

God Save The Queer: Discussing the Role of the Family in International Relations

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MARIANNE HOLT, JUL 7 2019

Ostensibly, traditional definitions of the family as a heterosexual nuclear unit are archaic, given that this notion does not correlate with the realities of agents living in the international system (Smolka 2001: 603). Familial formations of the family are no longer binary, this is illustrated by the UK's 2011 Census which defined a family as "a couple living together (with or without children) or a lone parent living with child/children" (ONS 2014: 2). Although the discrepancies associated with a binary definition of the family have been noted by the state, it is evident that the traditional family ideal continues to play a pivotal role in International Relations (IR). The oppressive nature of the family ideal is widely acknowledged in Feminist IR (see Peterson 2014), however, further research is required on the role of family in marginalising queer sexualities and identities.

This essay contends that the traditional family ideal grants certain sexualities and identities as permissible and palatable, rendering those who do not replicate the nuclear dream as deviant. Firstly, this discussion will assess the extent to which the family unit is an organizing principle of IR through outlining the existing debates surrounding the interpretation of the family as repressive. It will also explore the concept of LGBTQ+ bodies as "anti-family" (Hull & Ortyl 2019: 32), arguing that it is a transnational family ideal that is responsible for this conceptualization of queer identities. Subsequent to this, the essay situates the traditional family ideal in relation to the political climate in the United Kingdom (UK) and takes a multileveled approach using three case studies. The discussion evaluates and assesses the role of the family ideal in Birmingham (local), the UK government (national) and in UK international affairs (international).

The Family Ideal

This section will discuss existing scholarly work on the family in IR. Primarily, it will focus on how the family is understood to be synonymous with heterosexual and monogamous relationships and how this has pushed nonconforming sexualities to the periphery of IR. It will then examine how this traditional understanding of what constitutes a family has facilitated the existence of a multi-faceted heterosexual hierarchy as well as analyse arguments that this hierarchy is quintessentially transnational. This discussion provides an understanding of the role of the family in IR which I will situate in the framework of the UK later on.

Queer theory identifies how the family plays a fundamental role in International Relations; Peterson argues that sexuality is paramount to state-making (Peterson 2014: 605). The fear of queer sexualities and genders play an integral role in the "contemporary struggles over the universality of human rights" (Richter-Montpetit 2018 :227). The established heteropatriarchal family ideal is innate to the socialisation of agents; it has the capacity to reinforce social divisions in gender, sexuality, class and race/ethnicity. This is something that remains underexplored in traditional IR theory (Peterson 2014: 605). Heteronormativity interrogates the divergence between same-sex and heterosexual sexualities, noting how straight sexuality is construed as coherent whilst their queer counterparts are marginalized through institutional and structural homophobia (Richter-Montpetit & Weber 2017: 3). "Hegemonic heterosexuality is central to people's everyday lives, forms of expression, intimate arrangements and forms of desire" (Lind 2013: 2).

Heterosexual matrimony is heralded as the ideal sexuality at the local, national and international level, this

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interpretation of the family is a potent force in contemporary IR. Manifestations of straight privilege is visible even in states where protections against homophobia are enshrined in law (Nash & Browne 2015: 564). In the case of the UK, rather than explicitly attacking same-sex sexualities, oppositional groups propagate the family ideal by declaring heterosexual marriage as idyllic (Nash & Browne 2015: 567). Anti-LGBT activists can masquerade their homophobia as simply a desire to preserve the “natural family” (Nash & Browne 2015: 566). The family ideal continues to impede LGBTQ+ equality; Coley argues that although there is more public support for gay rights, “certain informal privileges, such as the ability to be public about one’s sexuality, continues to lag behind” (Coley 2017: 89). A significant proportion of the population are resistant to extending the definition of family ideal to encompass same-sex couples; queer relationships are feared as they destabilize normative understandings of gender and sexuality (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013: 493). Construing family relationships and queer sexualities as mutually exclusive legitimises and enforces negative perception of queer bodies at the local, national and international level.

Interpreting the family ideal as something that universally oppresses LGBTQ+ people could be refuted by the concept of homonormativity. Some queer theorists argue that since the legalisation of gay marriage, the once non-conforming queer agent may assimilate into nuclear familial structures (Hull & Ortyl 2019: 32). In a neoliberal society, “love is love” is applicable to “gender normative, middle class, monogamous and consuming coupledness” (Duggan quoted by Nash & Browne 2015:563). Mainstream queer activism fixates onto heteronormative understandings of the family (Hull & Ortyl 2019: 40); advocacy on this basis neglects the realities of queer agents who do aspire this ideal (Hull & Ortyl 2019: 32-33). However, it must be argued that being in a married couple does not exempt queer people from being oppressed by the family ideal (Nash & Browne 2015: 563). Although same-sex marriage is now legally recognised, queer families are obstructed from being included in the family ideal as they struggle to be recognised as families (Moore & Stambolis-Ruhstorfer 2013: 501). For instance, although many religious groups are more accepting of the LGBTQ+ community, conservative groups do not believe that same-sex couples should be regarded as families. As well as this, married same-sex couples experience subjugation from the family ideal. Same-sex nuclear families are not regarded in the same esteem as heterosexual couples, as is evident in legislation which prevents same-sex couples from being legally recognised as parents (Nelson 2011: 334-338). Additionally, the subversion of essentialist gender roles in a same-sex relationship hinders queer families from commonality to the family ideal. Gender differences between males and females in the nuclear family are integral to the functioning of society; heteronormative conceptualises of the family facilitate the production of children who are socialised “to embrace the dominant norms and values of the society’s culture” (Weber 2016: 15).

In the international system, LGBTQI+ bodies are disparaged by opponents who maintain that traditional values are sacrament. Homophobic assumptions about queer bodies are frequently invoked under the guise of maintaining tradition (Article 19 2013: 19). In the context of debates of the role of family, the traditional viewpoint of the family as incompatible with queerness is incontestable; LGBTQ+ agents do not possess the social capital to challenge the overarching consensus of society (Article 19 2013: 21). Nash & Browne argue that adversarial heteronormative discourses at the local level have international ramifications, “they are intertwined across the nation, the classroom, home and bodies” (Nash & Browne 2015:565). They highlight how LGBTQ+ acceptance is usually conceptualized as an individual’s coming out journey; or as a national issue which can be resolved with a remedy of legislation and policy. This misconception underestimates the role of the family in IR; confining it to an individual agent’s community or to state borders (Nash & Browne 2015: 564). Nash & Browne conclude that observing the role of the family from local and national perspectives is too binary; it is impossible to separate these spheres from the international realm, an arena which Valentine et al. identifies as “a site of contestation of moral values” (Valentine et al. quoted by Nash & Browne 2015: 564). The seemingly localised process of coming out to family and friends is interrelated to the transnational. Anti-gay discourses should not be reduced to local and national interactions; as this diminishes the role of the family in IR. Heteronormative narratives about the family have transcended debates about the morality of homosexual acts, these narratives argue that the traditional family is “in the ‘best interests’ not only of the nation . . . but also of ‘the child’” (Nash & Browne 2015: 571). This insight is central to the discussion of this essay, many perceive *de jure* (legal) equality as definitive proof that the LGBTQ+ are no longer oppressed by familial norms. Even if a queer agent capitalises on the legalisation of same-sex marriage and epitomises the heteronormative family unit, they cannot achieve exemption from the far-reaching and oppressive transnational family ideal.

The Family Ideal in Birmingham, the UK and Beyond

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In March 2019, Birmingham was center stage in a national debate about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities into the curriculum. Parkfield Community School, a school with a student body that is 98% Muslim, received backlash from parents who were in opposition to their 'No Outsiders' programme. This programme was pioneered by Parkfield's assistant headteacher, Andrew Moffat, a gay man who wished to normalize differences in race/ethnicity and sexuality to children (Asthana 2019). After much opposition from the parents of the pupils, as well as Muslims living across Birmingham, the dispute culminated with the removal of the LGBTQ+ inclusive lessons from Parkfield's curriculum (Parveen 2019). One of the protesters vehemently opposed the 'No Outsiders' programme, believing that Moffat was responsible for "[a]ggressively promoting LGBT rights and giving [it] a positive spin" (Asthana 2019). Another believed that these lessons had no place in the curriculum, "[w]e send our kids to school to learn Maths, Science and English" (Asthana 2019).

The Birmingham row is perceived as a localised issue of religion; it was depicted as a battle of morality between the parents who objected to the lessons on the grounds of their faith and Moffat's agenda of inclusivity. From a Queer IR theorist perspective, the row was notable given that it was between immigrants and "perverse" homosexuals; subjects that are usually discursively constructed as "undesirable and dangerous" (Richter-Monpetit 2018: 229). Richter-Monpetit notes that a faux pro-LGBTQ+ stance is frequently appropriated by Western states in order to validate discourses around immigration and security (Richter-Monpetit 2018: 229). Paur (2017) supports this notion of homonationalism; queer subjects are supported by certain political actors in order to construct orientalist notions of "Muslim sexuality" (Paur 2017:4). It must be acknowledged that this essay does not condone the decision to revoke the LGBTQ+ inclusivity lessons, however, Parkfield's parents' uncomfortableness about positive depictions of homosexuality is just a microcosm of International Relations. It is not a problem of individual homophobia; anxieties about children learning that it is acceptable to be gay transcends Islam. Izzy Montague, a Christian activist, declared in a TV debate that LGBTQ+ lessons have no place in the curriculum. She argued that it is erroneous to teach children that same-sex couples can be parents: "It is not true; it is not honest" (Good Morning Britain 2019). Nash & Browne suggests that same-sex relationships are unable to coexist with the traditional notions of the family, anti-LGBT activists frequently invoke the argument that we are all a product of heterosexual procreation in order to justify the exclusion of same-sex families from the family ideal (Nash & Browne 2015: 570). Therefore, although same-sex couples are legally allowed to "practice" their sexuality and participate in certain facets of neoliberal society, the family ideal hampers efforts to depict LGBTQ+ families in a positive light. In cases such as the Birmingham row, "the 'private' domestic life of the home and family is pulled into the public (state) sphere for scrutiny and support" (Nash & Browne 2015: 570). Evidently, the notion of children learning that same-sex families exist is absurd to opponents of No Outsiders, who view the homosexual agent and the nuclear family as antithetical.

A teaching publication (TES) conducted a survey to find out how parents and teachers felt about the inclusion of LGBTQ+ identities in the curriculum. It concluded that although the vast majority of the 344 adults were in favour of LGBTQ+ lessons, the data suggested that they were not comfortable with young children learning about non-normative relationships (Kelleher 2019). Hence, there is a collective apprehension about informing young children about LGBTQ+ relationships, suggesting that they are in some way inappropriate and X-rated. A reluctance to inform young audiences about same-sex sexualities suggests that the family ideal continues to influence British parents' perceptions of the LGBTQ+ community. Evidently, same-sex families in the localised home and community struggle to achieve parity with their heterosexual counterparts. However, this contestation of values is intrinsically tied to national and international spheres. Rather than wholly blaming bigotry or religious dogma at the local level for the exclusion of LGBTQ+ bodies from familial narratives this essay contends that disdain for queer sexualities in the classroom, home and wider society is innately related to the transnational family ideal. LGBTQ+ victories are counterattacked by these "multi-scalar networks" (Nash & Browne 2015: 563). The capacity of the transnational ideal to reproduce the interpretation of queer bodies as devoid of family values must be explored further.

It could be argued that the family ideal does not have an extensive impact on International Relations. The homophobic sentiments of anti-LGBTQ+ activists in the UK are attributed to the agent, the parents of the pupils of Parkfield could be read as an anomaly in an otherwise gay friendly state. However, condemning the perspectives of these parents neglects to acknowledge how the UK facilitates the privileging of the heterosexual at the national and transnational level. Instead, the characterization of homophobia as a problem unique to Islamic community ignores how Western states are complicit in reinforcing the heteronormative family ideal. A caricature of the repressive

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Islamic faith is capitalized on by Western states (an alleged haven for queer subjects) who use it as “a justification for imperial projects of war” (Hicks & Jeyasingham 2016:2365). Paradoxically, there is a link between British colonialism and the traditional family ideal in International Relations. “Of the 71 countries around the world in which same-sex relations are illegal. . . more than half are former British colonies or protectorates” (Wescott 2018). Han & O’Mahoney regard the British Empire as “substantially responsible for the state of this particular issue” (Han & O’Mahoney 2014: 285). The UK may pat themselves on the back for their benevolent decision to not imprison gay people anymore, however, the legacy of British colonialism ensures that global LGBTQ+ populations are excluded from the family ideal. Butterworth encapsulates this, stating that “[a]nti-gay laws originating in Britain aren’t an archaic part of history – they are an archaic part of the present” (Butterworth, 2018).

The UK government’s treatment of queer agents across the international system, and the state’s actions abroad, refutes the idea that they are LGBTQ+ allies. In April 2019, LGBTQ+ Syrian refugees entered a legal battle with the Home Office “claiming that they have been abandoned to a life of danger in Turkey, despite promises to bring them speedily to safety in the UK” (Taylor 2019). Despite the fact that the UK had accepted these 15 refugees two years ago, they remain in their home country awaiting action (Taylor 2019). In the UK government’s 2018 LGBT action plan, Penny Mordaunt (Minister for Equalities and Women) declared: “[t]he UK has a proud record of defending and extending LGBTQ+ rights both at home and abroad” (UK Government 2018). This statement is disregarded by the government’s foreign policy. They have consistently overlooked the rights of homosexual subjects in Saudi Arabia, Uganda and Brunei “because of their wealth or strategic importance” (Hamdache 2019). If the UK truly believed that homosexuals had the same inalienable rights as their heterosexual counterparts, the state would safeguard their rights at home and abroad.

Conclusion

This essay has evaluated the role of the family in International Relations through examining the multi-leveled implications of heterosexual privilege, concluding that the family plays a principle role across IR. It maintains that the family plays an oppressive role in IR due to its regulation of sexuality and therefore supports the notion of a transnational family ideal. The family ideal is rooted in traditional understandings of the nuclear family unit and permeates the local, national and international. The discussion highlights the regulatory power of the family, illustrating how the family ideal transcends the private realm and works to impede LGBTQ+ bodies from being out and proud.

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Date written: April 2019