

The Lack of Diverse Perspectives in the International Relations Field: The Politics of Being Alone

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What does it feel like to be alone intellectually? The perspectives of minorities in the International Relations field are often ignored and disrespected. This article discusses the viewpoints minorities can add to the field and how their perspectives can aid research and theory development. The challenges and intellectual hardships of those from the underrepresented classes are difficult to understand and this article provides an overview for such concerns.

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This article will evaluate the challenges minority scholars face in the international relations (IR) profession from the research and academy perspective. The central problem that scholars of “color” face in academia is one of being alone—floundering in a world where no one understands the challenges they may face. These problems run the gamut from dealing with issues such as institutional racism to lack of research encouragement for questions regarding new issues relating to ethnic groups.

With this article, I hope to reach the wider members of the academy. Many minorities and women in academia will understand the problems I outline below, yet it is those who do not come from a diverse ethnic background that I hope to reach. By diverse or diversity I mean the goal of ethnic and gender inclusion of underrepresented classes and groups. I will first outline my intellectual development, discuss how this path influenced the research questions I tackle, and then conclude with some general problems that minority researchers might face in the IR field. I hope that by engaging the issues I discuss here, other scholars can begin to understand the challenges minority scholars face and will continue to face in the future. The field of IR can only progress further with the acceptance and understanding of those who might bring new viewpoints into the field’s lexicon.

Intellectual Development

I grew up in Los Angeles and always seemed to know that I wanted to be an IR scholar. In grade school I remember how everyone found it odd that my report on the American Civil War featured battle deaths as a research question. The question just seemed natural, so I seemed destined to be a quantitative IR scholar. After finishing my undergraduate degree in the comforts of Whittier College and its diverse ethnic environment, I ended up in the Ph.D. program at

Vanderbilt University at the age of 22, having only left Los Angeles for trips to Mexico prior to my big move to Nashville.

The move to Nashville was shocking for many reasons. I was unprepared for the rigors of a Ph.D. program and no one seemed interested in my apparent problems adjusting at a rigorous academic environment. After I had been threatened with the non-renewal of my contract at the end of my first semester, my eventual mentor, John Vasquez, returned from sabbatical and helped me right my intellectual ship. Along with the help of James Ray, Donna Bahry, Donald Hancock, and Richard Tucker, I eventually found my proper intellectual space at Vanderbilt after deciding to focus on the Causes of War research program as opposed to Latin American research questions. Pigeon-holing scholars into certain “natural” research programs seems to be a poor educational strategy. I was clearly not interested in becoming a comparative scholar, yet the institutional structure seemed to think this was the natural fit for me. Asian and African-American scholars face many of the same problems. Just because someone’s homeland may have been in Asia does not mean the person should study Asia.

My intellectual research program mainly focuses on the study of rivalry or long-term historical animosity. My dissertation (Valeriano 2003) and most research projects focus on the question of rivalry development and its impact on conflictual relations. After securing a tenure-track position at a master’s granting institution in Texas, things began to change for me and my research agenda became less clear to me overall. Changes would have to be made in light of the new challenges I began to face.

Research Shift

I had always assumed that most of my research would focus on the causes of war, but the political environment in Texas changed my perspective. While others found the time to help me at Vanderbilt, no one seemed willing to do the same for the minority students (or young minority professors) at this Texas institution. Minority students were falling through the cracks to an extent I had never seen before. Coming from Los Angeles I did not understand how a group such as Latinos, with their huge demographic numbers in Texas, had become so marginalized in the state. From that point on my research agenda seemed to change, as I felt a responsibility for minority students and a duty to present research that would interest them. I believe that research informs teaching and that the two practices are interconnected. My research agenda changed, but I made the choice on my own terms and with the goal to inform my students.

In addition to tackling questions of rivalry development, complex international interactions, and classification questions about warfare, I added a few new research questions to my agenda. I became concerned with how minorities were being incorporated into the American system. Could they and should they have an impact on what we might consider the national interest (Valeriano 2007)? What about foreign policy relations with Latin America? What impact would Latinos have on external relations? Finally, immigration was the “hot topic” throughout the country, yet no one seemed to be asking empirical questions about its impact beyond the obvious economic questions. Where did everyone come from? Is the recent rise in immigrants really a new phenomenon? What happens across time as immigrants enter a society? I wanted the data to answer these questions, so I started a global immigration data set project to account for the inflows and outflows of migrants throughout the world since 1950.

It seems pretty clear to me that without my intellectual background and minority perspective I would not have begun to seek answers to the important questions that have an impact on the Latino community. Vanderbilt taught me

to think scientifically, whether from the qualitative or quantitative perspective, and Texas taught me to question the course of research questions and institutional obstacles that can hinder innovations that can come from diverse perspectives. I hope to do research that both follows the traditional IR course and also challenges traditional foreign policy assumptions throughout my career. I hope other young scholars follow me and begin to ask similar questions. What does multiculturalism add to American society and external relations? What challenges will the United States face as society transforms?

Observations

My intellectual history has led me down a certain path, and now I will conclude with observations I have made during my short journey. The most troubling problem minority scholars must face is the lack of audience and respect for our work. Where would one begin to publish work that tackles questions of diversity and multiculturalism in the IR field? An odd piece here or there might penetrate *ISQ* or *World Politics*, but it is by no means the norm for the major journals in the political science field. The few that do this type of work seem to be marginalized and disrespected. We seem to be treated as token scholars doing work that answers narrow questions. It has been said that we do not tackle the big questions of American political development. Yet I cannot think of any questions in IR or political science in general that are bigger than the question of diversity/multiculturalism and its impact on interactions, whether at the domestic or international level. Maybe the problem has to do with framing the questions we tackle, yet it seems that the main problem is that departments and other researchers do not see the broad implications of this new scholarship.

The next typical problem relates to financial support for ethnically diverse groups. The main reason so few scholars of color come through our academic halls is due to financial hardships (Perez and Gong 2005). When I started a Ph.D. program, my parents were horrified. Why would I turn down solid job options for a shot at a Ph.D.? Where would the money come from? Mentoring rarely occurs for scholars of color, and students do not understand the options available to them as they pursue an academic path. The study cited above makes the conclusion that those from lower to middle class backgrounds rarely choose to attend graduate school unless they are fully funded. Only through active mentorship and guidance can those from unprivileged backgrounds make it all the way to the Ph.D. due to the confusing intricacies of graduate funding options.

Further down the career path, things get much more difficult. How is a poor scholar supposed to survive during the years of dissertation writing and research? What about the postdoctoral or adjunct years? How can one survive without outside financial help? How is a poor scholar supposed to relocate to a tenure-track job without the capital to front the moving bill and apartment/house down payment? No one seems to address these questions, but everyone seems to ask where have all the minorities gone (Samuel L. Myers and Turner 2004). A few minorities enter Ph.D. programs, yet so few seem to finish and fewer yet seem to make it all the way to tenure. The reason is probably the basic economic structural problems that minority and other poor students have to face. How can they begin to tell their parents that they are not going to go to work right after earning a bachelor's degree and instead will be studying for at least five more years? These very same parents have sacrificed their lives in menial jobs to put their Ph.D.-bound children through undergraduate education in the first place. How can these children repay them by going to school for many more years? The immigrant dream does not include a Ph.D.; it only reaches as far as a college degree and a stable middle class life in an office or in public service.

Related to the economic factors that might impede the path towards a Ph.D. and research careers are mentoring problems. I have been lucky as I have had many different mentors throughout my career—but none minorities. Other scholars have no mentor, only a dissertation chair. Who are they supposed to work with? Who will give them advice on how to navigate research and academic pathways both while they are graduate students and when they enter the field?

“Acting Right” in Academia

Even if a scholar does find a mentor, finishes the Ph.D., and finds a job, there is one bigger obstacle to overcome—the halls of academia. One study (Turner, Samuel L. Myers, et al. 1999:28) notes, “our findings and analysis show that the predominant barrier is a pervasive racial and ethnic bias that contributes to unwelcoming and unsupportive work environments for faculty of color.” Minority scholars face questions about how they act. Certain perceptions about their character are made. Even in the liberal field of academia, most scholars are not as enlightened as they might think they are. I have been told I am articulate, don’t know my place, don’t act right, talk out of turn, joke too much, speak without thinking, buck institutional structures, and must have learned English as a second language all in the space of my three years as a professor—all this, from the highly educated strata of university.

It seems to me that all these perceptions or comments are based on a misunderstanding of the intellectual background a minority scholar is raised in. We do not know how to act “right” sometimes because we have to act different to succeed. Our own identity is constructed in such a complicated way that we do not even remember how we would act if given the choice; we only act how we think we are expected to act. We have to work harder, quicker, smarter, and demand more from our institutions than others due to intellectual marginalization. What does it even mean to act “right?” What one Anglo raised in Missouri will consider proper behavior is not the same type of behavior that a Latino from Los Angeles might find acceptable or typical.

A common observation about minority scholars is that we move often, bouncing from academic institution to institution. Some might suggest this behavior just highlights the greed in the field; others might realize it is because it is so hard to find an intellectual home where one is included, valued, and supported structurally. The slights and degradations add up to make a minority scholar feel overworked, unsupported, and virtually alone.

I have taken a strange path towards a research position in a Ph.D. granting institution. It is clear to me that my diverse background has influenced the questions I ask and the research projects I choose to tackle. Without scholars with diverse perspectives the field might never tackle questions important to American political development and relations with the Global “South.” A diverse range of scholars is needed in the profession, yet there are serious institutional obstacles to progress in academia. The field of American politics has been relatively successful in generating and supporting minority scholars. IR as a field cannot be said to have achieved the same success. It is my hope that this article can enlighten a few to the strange path that minority scholars take and help others along the way so that the research questions future minority scholars may ask can be added to the lexicon of IR. I think I have a dream, but I am not sure if I am even allowed to dream.

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