

“Not Work Done in Your Home:” LGBT Scholars, the Study of Gender & Sexuality, and Intersectionally-Responsible Coalitions in Political Science

Zein Murib, University of Minnesota
Dara Strolovitch, Princeton University

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“I feel as if I'm gonna keel over any minute and die. That is often what it feels like if you're really doing coalition work. Most of the time you feel threatened to the core and if you don't, you're not really doing no coalescing. You don't go into coalition because you just like it. The only reason you would consider trying to team up with somebody who could possibly kill you, is because that's the only way you can figure you can stay alive...Coalition work is not done in your home. Coalition work has to be done in the streets. And it is some of the most dangerous work you can do. And you shouldn't look for comfort. Some people will come to a coalition and they rate the success of the coalition on whether or not they feel good when they get there. They're not looking for a coalition; they're looking for a home! They're looking for a bottle with some milk in it and a nipple, which does not happen in a coalition....You don't get fed a lot in a coalition. In a coalition you have to give, and it is different from your home. You can't stay there all the time. You got to the coalition for a few hours and then you go back and take your bottle wherever it is, and then you go back and coalesce some more.”

-- Bernice Johnson Reagon, at the 1981 West Coast Women's Music Festival.

Scholars and activists have long recognized that coalitions are valuable to and hold particularly strong normative, ideological, and strategic benefits for small, weak, and marginalized groups (Browne 1998; Bykerk and Maney 1995; Delgado 1986; Hojnacki 1997, 1998; Matsuda 1991; Murib 2015; Sawyers and Meyer 1999; Schlozman 1990; Staggenborg 1986; Strolovitch 2007; Tarrow 2005; Van Dyke 2003). Working within a coalition or in alliance with other groups can help them to aggregate their collective strength and numbers in order to achieve a stronger voice, a more significant presence, and increased credibility (Matsuda 1991; Levi and Murphy 2006; Pinderhughes 2002; Woliver 1998). It is also a principle way in which economic and social justice advocacy groups address issues affecting intersectionally marginalized subgroups of their constituencies (Strolovitch 2007). Working

in coalitions also advances solidaristic and ideological goals, such as the belief that “no one is free until we all are free.”

While the prospective benefits of coalition work are numerous and profound, they do not always realize their full potential, and some scholars and activists warn of potential pitfalls and even hazards associated with coalitions, particularly between strong and weak groups (Carmichael and Hamilton 1967, 74; Reagon 2000). Empirical research by scholars such as Suzanne Staggenborg (1986) Rufus Browning, Dale Rogers Marshall, and David Tabb (1986), Ralph Gomes and Linda Williams (1995); Kimberle Crenshaw (1994); Zein Murib (2014), and Dara Strolovitch (2007) shows that coalitions often downplay and marginalize the needs and interests of weak groups, and often compel them to moderate or otherwise alter their goals. In addition, coalitions that do address such issues are often quite fragile because the contributions and commitments of more advantaged coalition partners are often inconsistent, weaker and more symbolic than they are when it comes to issues that affect stronger members of the alliances. Such limitations to the efficacy of coalitions can be understood in part as the consequences and manifestations of what has come to be called *intersectional marginalization* (Crenshaw 1989). Recognizing that inequities persist *between* marginalized and dominant groups, an intersectional approach stresses the overlapping inequalities *within* groups and the resulting unevenness in their access to rights and resources.

An intersectional understanding exposes the fact that the “interests associated with particular identities and inequalities are not givens in nature, but are instead constructions that result from social and political processes and experiences.” From this perspective, there are no “unitary constituencies with clearly defined and bounded interests” (Strolovitch 2007, 26). Instead, groups we label “women,” “Latinos,” “LGBT people,” and the like are *themselves* coalitions of intersecting and overlapping groups that have varying levels of power and that are organized to address one particular axis that is *constructed* or framed as what they have in common (Strolovitch 2007, 26). Organizing around one axis, however, means that so-called “common interests” are actually those that affect or are “rooted in the experiences of” the more privileged members of a group (Cohen 1999, 23). Gains and other advances are therefore often distributed unevenly, often accruing mainly to those members who are privileged “but for” one axis of marginalization (Crenshaw 1989).

This essay tries to bring these insights from intersectional scholarship and research about

coalitions among marginalized groups to the goal of diversifying leadership and research in political science, and to think about what some of the consequences of doing so might be for both LGBT political scientists and for our understanding of the politics of gender and sexuality. In other words, we consider the goal of diversifying political science, specifically with regard to gender and race, as intertwined with diversity in terms of sexuality and gender identity, and we devote attention to drawing attention to obvious overlaps as well as those that often escape attention.

We begin by outlining the relationship between diversity, underrepresentation, and teaching and research in political science, focusing in particular on what it suggests about the ways in which increasing opportunities for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) people in leadership positions and in the discipline might change and perhaps even broaden research agendas and teaching, both in terms of substantive issues addressed and methodological approaches used. To do so, we draw on the results of a discipline-wide survey conducted in 2010 about lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues in political science. We then explore some of the ways in which coalitions can be used to address discrimination through coordinated efforts among marginalized and under-represented groups to educate each other and their colleagues about the issues they face in the discipline as well as about the relationship between these issues and the study of politics. Since coalitions are by definition comprised of many disparate groups, the goal of developing coalitions to address underrepresentation goes beyond descriptive representation – augmenting the number of lesbians, gay men, bisexual, and transgender faculty and graduate students – towards a strategy of enhancing substantive equality for all underrepresented groups in the discipline (Alexander-Floyd 2015). In this way, the coalitions that we propose in this paper do not serve as a “home,” where one feels belonging and

recognition as a specific and bounded group, but are instead opportunities to engage in exchanges that are sometimes challenging -- but above all informative and collaborative -- in the service of mobilizing to meaningfully alter institutions at all different levels to enhance diversity. We conclude by drawing on our respective research on coalitions to present some steps to consider in developing coalitions and also some potential drawbacks to avoid.

Enhanced Diversity & Curricular Expansion

Carol Mershon and Denise Walsh explain in their opening essay for the recent *PS* symposium on diversifying that discipline that underrepresentation “both manifests and perpetuates discrimination in multiple ways, including through implicit bias and self-replicating exclusionary social networks” (2015, 441). To address those intertwined issues, the essays in that symposium offer strategies to enhance representation for various groups, specifically focusing on race and gender. These recommendations range from generous leave policies and flexible scheduling (Beckwith 2015), to altering teaching evaluation methods (Alexander-Floyd 2015), to fostering opportunities for groups to organize at all levels of the profession (Mershon and Walsh 2015). The effects of these strategies for enhancing diversity will extend to teaching and teaching evaluation outcomes (Alexander-Floyd 2015), representation in leadership roles (particularly within APSA; Beckwith 2015), and the proliferation of organizations to address the needs of specific underrepresented groups (Mershon and Walsh 2015). Though these authors write from different subfields and offer varying recommendations to increase diversity in political science, consensus emerges among them regarding the normative implications of efforts to diversify the discipline. Enhancing diversity among faculty and students stands to shift the questions broached by political scientists and the subjects taught in classes by broadening the range of possible topics.

The relationship between diversifying both the discipline and the substantive topics addressed in political science research and classrooms is especially relevant for studying and teaching issues pertaining to sexuality and gender identity, as is the importance of thinking intersectionally and coalitionally. Julie Novkov and Scott Barclay's 2010 survey of political scientists, for example, shows that while 41 percent of LGBT-identified faculty reported devoting extensive or somewhat attention to LGBT issues in both research and teaching, only 15 percent of straight-identified respondents reported doing so at the same levels (Novkov and Barclay 2010, 101). The connections between LGBT-identified faculty and research and teaching about LGBT politics demonstrated by these survey findings is made even clearer when the results are broken down by subfield. For example, public law and American politics have the highest proportion of LGBT-identified faculty and graduate students. Faculty in these two fields also report that research and teaching on LGBT issues is "highly appropriate" at relatively high levels. The percentage of respondents who responded that research and teaching about LGBT issues are "highly appropriate" is dramatically lower, however, for those specializing in international relations, which corresponds to the reportedly lower number of LGBT-identified scholars in that subfield (Novkov and Barclay 2010, 101).

While LGBT scholars are far from the only ones interested in studying the politics of gender and sexuality, and while certainly not all members of marginalized groups -- LGBT or otherwise -- will focus on issues related to the politics of those groups, Novkov and Barclay's findings echo other work that has found a relationship between descriptive representation in a discipline and the topics that are seen as legitimate objects of study (Silverberg 1998; Simien 2004). For example, although they make very clear that many straight-identified respondents recognized the challenges faced by LGBT-identified scholars and were supportive of efforts to increase their

ranks and to incorporate sexuality into political science research and teaching, others expressed hostile views including the following ones:

“Bending over for junk like LGBT studies will make Political Science more irrelevant than it already is.”

“The most significant problem facing ‘LGBT’ political scientists is the manner in which their lifestyle and activism cloud and confuse their professional activities.”

“LGBT is a nonissue and I like many others actively keep such garbage off the radar screen. It’s a weak political agenda and does not merit any attention whatsoever.”

“I don’t think LGBT political scientists face any problems.”

“I do not think that most of the work being done on this issue is serious political science. Instead, I think it is an aggressive advocacy effort.”

As such, these findings suggest that one way to increase attention to LGBT topics is to attract lesbian, gay, bisexual, and/or transgender-identified scholars to political science. But the causal arrow likely runs in both directions: As Novkov and Barclay argue, the foregoing statements and others like them suggest that many of our colleagues believe that “LGBT research in political science is insufficiently positive and empirical and rests too much on cultural studies and theory,” and on personal experience (Novkov and Barclay 2010, 103). It is therefore also important that those of us committed to increasing equity and diversity do what we can to signal that issues like race, gender, sexuality, and disability are important objects of political inquiry, both to members of under-represented groups and to our colleagues who may resist (or simply may have never considered) this idea. It is also important that we push back against the idea that these topics are any more susceptible to “subjectivity” or “bias” than any other topic of study and to support widely ranging epistemological and methodological approaches.

The Novkov and Barclay survey results show that the demographic make-up of political science with regard to openly-identified LGBT people is shifting as new cohorts of political scientists enter the profession, bringing with them the possibility that LGBT issues will be more central to the discipline in the near future. Although these changing demographics augur a welcome shift, it seems like a particularly daunting task for graduate students and assistant professors to assume along with all the other pressing demands entailed in beginning a career. Thus, in keeping with the themes that motivate this short course, we explore the possibilities offered by building coalitions to augment the critical mass of scholars committed to addressing diversity, gender identity, and sexuality in research and teaching. We first present some ideas for building such coalitions and the objectives these coalitions would advance. We then follow these proposals by drawing on our research on coalitions to reflect on some of the potential obstacles and pitfalls entailed in building such coalitions.

Coalitions to Achieve Critical Mass

There are many different ways to define coalitions – from interest group coalitions, social movement coalitions, and legislative coalitions, among many other possible configurations. For the purposes of this essay, we define coalitions broadly as disparate groups pooling resources to coordinate action on shared goals (Levi and Murphy 2006, 654). Defining coalition in this way allows for advancing three interrelated goals, all in the service of enhancing diversity.

First, coalitions should provide a forum for exchanging information across different groups about particular experiences of discrimination and barriers to access. Education and building solidarity are the primary purposes of this goal, which are accomplished by creating circumstances in which participants can openly articulate specific frustrations and obstacles as well as share strategies and successes. Additionally, for those who are at smaller institutions,

coalitions of the sort we propose here can be used to mitigate the effects of exclusionary social networks by providing opportunities to network.

Second, coalitions should furnish sites for experimentation with strategies to enhance diversity. Short courses such as this one, which invite people to present on a range of topics and then foster discussions about bringing ideas about diversification back to departments, illustrate this function for coalitions. At the level of colleges and universities, coalitions should be fostered across both groups and departments to address specific institutional obstacles to diversity, to recognize what gains have been made, who has benefited from them, and who has not. It is also very important that differently situated groups and individuals resist the (sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit) “divide and conquer” strategies of university administrations and figure out how they can help each other. Without seeming implacable, they must make clear to those in power that they will not end their efforts to enhance diversity and reform institutions once they have secured something for “their” groups.

Third, and relatedly, coalitions should be used to challenge assumptions about inequality and marginalization. Bringing different groups together necessarily entails honest discussions about what Maria Lugones (2003) describes as the many different “wes” and the many different “thems.” In other words, rather than attempting to gloss over differences, coalitions must bring to light the different ways in which oppression and resistance occur, recognizing the varied and shifting positions of different participants as oppressors in some instances and oppressed in others, and, again, must figure out how to hear each other and help each other.

In thinking about the particular context of this short-course – coalitions with LGBT people that will “gender” political science in more positive ways, this has several implications. Some of these include incorporating issues of sexuality and gender identity into courses and research

about women, gender, and feminism. But it also entails making a bit of what Wendy Smooth refers to as “a mess” of what we think of as “gender issues” and to call into questions some of the ways we typically address them in the discipline, in the academy, and more generally.

For example, LGBT people certainly face many the same kind of “work-life balance” issues as their straight colleagues, but they face others as well, such as decisions to come out to colleagues and students, institutional recognition for their particular family configurations, and unique concerns over health care benefits. Lesbians and gender-non-normative people face many of the same issues as straight women when it comes to gendered dress and presentation-of-self codes, but often heightened by not only struggling to “look professional,” but also fearing that their attire might make colleagues and potential colleagues feel uncomfortable. Indeed, thinking about sexuality and gender identity raise a whole host of new issues and wrinkles on old ones – gendered assumptions about what it means to have or to not have kids, the availability of gender-neutral bathrooms in departments and at conferences, and so on. And some of these issues are thorny and entail difficult conversations. For example, all women in the academy are expected to do more service than their male counterparts and are punished if they say “no.” Women with children are often judged and even punished if they are seen as choosing not to “lean in” by prioritizing work over their families. However, women – queer or straight – who do not have children are often made to feel as if they have no good excuse to “say no,” no good reason to leave the meeting early, and the like.

In light of these observations, through these three interrelated goals -- education, experimentation, and challenging assumptions -- the intersectionally-responsible coalitions we propose here are directed towards enhancing diversity in a way that goes beyond simply attracting more lesbians, gay men, bisexuals, and transgender people to leadership positions in

the discipline or the academy. Rather, these coalitions aim to effect change for as many different groups as possible by fostering true understanding and solidarity among members of under-represented and marginalized groups and their allies so that they can be counted on to address forms of discrimination and marginalization that they may not experience directly. Although it is still important to diversify the “bodies” in Political Science and its leadership, intersectional coalitions have as their goal substantive equality rather than descriptive representation. Dara Strolovitch underscores the intersectional potential of such coalitions, explaining that, “By flouting the usual boundaries around issues and interests and by bringing together organizations and movements with different priorities, constituencies, and agendas, coalitional politics are, by definition, intersectional politics” (2007, 176-177). In this way, coalitions stand to enhance diversity comprehensively, and not through the piecemeal inclusion of different groups at different times.

There are, however, some potential pitfalls to consider when developing coalitions to address discrimination and enhance diversity. Specifically, research about widely-ranging contemporary coalitions shows how the pressures to represent unified goals often entails the elevation of some interests over others, which in turn produces within group inequality and marginalization for vulnerable groups. Cristina Beltrán’s 2010 study of Latino as a political identity, for example, shows how many different movements and identity categories – Chicano, Puerto Rican, and Cuban, all with different priorities – were absorbed under the signifier of Hispanic when drawn into coalition with each other for the purposes of projecting a large, unified group in U.S. politics.

Dara Strolovitch finds evidence of this dynamic of within-group marginalization at the site of advocacy coalitions, showing that they are a “double-edged sword” when it comes to advocacy

for disadvantaged subgroups (Strolovitch 2007, 179). Although interest group coalitions might increase opportunities for small or underfunded interest groups to articulate their agendas to other larger and more powerful groups, Strolovitch's research reveals that coalitions of advocacy organizations devote considerably less attention to the interests of disadvantaged subgroups within the coalitions than the interests of advantaged members. The attention that they do devote to coalitions around issues affecting intersectionally-marginalized groups is also often more symbolic than it when it comes to issues affecting more advantaged group members. This effectively downplays the interests of weaker, often intersectionally-constituted groups, under the heading of coalition.

Zein Murib's research on the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender coalition demonstrates a similar pattern of marginalization for the most vulnerable members of coalitions. Specifically, Murib shows that the work of political actors to assert lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people as a unified coalition and associated minority group relied on the elevation of particular interests that would be most legible to the broader public and lawmakers. As such, under the heading of "LGBT" politics, marriage equality and inclusion in the military were prioritized, while employment discrimination protections and Immigration and Customs Enforcement reforms that would benefit those who seem to challenge gender norms and LGBT people of color are minimized or completely silenced.

Conclusion

What are we to make of these findings in light of the recommendation to foster coalitions in political science to address diversity? To begin, it is important to recognize the limitations of coalitions. The three goals that we outlined above strive to foster dialogue and solidarity among many different groups and pool resources to effect change, but they should not be viewed as a

panacea for underrepresentation. The important work of meaningfully altering institutions at all different levels to attract and enable a diverse group of political scientists to the profession should be prioritized as on-going goals. Because coalitions have the capacity, and sometimes even the objective, to work on issues that bring together the interests and goals of many organizations and movements, they have within them the potential to alleviate the inequities that favor strong groups at the expense of weak ones, giving organizations and movements the opportunity to work on issues and to service constituencies that they might otherwise overlook. By flouting the usual boundaries around issues and interests and by bringing together organizations and movements with differing priorities, constituencies, and agendas, coalitional politics are, almost by definition, intersectional politics.

In fact, in spite of their limitations, some research has found that coalitions are the most likely route for addressing issues affecting intersectionally marginalized groups (Strolovitch 2007; Van Dyke 2003). Coalitions foster conditions that highlight connections among issues and constituencies, thereby providing movements and organizations with an opportunity to expand their analysis of the issue at hand and to take into account the interests of the overlapping and intersecting constituencies that comprise the coalition (Van Dyke 2003). Coalitions are thus in a better position to explain why and how their constituent groups should take into account issues affecting weak groups that they might not ordinarily consider. In addition to these proactive effects, the trust and commitments promoted by coalitions also can have a preemptive effect that prevents groups from pursuing policy goals that might be detrimental to weaker coalition partners (Levi and Murphy 2006).

Viewed in this light, an intersectional framework is a promising paradigm for coalitions of groups marginalized by race, class, gender, and sexuality. With its attention to both the salience

of group identity and to the inequalities within identity groups, an intersectional approach can help to realize the potential of coalitions while also addressing power imbalances, differences around race, gender, class, and sexuality, and highlighting the overlapping nature of issues and identities associated with marginalized groups. Such an approach provides a framework within which coalitions can maximize the likelihood that their work will take as its point of departure an understanding of inequalities of power, status, and resources within and among coalescing groups and an insistence upon acknowledging the ways in which the many possible forms of subordination are interconnected.

Thinking about coalitions intersectionally also engages the arguments of scholars such as Wendy Smooth, who encourages the application “messy” intersectional paradigms to analyses political processes and public policies. Acknowledging that such analyses are unruly and non-parsimonious, but contending that such messes are productive and “worth making,” Smooth argues that “resisting the desires to make tidy categories...and allowing the messiness of categorizing...to come to the forefront, will build better models for studying...politics and will help in devising more effective political campaign” (Smooth 2006, 403). In this way, intersectional coalitions provide a forum for what legal scholar Mari Matsuda describes as “asking the other questions.” For example, when we see something that “looks racist,” Matsuda argues, we should also ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” When something looks sexist, we need also to look for the heterosexism in it. If something is homophobic, we must also understand the class interests embedded in it (Matsuda 1991, 1189). An intersectional approach to coalition politics offers a perfect opportunity to “make a mess” by asking these “other questions” in order to capitalize on the potential advantages of broad alliances among marginalized groups and movements.

While no panacea, an intersectional approach provides a framework within which the coalition building can be harnessed in order to build stronger and more progressive movements, particularly during challenging times. Intersectional coalitions encourage groups to come together in ways that acknowledge group identities -- what Bernice Johnson Reagon refers to as “home-” -- but that also transcend the usual boundaries around such groups in ways that challenge us, but that also provide us with unparalleled opportunities to draw connections among issues and illuminate aspects of these issues that would remain in the shadows were we to work alone. Coalitions also promote the cross-fertilization of issues and constituencies, leading to broader visions, to understandings about how issues are connected, and, ultimately, to more comprehensive solutions to the multifaceted issues that face marginalized groups.

Works Cited

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