and commonly held assumptions about global politics while centring LGBTQ+ lives. Queer theory revisits the damaging implications of dichotomous thinking in global politics that manifests in binaries such as Global North/Global South, us/them, masculinity/femininity, war/peace, developed/underdeveloped, gay/straight, man/woman and instead examines the complications and tensions inherent to these binaries. Queer IR theory makes several other important interventions in IR, though the potential for these interventions has received little recognition or engagement outside our circle of queer IR theorists (Leigh, 2017). Richter-Montpetit and Weber point to some of the core queer contributions to IR research as examining human rights violations and the conditions faced by LGBTQ + people across the globe, investigating power relations in global politics, rethinking war and peace and offering new ways of thinking about international political economy (Richter-Montpetit & Weber, 2017).

LGBTQ+ students and scholars are drawn towards the Queer IR community and/or Queer IR scholarship, finding a meaningful identity beyond geographical location or proximity and compelled to study the power relations that impact their lives so profoundly. Yet, we have found that the space carved out by LGBTQ + scholars and their allies to champion queer IR scholarship does not mean that those who do this work will find support for their scholarship nor their unique lived experiences in the discipline. As such, the role of mentorship to support LGBTQ+ scholars as academics proves just as important, if not more so, than the support for Queer IR in theory.

While the ISA plays an outsized role in the discipline of IR, it is important to also remember that this Western centric organisation and convention should not be viewed as a stand-in for the discipline. Those experiences at the ISA convention we highlight only serve to illustrate the exclusions of those even in the most privileged of positions within the discipline, those who have the capacity to engage within this expensive and inaccessible site of ‘doing’ IR. We also recognise that participating within the discipline of IR may not be desirable to some scholars who have found their home in interdisciplinary circles (or who have not found a home at all and are content with navigating the challenges of being ‘discipline-less’ within academia). Our intervention focuses on our own experiences of being in community with those who seek to work, be read and be cited within the academic discipline of IR through what is perhaps the most traditional pathway to being taken seriously within the discipline of IR today.

Mentoring as Queer-Feminist Solidarity

There is a continuing disconnect between the pull of IR for LGBTQ+ scholars (a normative drive towards justice and a desire to connect to global communities) and the reality of IR. LGBTQ+ scholars, though diverse with some benefitting from race, class and gender privileges, are confronted by conservative understandings of core IR concepts and continuing geographical barriers to participation, which prevent our queer and trans colleagues in the global South from participating equally (See Umar, 2023 in this forum). It is also important to note that systemic racism can be sustained by pro-LGBTQI states, namely by associating anti-gay policies with un-civilised countries (Lind, 2014; Thiel, 2014). The rejection of queer theory is not felt merely on a scholarly level. Transphobia within universities broadly, the discipline specifically, and even among feminist IR colleagues, threatens the security of our trans and non-binary students and colleagues and thus undermines their ability to

produce their best work. Political moves to ban education on gender and sexuality impact the lived experiences of those of us who are marginalised within the discipline because of their gender, sexuality or race (Wade, 2017; Arana, 2021). This is magnified for those who are teaching about queer or racialized subjects, as has become evident in the backlash in the United States against teaching critical race theory in public institutions (Flaherty, 2021). The use of queer theory to apply only to violent subjects/objects without attention to the ethics and normative aspirations of queer IR is also exclusionary, ignoring feminist and queer research ethics regarding the inclusion of LGBTQ+ participants in research as well as the need to work towards emancipation for queer and trans people (Clark, 2019; Dagget 2015; Gentry, 2020: 116).

The unique positionality of queer and trans scholars and their needs are not connected with or addressed by generic mentoring or advice from senior scholars without the same lived experiences of being queer and/or trans. PhD students and Early Career Scholars (ECRs) frequently require and seek support and advice during their PhD candidature and the post-PhD job search. Senior scholars are most often well-meaning and very helpful in providing support and advice to junior colleagues; however, generic advice, without careful consideration to an individual's unique set of circumstances and identity, is of limited use. For queer and trans PhD students and ECRs, this disconnect between the advice given and its applicability to their lived experience can be isolating and a barrier to receiving adequate and useful support. As an example, well-meaning but generic advice can be as simple as suggesting a LGBTQ + graduate go for a job in a country where they would be unsafe and persecuted, where they would need to hide their identity, where they could not access gender-affirming hormone therapy, or where their same-sex partner would not be supported to join them by the institution.

On a more complex level, support and advice by cisgender and heterosexual senior scholars can be inattentive to the psychosocial barriers LGBTQ + people often experience. For instance, while it is normal scholarly practice for a mentor or supervisor to ask a student to justify their use of a particular theoretical framework, this line of questioning takes on added significance when a LGBTQ + junior is asked to justify their use of queer theory to a straight, cisgender senior. Similarly, senior scholars are increasingly opening up about 'imposter syndrome' within academia. This has been a positive development, normalising this experience for both peers and junior colleagues. However, for queer and trans PhD students and ECRs, imposter syndrome connects to a much deeper and longer-lasting experience of not fitting in (or worse, having one's presence actively questioned) and the anxieties we feel as a result. As queer-feminist scholar Sara Ahmed explains, the questions that follow queer and trans people around – 'are you a boy or a girl?' and 'are you [same-sex partners] siblings?' – 'dislodge you from a body that you yourself feel you reside in' (Ahmed, 2017: 122). Melissa M. González writes that articles about "'imposter syndrome" in gringo higher ed publications' have 'never sat right' with her because they imply that there is a 'viable, ontological alternative to being an imposter' (2020: 236). If you feel you do not belong in the 'heterosexual, wealthy, cisgender, white' academy, González writes, 'it is because you do not, in fact, belong' (González, 2020: 236). It often takes other LGBTQ + people and other marginalised communities to truly understand and empathise with these psychosocial and embodied experiences.

The ISA's LGBTQ + Mentoring Programme is one place that offers a way through these limitations (ISA LGBTQA Blog 2020). Our mentoring programme pairs together more junior scholars, usually PhD Candidates and Early Career Researchers, with scholars who are further along in their careers. As a LGBTQ + programme, both mentees and mentors identify as Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Non-Binary, Gender Diverse, Queer, Questioning or Intersex. These mentee-mentor relationships play an important role in strengthening social ties and combating aloneness and isolation in our LGBTQ + community in IR for mentees and mentors alike. It is common for LGBTQ + scholars, particularly junior scholars, to not know a single other LGBTQ + person in the discipline until they join the programme. The programme has welcomed people who are exploring or questioning their sexuality and/or gender identity, recognising that the lack of alternative safe spaces in the discipline can create nervousness around identifying as queer or trans. For its second year we were part of expanding the

reach or the program, with more than twice as many people signed up in 2021 as did in 2020 – totalling over 54 participants from 17 different countries. In 2021, we invited mentors from outside of academia to join the programme. We did this for two reasons: firstly, in recognition that many in our LGBTQ + community have activist backgrounds or are social justice oriented and may not find their normative goals can be fulfilled in an academic position, and, secondly, because the academic job market is shrinking and LGBTQ + graduates often lack the international mobility of our heterosexual and cisgendered counterparts (for reasons outlined above). We passed the baton on the program to incoming LGBTQA Caucus officers Pascha Beuno-Hansen and Razan Ghazzawi. During the 2022/2023 year, they surveyed the mentoring programme participants from 2021 and received valuable information regarding the effectiveness of the programme as well as suggestions for future programming. At the ISA conference in Montreal they organised a very successful informal mentor gathering to rebuild the community after the years of pandemic-related isolation. The 40 people that participated enjoyed connecting with each other and sharing ideas in small groups. They plan to organise another similar mentor gathering virtually in 2023.

Borrowing from humanistic approaches to pedagogy, we recognise that LGBTQ + students are motivated towards self-actualisation; however, their ‘lower order needs’ have to be satisfied before their academic potential can be reached (Stewart, 2012). For queer and trans students, these lower order needs include recognition, acceptance and safety. These needs are not guaranteed to be met by even well-meaning senior scholars, and indeed are actively denied by transphobic and homophobic senior scholars. It is therefore crucial that safe spaces, such as the LGBTQ + mentoring programme, exist so that queer and trans PhD students and ECRs can be supported to produce their best work.

Why Do We Do IR

As queer activist scholars, we often ask ourselves – or are asked – ‘why do you do IR’? Despite greater inclusion in some areas, the IR discipline as a whole remains largely conservative with many barriers to participation – including geographic, social, financial and linguistic. For the last 10 years, the International Studies Association’s LGBTQA Caucus has sought to address the marginalisation and exclusion of our LGBTQ + communities through elevating and celebrating the work of emerging and eminent LGBTQ + scholars as well as providing support to LGBTQ + junior colleagues through grants and our nascent LGBTQ + mentoring programme. Our mentoring programme provides tailored support to LGBTQ + junior colleagues, recognising their unique lived experiences and the specific exclusions they face in their professional and personal lives.

As our colleagues’ work on queer temporalities tells us, time is strange, progress and regress intertwine and we cannot expect conditions for LGBTQ + people to get better chronologically (Freeman 2010, Jaclyn 2017). We have seen this recently in academia, and within our discipline, with increased condemnation of trans people and pointed questions asked about trans scholarship, gender-affirming language, and even bathroom access in conference spaces. Our LGBTQ + colleagues from the global South, as well as colleagues who are LGBTQ + refugees, also face many obstacles to participating equally in our discipline – particularly as the International Studies Association continues to host its annual convention in North America. LGBTQ + scholars in IR can find safety and connect with their passions among supportive LGBTQ + communities, and through intellectual engagement with LGBTQ + politics and queer IR. However, the question ‘why do you do IR’? will remain a curious one, as marginalisation of our scholars and scholarship continues and wider social progress waxes and wanes.

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Notes

1. Both of the authors identify as queer. We understand not everyone in the LGBTQA Caucus is queer so throughout the piece refer to 'LGBTQ+' to refer to the larger community of scholars engaging with the caucus.
2. We use the acronym LGBTQ+ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, queer, and others) to describe people with non-hegemonic sexual orientations, gender identities, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC). The authors also use 'queer and trans' as another collective adjective to describe these same populations. Our attention in this piece is on those within 'queer and trans' community not just because of their Queer IR scholarship or because of researching LGBTQ+ lives, but also because of their lived experience as LGBTQ+ people.
3. 'LGBTQ' is often used synonymously with lesbian and gay rights, which receive the most engagement. Meanwhile little academic attention has been given to the 'BTQ' in the acronym physiological affects bisexual, trans and queer rights in IR. Melanie Richter Monpetit's (2018) discussion of international human rights regimes helps us to understand why: a fixed identity is required to make particular rights claims. At the same time, bisexual, trans and queer people are often seen to challenge or complicate fixed notions of identity. Our attention in this piece is on those within 'queer and trans' community not just because of their Queer IR scholarship or because of researching LGBTQ+ lives, but also because of their lived experience as LGBTQ+ people.

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