

THE CONCEPT OF GAPS IN LITERATURE AS OBTAINABLE IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS RESEARCH

Mercy Uwamusi Benson-Ogbeide

Department of International Relations

Baze University

Phone: +234 80555 1440

Abstract

The paper examines the concept of gaps in literature as used in international relations research. Secondary method of data collection was used to obtain data. Findings indicate that, gap occurs when a problem has not been theorised adequately, there is no empirical evidence or a perspective has been ignored. Most early IR studies were Euro-American in their focus, and focused on the notions of sovereignty, military strength, and great-power politics. Consequently, other matters like global health diplomacy, cyber governance, environmental security and South-South cooperation were not given much attention. These blank spaces resulted in big gaps that were filled with new strands of research the paper concludes that, literature gaps also arise in cases where the existing theories do not provide sufficient explanations of changing events in the world. Indicatively, Realism has a problem with describing the role of the non-state actors, whereas Liberalism fails to reflect in cases of institutional failure that remains persistent. These conceptual blindnesses identify systematic gaps that need new or changed strategies. The paper recommends adequate theoretical application in order to identify theoretica and other gaps and how to bridge up such gaps.

Keywords: gaps in literature; social science; international relations research; theoretical deficit; Euro-American

Introduction

International Relations (IR) as a field has expanded significantly since its formal emergence after the First World War. Early scholarship focused largely on explaining the causes of war and the conditions for peace, particularly within the context of European power politics. Over time, the discipline developed dominant theoretical traditions such as realism, liberalism, and later constructivism, each offering distinct explanations of state behaviour and global order (Carr, 1939; Morgenthau, 1948; Waltz, 1979). Despite this growth, the IR literature continues to display notable gaps that limit its ability to fully explain contemporary global realities.

One major gap lies in the Eurocentric orientation of much IR scholarship. Classical and neorealist theories were developed largely from European historical experiences, especially the balance of power system and the two World Wars. As a result, concepts such as sovereignty, national interest, and statehood are often treated as universal, even though they emerged from specific Western historical trajectories (Acharya & Buzan, 2010). This has led to the marginalisation of perspectives from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Middle East. While postcolonial scholars have challenged this imbalance, their contributions remain underrepresented in mainstream IR journals and curricula, leaving a gap in understanding how global

politics is experienced outside the West (Tickner & Blaney, 2012).

Closely related to this is the limited engagement with Global South realities. Many IR studies focus on great powers, advanced economies, and formal institutions such as the United Nations or NATO. Issues central to developing regions, such as state fragility, informal governance, external dependency, and postcolonial state formation, are often treated as secondary or exceptional cases rather than core concerns of the discipline (Ayoob, 1995). This gap weakens the explanatory power of IR theories when applied to regions like Sub-Saharan Africa, where domestic and international politics are deeply intertwined.

Another persistent gap concerns the overemphasis on the state as the primary unit of analysis. Traditional IR theories privilege sovereign states and their interactions, often neglecting the growing influence of non-state actors. Multinational corporations, international non-governmental organisations, terrorist networks, and transnational advocacy groups now play significant roles in shaping global outcomes. Although liberal and constructivist approaches acknowledge these actors, much empirical research still prioritises state-centric explanations, leaving insufficient analysis of how non-state actors influence diplomacy, conflict, development, and global governance (Barnett & Finnemore, 2004).

There is also a notable gap between theory and empirical realities, particularly in policy-relevant research. Many IR theories are highly abstract and prioritise internal consistency over real-world applicability. Critics argue that this has produced a divide between academic IR and foreign policy practice, with limited engagement between scholars and practitioners (Deciancio, 2024). As global challenges such as climate change, pandemics, cyber insecurity, and forced migration intensify, the literature struggles to provide grounded explanations and practical insights that policymakers can readily apply.

Methodologically, IR research shows an imbalance that constitutes another gap. Quantitative and positivist approaches dominate leading journals, especially in the United States, often at the expense of qualitative, historical, and interpretive methods (Smith, 2004). While quantitative studies offer generalisable findings, they may overlook context, meaning, and power relations. This methodological hierarchy marginalises alternative ways of knowing and restricts the diversity of questions that can be asked within the discipline.

Gender and identity represent further underexplored areas in IR literature. Feminist scholars have long argued that mainstream IR ignores how global politics affects men and women differently and how gendered power relations shape war, peace, and diplomacy (Tickner, 1992). Although feminist IR has grown as a subfield, its insights are still not fully integrated into core theoretical debates. Similarly, issues of race, religion, and identity are often treated as peripheral rather than central drivers of international behaviour, creating analytical blind spots.

Finally, the literature reveals a temporal gap in addressing emerging global transformations. Many theories were developed during the Cold War and are only partially adapted to contemporary realities such as multipolarity, digital diplomacy, artificial intelligence, and South–South cooperation. While new frameworks are emerging, there remains a lag between rapid global change and theoretical innovation, limiting the relevance of IR scholarship in explaining current international dynamics (Acharya, 2014).

Types of Literature Gaps in International Relations

1. Theoretical Gaps

The gaps in theory come into being when the theories of IR cannot be used to explain the new realities. An example of this is realism and Liberalism which assume rational and interest-seeking state behaviour. Nonetheless, the increasing nationalism, identity politics and domestic populism expose weaknesses to

these presumptions (Nye, 2022). Constructivism provides information on standards and identity but does not all the time take into account material restriction which influences state decision making. These theoretical constraints leave room to other views like post colonial IR, Feminist IR and green theory. These strategies have been formulated to cover the blind spots of mainstream theories, in particular, the lack of focus on identity, environmental issues and historical inequalities.

2. Empirical Gaps

Empirical gaps can be seen when a phenomenon has not been appropriately researched on using enough evidence or using the right data. Even though the literature in IR focuses a lot on the relations between major powers, such regions as Africa, Southeast Asia and the Caribbean have frequently been underrepresented. Such an imbalance misinterprets global politics (Zarakol, 2022). There are also empirical gaps due to the absence of new data on the new challenges, including the problem of cyber conflict, digital diplomacy and the geopolitical implications of artificial intelligence, which were not considered in the previous literature. The latest world developments such as the war in Russia-Ukraine and the pandemic of COVID-19 have only contributed to the gaps in empirical data because previous studies did not expect such extensive results.

3. Contextual Gaps

Contextual gaps are where scholars apply findings in different areas ignoring the realities on the ground. Most of the traditional IR theories are based upon the European historical experiences like the Peace of Westphalia, which are not entirely applicable to the development of African states, sectarian politics in the Middle East or Asian institutions (Acharya, 2021). When the results of one political setting are made to be applied into another, pertinent dynamics have not been considered. This leaves openings which demand contextual analyses that take into consideration local histories, cultures and political practices.

4. Methodological Gaps

Methodological gaps occur when previous researchers are based on restricted research methods. The conventional IR studies relied on qualitative study and diplomatic history. Nevertheless, global politics are becoming more and more concerned with problems that can be served with mixed methods, big-data analysis, methods of network modelling and geospatial methods (Lake, 2023). When the study is still in old equipment, it creates loopholes in research that cannot allow further insight. In the same vein, research that does not embrace interviews, fieldwork or voices of marginalised groups may be deprived of important views.

5. Normative and Ethical Gaps

The normative gaps manifest by the failure of the literature to cover moral and ethical aspects of international affairs. Drone warfare, humanitarian intervention, climate justice and refugee protection pose very profound ethical concerns that are typically overlooked in strategic or power-based thinking (Barder, 2022). Scholars might not critically evaluate the legitimacy, accountability and human welfare by concentrating on state interests and material capabilities only. These blind spots create significant normative holes that are being filled today by modern researchers.

Causes of Literature Gaps in International Relations

The ever-changing world politics is one of the greatest contributing factors to gaps in literature. Multinational corporations and digital platforms, extremist networks and climate-related organisations are

new actors that do not respect the velocity of the speculative literature but remake the international system (Keohane and Nye, 2022). The other reason is the issue of theoretical dominance, in which the Western-centric paradigms use alternative world views as peripheral and introduce structural knowledge gaps (Tickner & Waever, 2020). Empirical and methodological gaps are also caused by research funding constraints, inaccessibility to sensitive information and the lack of scholarly materials in developing countries. Another way that geopolitical biases construct the field of study is the way certain regions or issues are overstudied and certain ones are understudied.

Importance of Identifying Literature Gaps in International Relations

Ascertaining literature gaps is important for producing original and impactful research. It enables researcher to clarify research problems, refine theoretical debates and move academic debates beyond repetition of existing claims. The researchers contribute to knowledge and help shape global policy discussions through the identification of gaps. For example, identifying gaps in cyber governance studies has informed new approaches to digital diplomacy and global cybersecurity frameworks (Deibert, 2023). Ascertaining gaps also ensures that understated regions, including Africa and the Global South, are incorporated into IR scholarship, promoting a more balanced understanding of global affairs.

Strategies for Identifying Literature Gaps in IR

Researchers detect literature gaps by carefully reviewing previous literatures, identifying contradictions, and examining unanswered questions. Comparing findings across regions often reveals areas where theories fail to apply consistently. Emerging events, such as technological innovation, shifting alliances or new security threats, also highlight gaps because literature has not yet caught up with contemporary realities. Evaluating methodological patterns in existing research allows scholars to identify where new tools or data sources may produce deeper findings. Additionally, analysing policy debates helps pinpoint areas where academic attention is lacking.

Significance of Literature Gap

Literature gaps play a central role in shaping the direction, relevance, and contribution of research in International Relations (IR). A literature gap refers to areas where existing studies are insufficient, outdated, conceptually limited, or silent on important dimensions of international phenomena. Identifying and addressing such gaps is not merely a procedural academic requirement; it is fundamental to advancing knowledge, refining theory, and improving the practical relevance of IR scholarship. The significance of literature gaps in IR can be understood in terms of their theoretical, empirical, methodological, and policy implications.

From a theoretical perspective, literature gaps highlight the limitations of dominant IR theories in explaining contemporary global realities. Much of IR theory emerged from specific historical contexts, particularly Europe and North America during the twentieth century. As a result, realism, liberalism, and even constructivism often struggle to account for experiences outside the Western world or for non-traditional forms of power and interaction (Acharya & Buzan, 2010). Recognising these gaps creates space for theoretical innovation, including the development of Global South-oriented frameworks and postcolonial perspectives. Without engaging these gaps, IR risks theoretical stagnation and continued reliance on explanations that no longer reflect the complexity of global politics.

Literature gaps are also significant because they expose imbalances in knowledge production within the discipline. The dominance of Western scholars, institutions, and journals has shaped what is studied, how

it is studied, and whose experiences are considered valid sources of knowledge (Tickner & Blaney, 2012). Addressing gaps related to underrepresented regions such as Africa, Latin America, and parts of Asia contributes to epistemic diversity and challenges the assumption that Western experiences are universal. This is particularly important for IR, a field that claims to explain global interactions. Filling these gaps enhances the inclusiveness and legitimacy of the discipline.

Empirically, literature gaps signal areas where real-world developments outpace scholarly analysis. The global system has undergone profound changes, including the rise of emerging powers, increased South-South cooperation, transnational security threats, and the growing influence of non-state actors. Yet much empirical IR research remains focused on traditional state-to-state relations among major powers (Deibert, 2023). Identifying empirical gaps allows researchers to redirect attention toward neglected issues such as fragile states, informal diplomacy, regional organisations in the Global South, and the international dimensions of domestic governance. This strengthens the empirical foundation of IR and ensures that scholarship remains responsive to changing global conditions.

The significance of literature gaps is equally evident in methodological advancement. IR research has long been shaped by methodological debates, particularly between positivist and interpretive approaches. The dominance of quantitative methods in leading journals has produced valuable insights but has also limited the kinds of questions that can be asked (Smith, 2004). Literature gaps often reveal the absence of qualitative, historical, or mixed-methods studies in certain areas. Addressing these gaps encourages methodological pluralism, allowing scholars to capture context, meaning, and power relations that numbers alone may not reveal. This contributes to more nuanced and comprehensive explanations of international phenomena.

Another important dimension is the theory–policy gap in International Relations. Many scholars have noted that IR research often remains disconnected from the concerns of policymakers and practitioners (Nye, 2022). Literature gaps highlight areas where academic debates have failed to engage pressing policy challenges such as climate change governance, global health security, cyber diplomacy, and humanitarian intervention. By identifying and addressing these gaps, researchers can produce work that is not only theoretically sound but also policy-relevant. This enhances the practical value of IR scholarship and strengthens its contribution to informed decision-making at national and international levels.

Literature gaps also carry significance for normative and ethical inquiry in IR. Issues related to gender, race, identity, and inequality have historically been marginalised within mainstream IR theory. Feminist and critical scholars have shown that ignoring these dimensions leads to incomplete and sometimes distorted analyses of war, peace, and global governance (Zarakol, 2022). Recognising gaps in this area allows scholars to interrogate whose interests are served by existing knowledge and whose voices are excluded. This deepens ethical reflection within the discipline and aligns IR research with broader concerns about justice and human dignity.

Furthermore, addressing literature gaps is crucial for academic originality and contribution. In postgraduate research and scholarly publishing, the ability to clearly identify a gap demonstrates that a study adds value rather than merely repeating existing work. In IR, where debates are often long-standing, literature gaps help scholars position their research within ongoing conversations while offering fresh perspectives or new evidence. This is essential for sustaining intellectual dynamism within the field and for mentoring new generations of scholars.

Finally, the significance of literature gaps lies in their role in ensuring the future relevance of International Relations as a discipline. Global politics is increasingly shaped by technological change, environmental crises, and complex interdependence. If IR scholarship fails to recognise and respond to gaps related to

these transformations, it risks becoming disconnected from the realities it seeks to explain (Acharya, 2014).

Conclusion

The review of gaps in the literature on International Relations reveals persistent weaknesses that continue to limit the depth, inclusiveness, and practical relevance of the discipline. Despite its long intellectual history and rich theoretical traditions, International Relations research remains shaped by assumptions and perspectives rooted largely in Western historical experiences. This has produced a body of knowledge that often struggles to adequately explain political, economic, and security dynamics in the Global South, where colonial legacies, state fragility, and external dependency significantly shape international behaviour. The continued dominance of Eurocentric frameworks therefore represents a critical gap that demands sustained scholarly attention.

Another key conclusion is that the state-centred focus of much International Relations literature no longer fully reflects contemporary global realities. While states remain important actors, the growing influence of non-state actors, transnational networks, and informal institutions has altered how power is exercised and how global outcomes are produced. The limited empirical engagement with these actors weakens existing explanations of diplomacy, conflict, development, and global governance, particularly in regions where non-state actors play decisive roles.

The literature also demonstrates a clear disconnect between theory and practice. Many theoretical debates remain abstract and insufficiently grounded in empirical realities or policy concerns. As global challenges such as climate change, health crises, cyber insecurity, and forced migration intensify, this gap reduces the ability of International Relations scholarship to inform decision-making and respond meaningfully to real-world problems. In addition, methodological imbalances, especially the dominance of positivist approaches, continue to marginalise alternative ways of understanding global politics.

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