

The Psychologies Underlying Political Psychology

Political psychology is, at the most general level, an application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics. From psychology it draws on theory and research on personality, psychopathology, social psychology, developmental psychology, cognitive psychology, and intergroup relations. It addresses political phenomena such as individual biography and leadership, mass political behavior, mass communication effects, political socialization and civic education, international conflict, foreign policy decision-making, conflict resolution, intergroup conflicts involving race, gender, nationality, and other groupings, political movements, and political mobilization. Although many of its practitioners are drawn from the disciplines of psychology and political science, they also include historians, sociologists, anthropologists, psychiatrists, communications researchers, educators, and lawyers.

The field of political psychology as a self-conscious specialty dates from the late 1960s. As far as we know, the first undergraduate and graduate courses taught under that title began in 1970 (Funk & Sears, 1991; Sears & Funk, 1991). Political psychology is now taught at both the graduate and undergraduate levels at most major universities in the United States, although not in every case under that exact title, and increasingly at smaller liberal arts colleges and in universities around the globe. The International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP), the core professional society for political psychology, was founded in 1978 under the strong leadership of Jeanne Knutson. It developed a journal, *Political Psychology*, published since 1980; research in the field is of course published in a wide variety of other outlets, as the bibliographies for the individual chapters here demonstrate.

As with any other academic specialty, the field of political psychology should be drawn together periodically to assess its standing, progress, and direction. Within the disciplines of psychology particularly, and political science as well, there is a tradition of periodic handbooks (see Greenstein & Polsby, 1975; Gilbert, Fiske, & Lindzey, 1998). There are two such previous books on political psychology: the *Handbook of Political Psychology* (Knutson, 1973) and *Political Psychology* (Hermann, 1986). The field has grown considerably since then. As a result, Daniel Bar-Tal and Ervin Staub, as president and president-elect of ISPP, suggested in 1999 that we prepare a new edition.

In this handbook a group of widely respected political scientists and psychologists summarize what psychology has contributed to our understanding of the political behavior of both political elites and ordinary citizens. Drawing on a diverse set of psychological theories, the contributors to this handbook shed light on central issues such as the effects of personality on leadership style, the development of biases that distort political decision-making, the origins of racial prejudice, and the etiology of violent communal conflicts. Our goal is to present the main contemporary content of political psychology. We strove to make the presentation comprehensive, cumulative, and international. First of all, it is intended to systematically review current knowledge; it is comprehensive, embracing all the fields of political psychology; and it is contemporary, emphasizing the latest and most current knowledge. Second, in soliciting authors we sought first and foremost prominent scholars in each area of political psychology. Third, we sought to make the book fully interdisciplinary, and indeed the authors come approximately equally from psychology and political science backgrounds. Fourth, we sought to make the book international, not merely a product of the United States, and we have included a significant number of authors from other nations. The chapters in each provide an up-to-date account of cutting-edge research within both psychology and political science and will be an essential reference for scholars and students interested in the intersection of these two fields. This handbook should allow one-stop shopping for what is currently known about political psychology in all its many forms.

▲ *Psychological Approaches to Politics*

The chapters that follow will make it clear that there is no one “political psychology.” Rather, there are a number of political phenomena that have been investigated from a psychological approach, and using a number of different psychological theories. In that sense there are a number of “political psychologists,” though of course every theory is more appropriate for some phenomena than for others. It may be helpful if we here lay out the major psychological theoretical approaches that have been applied to the study of politics (see also Sullivan, Rahn, & Rudolph, 2002).

Personality

One approach that is sometimes mistakenly identified as *the* psychological approach uses individual personality or characterological predispositions as the primary explanatory variable. Personality is usually defined as a stable individual difference variable that transcends specific situations. For example, we might describe a national leader as “highly aggressive,” by which we mean that she has a tendency, in most situations and more than most

people, to initiate action rather than passively respond and to be angry and hostile rather than gentle and sweet.

Sigmund Freud had a great deal of influence on early political psychologists because his psychoanalysis of specific individuals lent itself well to the analysis of the personalities of specific political leaders. Harold Lasswell, in his *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930), was a pioneer in analyzing the personalities of political activists in terms of the unconscious conflicts that motivated their political activities. This approach led to numerous psychobiographies of famous leaders, such as the analysis of Woodrow Wilson by George and George (1956) and of Martin Luther by Erik Erikson (1958). A natural extension of this examination of individuals has been to classify individuals into personality or character categories, such as Barber’s (1972) fourfold classification of presidents as active or passive and positive or negative. This intensive analysis of specific individuals also was extended to the analysis of ordinary people. Smith, Brunet, and White (1956) examined the psychological functions that political attitudes serve for ordinary citizens, and Lane (1962) the values and ideologies ordinary citizens use in thinking about politics.

This “idiographic” approach to personality and politics, examining the idiosyncracies of specific individuals, contrasts with the “nomothetic” approach, which statistically places larger numbers of people at various positions on a specific dimension of personality. The most famous is perhaps the book *The Authoritarian Personality* (Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson, & Sanford, 1950), an ambitious and influential effort to distinguish authoritarian, antidemocratic people from more egalitarian, democratic personalities, with a single questionnaire. For example, high authoritarians are more likely than low authoritarians to agree that “any good leader should be strict with people under him in order to gain their respect.”

The personality approach dominated political psychology in the 1940s and 1950s (Sullivan et al., 2002). Greenstein (1987) offers a most perceptive analysis of how and when personality analyses are most telling in political psychology (also see Runyan, 1984). Though somewhat less prominent today, the personality approach continues to influence research on mass and elite political behavior, as seen in John Duckitt’s review of explanations for prejudice and David Winter’s analysis of individual differences in elite behavior and decision-making.

Behaviorist Learning Theories

Another general approach has evolved from the behaviorist theories that were much in vogue in the middle half of the twentieth century. One version of behaviorist theories emphasizes the learning of longlasting habits, which in turn guide later behavior. They were inspired by the classical conditioning studies of Pavlov, who showed that dogs could be conditioned to salivate at the sound of a bell if it were always followed by food, by the

instrumental conditioning studies of Watson and Skinner, who showed that animals could develop complex habits if their behavior proved instrumental to the satisfaction of their basic needs such as hunger or thirst, and the imitative learning examined by Bandura, who showed that children would engage in imitative behavior without any involvement of need satisfaction. Such theories long dominated the analysis of mass political attitudes. The field of political socialization, as described by Sears and Levy, developed from the assumption that children learned basic political attitudes (such as party identification or racial prejudice) from their families and friends, and that the residues of these early attitudes dominated their later political attitudes in adulthood, such as their presidential vote preferences. Mass communication effects were analyzed in terms of the "reinforcement" of a prior position by exposure to congruent communications (Klapper, 1960; Zaller, 1992; see Kinder, chapter 11).

Developmental Theory

An important counterweight to the behaviorist emphasis on social learning was the theory of childhood cognitive development originally proposed by Piaget and later elaborated by Kohlberg and others. As children get older, they pass through various cognitive stages in their understanding of the social world, initially understanding only the positive or negative effects of an action, then focusing more on the views of authority, and finally being able to reason in terms of either relativistic or absolute moral values (Tapp & Kohlberg, 1971). Some have suggested that progress through these stages is usually incomplete by the time people reach adulthood, giving rise to the possibility of individual differences among adults in level of cognitive or moral development (Rosenberg, 1988). This developmental approach has had its primary application to preadult political socialization, defined broadly. Sears and Levy discuss different theoretical approaches to attitude acquisition among children.

Incentive Theories

A second general behaviorist idea is that behavior is governed by the structure of incentives in the individual's current situation. For example, a rat in a t-maze would turn to the alternative that provided the most reward and the least punishment and avoid the less favorable alternative. Later variants of these theories emphasized the positive and negative incentives that induced people toward specific behaviors or repelled them. Kurt Lewin developed a variant on these that he described as "field theory," which placed individuals in a field in which internal and external forces pushed and pulled them into specific behaviors.

These too have long influenced the study of mass political behavior. Mass electoral behavior was analyzed in terms of "pressures" on a voter to

vote in a particular direction, such as those associated with the dominant political preferences of their demographic groups (Lazarsfeld, Berelson, & Gaudet, 1948) or "short-term forces" such as candidate appeal or foreign policy issue preferences (Campbell, Converse, Miller, & Stokes, 1960; also see chapter 12). Basic values can also provide incentives for or against specific political actions (see chapter 14). Collective action and violence is often analyzed in terms of incentives for and against it (see chapter 20).

A variant on the incentive approach adds subjective appraisals of the most important incentives. For example, "expectancy-value" theory predicts that choices will favor alternatives that hold the highest potential hedonic value to the individual, multiplied by the individual's subjective expectation of the probability of that value being produced by that choice alternative (Edwards, 1954; see chapter 2). The similarity between such theories and the rational choice theory that is central to neoclassic economics, and now very popular in political science, is evident; that link is discussed further hereafter.

Social Cognition

The Gestalt movement that migrated from Germany to the United States before World War II began with the assumption that people had needs for understanding and perceptual order and so would spontaneously develop perceptions and cognitions that simplified a disorderly perceptual world (Asch, 1952; Krech & Crutchfield, 1948). In the hands of Heider (1958) and Festinger (1957) and others this was applied to the study of attitudes, with the presumption that people were motivated to seek cognitive consistency (Abelson, Aronson, McGuire, Newcomb, Rosenberg, & Tannenbaum, 1968). Many of the phenomena of electoral behavior and mass communications were subsequently analyzed in terms of individuals' tendencies to develop electoral and other political preferences that were consistent with their other strong attitudes (e.g., Sears, 1969; Sears & Whitney, 1973).

Later this cognitive consistency approach was subsumed under the field of "social cognition," which analyzes individuals as seeking to develop simplifying views of the external world, easily capable of learning new information but also needing to economize on cognitive processing because of limited processing capacities (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). The field of social cognition was also influenced by the more general cognitive revolution in psychology that emerged in the 1980s, based on the application of computer analogies to the structure and processes of the cognitive system. It led to a series of key insights into the strengths and limitations of human information processing that were readily applicable to political reasoning.

The need for cognitive economy helped to explain the tendency toward cognitive consistency. It also pointed to the use of cognitive heuristics or shortcuts, which could potentially distort both elites' decision-making (Jervis, 1976; Larson, 1985) and the mass public's preferences. Levy (chapter

8) reviews the impact of a psychological approach on foreign policy decision-making and explores these biases in greater detail, drawing a distinction between "cold" biases based on the application of cognitive heuristics and "hot" motivated biases, such as wishful thinking and cognitive consistency. Lau (chapter 2) reviews work on behavioral decision theory, contrasting normative models with behavioral descriptions of how ordinary people actually do make political decisions, with a particular focus on voting decisions. Here too the cognitive limits on rationality lead to a variety of problem-solving strategies involving cognitive shortcuts. Taber (chapter 13) similarly develops an information-processing model of voter decision-making.

An emphasis on cognitive shortcuts also allows for elite manipulation of mass publics, as elites determine how an issue is to be framed or what predispositions are to be primed, through their agenda-setting powers (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; see chapter 17). But as McGraw (chapter 12) notes in her discussion of the dynamic process of impression formation, when voters assess political candidates via on-line processes they often forget the details but arrive at the "right" decision about the candidate consistent with their preferences. In this instance, the need for cognitive economy does not bias political decision-making. Taber (chapter 13) and Lau (chapter 2) too conclude that the use of cognitive shortcuts may often not bias the ordinary voter's decision making as much as was once feared (also see Lau & Redlawsk, 1997).

In recent years, the centrally cognitive emphasis of social cognition has been questioned to some extent and so the role of emotions and affect has begun to play a larger role, as described by George Marcus (chapter 6).

Intergroup Relations

Intergroup relations is a particularly active area within political psychology at present and this emphasis is reflected across the chapters of this handbook. In addition to the discussions by Huddy (chapter 15) and Duckitt (chapter 16) that deal directly with group-linked research, Sears and Levy (chapter 3) include a section on the childhood development of racial identity, Billig (chapter 7) discusses the use of group-linked pronouns in his contribution of political rhetoric, McGraw explores the impact of race on candidate evaluations in her discussion of political impressions, and Klansdormans (chapter 19) discusses the role of group identification in intensifying commitment to social movements.

The field of intergroup relations does not embody a single theoretical approach; rather it draws on diverse psychological theories. Early research on intergroup relations conducted in the 1950s and 1960s focused primarily on outgroup animosity, especially toward Jews and Negroes (Allport, 1954). Research on the authoritarian personality emphasized the importance of personality factors on the development of racial prejudice and anti-Semitism

(Adorno et al., 1950). More recently, research on racial prejudice has been dominated by theories that stress the role of social learning in the acquisition of negative racial attitudes, stereotypes, and authoritarian beliefs (Altemeyer, 1988; Ashmore & Del Boca, 1981; Sears, 1988).

Yet theories in the area of intergroup relations have increasingly emphasized the distinctive psychological power of group boundaries and group attachments. For example, contemporary research has devoted increasing research to ingroup loyalties. This work has focused less on individual differences and more on group-related factors to account for the development of both ingroup attachments and outgroup antipathies. Huddy (chapter 15) highlights the important distinction between two key group-related approaches: social identity theory, which stresses social prestige and intergroup respect as motives for the development of identity and ingroup favoritism (Tajfel, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), and realistic interest theories, which place emphasis on shared material interests and conflict over tangible resources as the origins of ingroup attachments and outgroup antipathy (Blumer, 1958; Bobo, 1983; LeVine & Campbell, 1972; Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). She concludes that the political impact of strong group identities is usually more closely tied to symbolic than to realistic interests. Duckitt attempts to reconcile the group and individual levels of theories about the development of prejudice. He develops a combined model in which group inequality leads to a desire to dominate other groups (consistent with social dominance theory) whereas intergroup threat leads individuals to an overt dislike of threatening group members (akin to findings on authoritarianism).

▲ *New Developments*

Both evolutionary psychology and neuroscience are beginning to influence research on an array of questions linked to political psychology. Sidanius and Kurzban explore evolutionary psychology in some detail as they discuss the origins of ethnocentrism, gender differences in political behavior, and the development of group-based hierarchies. Developments in evolutionary psychology are closely tied to recent developments in neuropsychology. Sidanius and Kurzban (chapter 5), for example, describe the brain as a system of "functionally specialized circuits" designed through the process of evolution to handle distinct tasks. This insight from neuropsychology forms the basis for George Marcus's approach to emotions. He emphasizes different types of emotional responses, such as enthusiasm, anxiety, and aversion, that may be under the control of different neural processes. This, too, holds important insight for political psychology. Anxiety, for example, motivates a search for new information, shattering the traditional view of emotion as something that interferes with rational decision-making. In contrast, enthusiasm or aversion results in a tendency to rest on one's existing tendencies without initiating a search for new information.

Billig draws from an approach more commonly used in qualitative social sciences—discourse analysis—to reconceptualize central psychological variables, such as identity, as a product of conversation that is nested within a specific context. This leads to the view that political attitudes need to be studied within a controversial or argumentative setting.

Political psychologists have also paid growing attention to the complex theoretical and empirical role of gender. Sapiro (chapter 17) provides an overview of this research, drawing from a wide array of sources in political science and psychology. She challenges the notion that gender has obvious and consistent effects and argues instead that its political effects are variable and contingent. Under some circumstances, women and men react differently to political events, and gendered political objects (such as politicians or policies) can elicit clear reactions based on gender stereotypes.

Another important trend concerns an examination of the interplay between political elites and publics. Frames have become an increasingly important concept within the study of mass politics. Both Kinder (chapter 11) and Klandermans (chapter 19) discuss the uses of frames by political elites and social movement leaders to shape public opinion on an issue or key problem. And McGraw reviews politicians' attempts and success at manipulating their public image. But this is a relatively new approach to political behavior that is ripe for further development.

One tension within political psychology concerns the relative emphasis on the stability, as opposed to the changeability, of attitudes and behavior. Research in a number of areas has begun to address this divide. For example, research on threat highlights the way in which an external stimulus can provoke the application of a preexisting belief such as authoritarianism (Duckitt) or strengthen a preexisting group attachment (Huddy). This interaction between people and situations provides a more compelling psychological view of the political process that accounts for variations in political attitudes and behavior across situations, and provides a potentially useful framework for future research.

▲ **Alternative Theories**

One particularly vexing question is whether there is an alternative to psychological theories of politics. It is obvious that there is no single accepted theory of human psychology. Whether we could ever develop such a theory, whether the barriers to it are potentially surmountable with greater research or are inherent in the complex and changing nature of human behavior, is as yet unanswerable. But at least as basic is the question of whether we can ever have a sensible theory that is completely nonpsychological.

At first glance, it would seem that important and indeed dominant theories in political science have no place for psychology of any kind. This

would seem to be true for theories that can be labeled materialist in that they argue that people pursue material self-interest (most obviously in the form of wealth) by the means that are best designed to reach those objectives at lowest cost. The obvious categories of theories here are rational choice and game theory.

The question is not whether theories like this are correct or not but a more conceptual one of whether they can be considered nonpsychological. We do not think that they can be. While they embody a psychology that is different from and perhaps simpler than that portrayed in the literatures reviewed in this book, they still rest on assumptions, usually implicit, about how people think and feel. Interests stem from what people value, and while these may be material, few can be understood without some sort of psychology. While human survival requires a minimal level of food and protection, most human behavior cannot be encompassed in these terms, and people seek much more than this. Most materialist theories take people's values, goals, and preferences as a given. This is not foolish, since no theory can explore everything. But it should not lead us to forget that explaining these things is a central part of social science and it is hard to see how this could be done without some form of psychology. Furthermore, the psychology almost certainly would have a large social component to it, because values and preferences stem in part from how people are socialized and take form in imitation, response to, and reaction against what others value and seek.

Preferences do not automatically lead to behavior, of course. To know how people will act in order to reach their goals, we have to know what their means-ends beliefs are. For example, knowing that a national leader desires peace cannot explain her behavior without also explaining how she thought it could be obtained. To say that politicians are primarily motivated to remain in power, as is assumed in rational choice theories, does not tell us what they think they need to do to reach this objective. Strategies and lines of policy are rarely obvious, which is shown by the twin facts that they are often hotly disputed and the ones pursued frequently turn out to be in error. Voters and elite decision-makers who want certain outcomes have to decide what policies are most likely to reach them. Debates about whether they are rational or not at best scratch the surface and at worst are misleading because there is no single rational way to go about their tasks.

The role of psychology is even clearer—although often overlooked—in contexts such as international politics, where we are dealing with small numbers of actors that are engaged in strategic interaction. That is, the outcome depends not on what each actor does separately but on the interaction of actors' behaviors, and each sets her behavior anticipating what the other will do, knowing that the other is engaged in a similar exercise. This is the essence of game theory. But far from being antithetical to psychology, game theory is highly psychological, as its best practitioners fully understand

(Kreps, 1990; O'Neill, 1999; Schelling, 1960). Each side has to develop expectations about what the other will do. There is no way to separate these processes into strategic and psychological parts, let alone to oppose a strategic theory to a psychological one. Rather, psychology and strategy are conjoined.

In general, rational choice or "positive theory" or "formal theory" approaches seek to model human behavior in mathematical terms, presupposing "rational" behavior based on maximizing material self-interest. This has in turn inspired efforts to identify psychological factors that cause people to behave inconsistently from rational choice, whether in individual decision-making (see especially Lau and Levy) or in interaction (see Kelman & Fisher, chapter 10).

▲ *Other Disciplines*

We do not mean to imply that the field of political psychology simply borrows its ideas from psychology. Krosnick and McGraw (2002; Krosnick, 2002) argue that political psychologists have much to contribute to the development of psychological theory by refining theories so that their predictions generalize beyond a laboratory setting. This potential is evident throughout the chapters of this handbook.

Moreover, other disciplines have made important contributions to political psychology. As the preceding section implies, economics has made the important contribution of providing a major alternative to psychological approaches. Sociology has especially provided models for collective behavior (see, Klandermans chapter 19, and Staub & Bar-Tal, chapter 20), and social structural analyses both of institutional behavior (see Ichilov, chapter 18) and of individual behavior, especially in the area of intergroup relations (see Huddy, chapter 15, Sidanius & Kurzban, chapter 5, and Duckitt, chapter 16). The field of communications has provided analyses of rhetoric and discourse that can help to explain elite rhetoric (see Billig, chapter 7). And the field of history has provided a great deal of grist for the political psychologist's mill, whether in the form of psychodynamic (George & George, 1956) or cognitive (Jervis, 1976; Larson, 1985) studies of individuals or studies of the behavior of small (Janis, 1982) and large (Volkman, 1988) groups.

One particularly noteworthy feature of political psychology is how much of its theoretical and empirical content has been stimulated by the search for explanations of events that occur in the real political world, not just the posing and testing of abstract academic theories. The regularly scheduled American national elections have stimulated much of the work on voting behavior, just as the Cold War stimulated much of the work on foreign policy decision-making and international relations.

▲ *Organization of This Book*

Part I of this book focuses on psychological theories themselves. This part includes basic psychological theories and their application to decision-making, childhood and adult development, personality, evolutionary psychology, the study of emotion, and a discourse analysis approach to rhetoric. Then we move to the substantive focus of different areas of political psychological research that tend to cut across theoretical approaches. In Part II we start with elite behavior in the area of international relations focusing on models of foreign policy decision-making, strategic interaction, and conflict resolution. Part III focuses on the interplay of elites and masses, through the media and voters' responses to political candidates. Part IV focuses on mass political behavior, including an analysis of political reasoning, the role of values, intergroup relations, and the political role of gender. Part V considers collective behavior: the effects of civic education, collective political action, and the effects of politics on the larger society. And the epilogue offers with some observations by one of the pioneers of political psychology, Robert E. Lane, who ponders the differences just alluded to between psychological and economic approaches to the analysis of political behavior.

Before closing, we also want to refer the reader with a further interest in political psychology to several other more specialized books with different goals from our own but somewhat similar titles. This handbook is intended as a comprehensive statement of the current state of knowledge in political psychology. Three other books (Kuklinski [2002b]; Monroe [2000], and Renshon and Duckitt [2000]) do not attempt such comprehensive overviews of research in specific subfields of political psychology. Rather, each has two more specific goals. Each includes essays reviewing the research programs of a few selected authors. Each also includes essays expressing opinions about how political psychological research ought to be done. The latter also presents examples of research at the intersection of political psychology and culture; for example, from Japan, Latin America, the Middle East, eastern Europe, and so on. Each would be of more value to political psychologists who want thoughtful perspectives on the field as a whole than to scholars seeking a current assessment of knowledge of the field, or to beginning researchers. Finally, Kuklinski (2002a) contains chapters from researchers describing their own research. This book too does not aspire to be comprehensive about the field of political psychology; each essay describes a specific research program rather than canvassing an entire topical area.

In other words, despite the similarities in titles, this handbook has a quite different purpose, and value, from these other recent books. This handbook is intended as the primary reference source to the many different fields under the umbrella topic of "political psychology."

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