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Welcome to the 'Family':

Integration, Identity, and Inclusivity in European Studies

Sarah Cooper and Koen Slootmaeckers

The semi-centennial anniversary of the Council of European Studies provides an exciting moment to take stock of 50 years of cutting-edge work and illuminates a particular success story for the ever-expanding field of gender and sexuality research. Arriving to the scholarly party far later than areas concerned with integration or political economy for example, and frustratingly still perceived in some quarters as a highly specialized, or more dismissively 'niche', denomination of the social sciences, the abundance of activity in this area is now undeniable and a vibrant academic community prevails.

Established in 2011, CES' very own 'Gender and Sexuality Research Network' (GSRN) is just one example of this. With a membership spanning all stages of an academic careers, from doctoral candidates through professors, the scholarship in this network provides a vibrant range of insights to European Studies. Topics covered in our network are too many to list but include gendered+ approaches to European integration and disintegration; LGBT equality; the intersections between race, religion and sexuality; and European reproductive health policies. Amongst a variety of endeavors that are fostered throughout the year across the network, the Council's annual conference showcases this growing presence, as was demonstrated in the 2019 conference in Madrid where no fewer than 32 panels in one way or another engaged with gender and sexuality research. The pathway to acceptance of activities with such a focus has been long and often fractious road, however, and while it is a pertinent moment to join in the momentous celebrations for CES, the development of research and teaching in this domain must be duly noted to ensure positive, future growth. The arduous process of integration is a helpful point at which to begin this reflection.

The Rebellious Step-Child

Gradual reconstitution of familial norms that erode the dominant heteronormative, two-parent family, and challenge the established binary, is a creeping and ever evolving societal trend, and one that provides a helpful and appropriate analogy for this burgeoning research agenda. The study of gender first pervaded the academic landscape as a rebellious step-child of European Studies and the social sciences, keen to challenge the patriarchal values entrenched in academia to that date. Unsurprisingly encountering teething problems around integration at this beginning stage, scholarship that sought to use gender as an analytical tool faced conservative backlash, and the academic pursuit of feminism waged a tough battle for respect from its newly acquired siblings. This attempted marginalization of gender studies to the edges of the discipline is perhaps mostly clearly elucidated by the scares opportunities to publish gender work, and limited engagement of the mainstream discipline with insights originating from gender studies more generally; such astute observation was importantly published in a recent editorial for the *European Journal of Politics and Gender* (Ahrens, et al. 2018). There are, however, also many encouraging steps worthy of note and signal new skills of cohabitation.

Home to the EJP, the European Conference on Gender and Politics (ECPG), for example, is now in its 10th year and proudly fosters attendance from over 40 countries, spanning 5 continents. Similarly, institutions globally have established interdisciplinary research units to promote such work 'in house' and integrate these issues into undergraduate and postgraduate teaching; Cambridge University fosters a collaboration across 20 of its departments through its 'Gender Research Centre', for example, with Bristol, Edinburgh and Essex similarly endorsing such projects across the UK. Furthermore, the Vilnius University Gender Studies Centre is the first of its kind in the Baltic States, and the Czech Centre for Gender and Science has strong advocacy engagement at the EU level, to name just a few examples.

Encouraging response to these gender centric initiatives has also been elicited from more mainstream avenues, and journals with a broader discipline approach have followed suit with the commissioning of special issues concerning gender and sexuality. A few instances across international journals include *Public Money and Management's* forthcoming 'Gender in an Uncertain Public Sector' (2020) edition, and *Social Science's* 'Gender and STEM: Understanding Segregation in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics' (2016). A need to remain vigilant to the continued success of this family unit is, however, constant and contemporary threat has emerged from powerful, external quarters.

Opposition and Identity

Unsettling challenges which seek to undermine and halt (if not destroy) the momentum of gender and sexuality studies is certainly a worrying trend to arise in recent years. The strengthening of anti-gender mobilization which seeks to demonize gender studies in order to oppose LGBT and gender equality and reinforce their heteronormative worldviews clearly demonstrate these efforts (Paternotte and Kuhar 2018). Such opposition does not only come from civil society and some far-right political parties, but also from some state institutions. In 2018, for example, the Hungarian government announced its intention to abolish accredited gender studies programs in the country. Although agreeing that current activities at this level would last the duration, it was later confirmed that no state funded social gender programs would be launched moving forwards. In defense, the government expressed its belief that their actions would not restrict freedom of academic expression, but rather that gender studies could find a place in other academic fields or be taught in universities operated by foundations.

To a network such as ours, and undoubtedly finding support beyond our members, this suggestion that gender studies move elsewhere appears a clear retrograde step for the discipline, however, and relegates the distinct stream of study to an inferior denomination of adjacent academic clusters. Furthermore, the nurturing of the next generation of gender and sexuality scholars is directly impinged, with the ability to experience specialized and often research led teaching in the area heavily restricted. Although the severe action is as of yet confined to a handful of countries, it is an example, although directed at the specific family unit of gender and sexuality scholars, of a much wider trend in which right-wing populist and/or (semi-)authoritarian regimes seek to limit the freedom of academic expression and thus silence dissident voices.

While gender studies therefore continues to develop and defend its bond within the family of European studies – albeit as one of a disruptive, vocal and, at times, rebellious teenager – it has additionally faced internal questions surrounding its own identity. The first of these challenges involved the scope of intended inquiry within the sub-discipline and was presented alongside the arrival of sexuality studies.

Promoting the study of a range of diverse topics, and the addition of new scholars with differing perspectives, the meshing of these two overlapping areas is not always entirely smooth, and a co-productive conversation can be difficult to achieve. Yet, one can also observe a growing recognition of their mutual interests in challenging the dominant power structure in society – as is clearly shown by the composition of the GSRN and, more acutely, in the running of panels.

The inclusive nature of gender and sexuality research has been further criticized however, for a problematic binary preoccupation of self-identified feminists that seek to exclude trans* experiences and voices. Reported in the media as a ‘bitter feud’, the internal factions garner much zealous attention from outside and serve to cause attrition to the united family front. Such displays of transphobia and exclusionary practices must be resisted if we want to succeed to build our alternative, blended and not normative family. As such, important lessons of equality and respect must be drawn (including for our own research network), so that the gender and sexuality research community can embrace and respect the important diversity of the work of its members.

Inclusivity as Priority

Thus, despite the notion of family traditionally envisaged along heteronormative, binary and conservative lines, its analogous value for us lies in the slow erosion of this perception and the evolving priorities of inclusivity. The challenge for society is not to disband the positive relationships and interconnections that can flourish within the created title of ‘family’, but to expand beyond the harmful, exclusionary and limited categorization that the term often represents. This has been mirrored in the field of European Studies, and gender and sexuality, although confrontational, abrasive and even rowdy across its members, is quietly pleased to sit with its academic relatives. And while the gender studies community continues its mission to challenge the normative pre-conceptions on the composition of what a family entails, it has been encouraged by growing acceptance, support and interdisciplinary projects across its siblings and a fruitful and important knowledge base is growing as a result. Despite outside attacks of its continued viability in higher education, therefore, the bonds that have been created in the scholarly landscape happily retains the familial value of loyalty, and the flourishing CES’ GSRN is a clear product of the desire of researchers in this field to push the agenda forward for the next 50 years, but also their ability to successfully do so when supported by peers.

References

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