# Political Psychology

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# **Political Psychology**

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Political psychology is an interdisciplinary academic field combining political science with psychology and drawing on a broad range of disciplines, such as anthropology, biology, communications, economics, genetics, and sociology. Research in political psychology aims at understanding, explaining, and predicting the effects of psychological dynamics, political structures, and political processes in broad social and historical contexts on political behavior, political decision-making, intergroup and intragroup relations and other political phenomena such as elections, political protest, violence, conflict, and terrorism. In addressing the ways in which political institutions both affect and are affected by human behavior, political psychology assumes a bidirectional relationship between psychology and politics: not only do our emotions, motivations, and cognitions influence political behavior, but also political systems and dynamics affect our psychological states (Hermann, 1986; Huddy, Sears, & Levy, 2013; Jost & Sidanius, 2004).

The key areas of research of political psychology are represented by the 14 sections of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP). These include:

- 1 Identity Politics and the Politics of Immigration.
- 2 Conflict, Violence, and Terrorism.
- 3 Intergroup Relations.
- 4 Leadership Personality and Elite Decision Making.
- 5 Public Opinion.
- 6 Political Communication.
- 7 Political Culture, Identity, and Religion.
- 8 Political Behavior and Electoral Participation.
- 9 Civic Engagement and Social Change.
- 10 Democracy, Civic Development, and Moral Politics.
- 11 International Relations and Foreign Policy.
- 12 New Theoretical and Methodological Development.
- 13 Biology, Genetics, and Neuroscience.
- 14 Clinical Political Psychology.

## Origin and evolution of the field

Deeply rooted in age-old philosophical ideas, the first steps in the field's evolution toward independence have only taken place in the interwar period. The conception of

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political psychology as an academic subdiscipline may be credited to Oxford historian G. B. Grundy, in his 1917 paper titled Political psychology: A science which has yet to be created (Rudmin, 2005). It was University of Chicago political scientist Charles Edward Merriam (1925), however, that was the first to explicitly call for the union of politics and psychological research, describing psychology as "sympathetic" to political science. Meanwhile, in 1924, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University, created the first chair in Social and Political Psychology in honor of social psychologist Floyd Allport, who later became the first to teach a course titled Political Psychology (Katz, 1979). A decade later, the German periodical Zeitschrift für politische psychologie und sexualökonomie (Journal of Political Psychology and Sexual Economy) was published, becoming the first western language journal employing the term political psychology in its title (Van Ginneken, 1988). Although some studies on personality and politics, particularly psychoanalytic and biographical studies of political leaders, have been published in the 1920s (Cottam, Dietz-Uhler, Mastors & Preston, 2010), most scholars maintain that the discipline has started to take on a life of its own only in the 1940s.

## Evolution of political psychology

William McGuire (1993) characterized the modern evolution of political psychology as progressing through three eras: The first era (1940s – 1950s) was dominated by research on personality and culture, particularly authoritarian personality and historical approaches to mass psychology, political elites, and leadership. The post-World War II period also brought about increasing fascination with political persuasion and the uses of propaganda, leading to the development of new public polling techniques (Jost & Sidanius, 2004). According to Sullivan, Rahn, and Rudolph (2002), researchers' approach at this time was mainly psychoanalytic, either explicitly or implicitly, and outside influences came mainly from psychiatrists and anthropologists. This is evident in the work of scholars such as Robert Lane, James David Barber, Fred Greenstein, and Harold D. Lasswell, who later became known as one of the pioneers of the study of political psychology, with books such as Psychopathology and Politics, published in 1930, and Power and Personality, published in 1948. Other notable works in this era include John Duckitt, Theodor Adorno, Bob Altemeyer and their colleagues' research on the authoritarian personality, Henry Murray's works on personality and leadership, Herbert McClosky's work on political conservatism and personality, Pitirim Sorokin's analysis of western culture, and David Riesman's works on culture and politics. Over time, the emphasis of psychological and political behaviorists on quantification and understanding of scholarly "rigor," led many scholars to reject the psychoanalytic orientation in favor of a more behaviorist approach (Deutsch & Kinnvall, 2002).

This development has marked the beginning of the second era in political psychology (1960s and 1970s), in which many academic psychologists and political scientists shifted their focus to the study of belief systems, attitudes, and voting behavior. The field was dominated by "rational actor" models, according to which cost-benefit considerations are key to political behavior and decision-making. During this period, outside influences on this field came primarily from sociology and communication theorists.

Prototypical of psycho-political research in this era are the works of Paul Lazarsfeld and Angus Campbell on elections and voting behavior, Robert Lane's work on ideological attitudes, and Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba's studies on political participation.

The third era of political psychology (1980s-1990s) emphasized the systematic study of human cognition and information processing, mostly because of the success of the "cognitive science" revolution (Sullivan et al., 2002). Specifically, since the 1980s, research has been dominated by questions on how individuals perceive, store, process, recall, and use information from their political environment. It was then that political psychologists started to criticize the popular rational choice models of political behavior and of international relations, by including the effects of biases, heuristics, emotions, and symbolic reactions to the understanding of political decision-making. Political psychologists' emphasis on both affect and cognition, and their collaborations with cognitive scientists and decision theorists, led to the development of promising lines of inquiry, reconciling psychology-based and rational-choice models of decision-making. This newly found interest in political cognition is evident in Daniel Kahneman, Amos Tversky, and Robert Jervis's publications on cognitive heuristics and biases, Margaret Hermann's analysis of elite decision-making, Philip Tetlock's work on cognitive complexity, George Marcus and his colleagues' research on emotions and decision-making, Herbert Simon's studies on bounded rationality, and Irving Janis' work on group decision-making.

By the second and third eras of political psychology, a critical mass of political psychologists finally existed, which led to the rapid institutionalization of the field: By the beginning of the 1970s, with support from the National Science Foundation, Yale created a program leading to a joint doctorate program in psychology and politics. Other universities in the United States quickly followed, among them SUNY – Stony Brook in 1979, the University of Wisconsin in 1982, CUNY in 1988, UCLA and UC Irvine in 1989, and Ohio State University in 1990.

Other important steps toward disciplinary legitimacy were the publication of the first handbook in political psychology (Knutson, 1973), the establishment of the International Society of Political Psychology in 1978, and the foundation of its official journal, Political Psychology, in 1980. It was only then that the bidirectional nature of political psychology was explicitly acknowledged (Hermann, 1986). As Lasswell's work was primarily psychoanalytically oriented, his great influence on the field led scholars in the discipline's first decades to focus primarily on the effects of psychology on politics. By the 1980s, however, attention has gradually shifted to the effects of political processes on psychological processes (Ward, 2002). According to Cottam and colleagues (2010), the third era was also characterized by an increased interest in the study of international affairs, including nuclear deterrence, wars, nationalism, ethnic conflict, and collective trauma. Notable works in these areas include Seymour Lipset's studies on political stability, the work of Robert Jervis, Richard Lebow, Janice Stein, and Bruce Russett on deterrence, Daniel Frei's research on the cognitive barriers to disarmament, and studies on the psychology of violence by Herbert Kelman and V. Lee Hemilton, Stanley Milgram, and Robert Jay Lifton.

In *Political Psychology: Key Reading*, Jost and Sidanius (2004) speculate a possible fourth era, which begins in the 1990s. Although the first three eras of political

psychology have focused mainly on intrapersonal topics—personality, attitudes, and ideologies—most research in the fourth era of political psychology focuses on interpersonal processes, primarily intergroup relations. Naturally, these new developments did not entirely supplant previous ones. In fact, like in many other fields in the social sciences, growth of this field involved frequent shifting of its popular topics, methods, and theories, all of which are studied by contemporary political psychologists. Thus, not only did the interests of the previous eras not disappear, but they are now part of a much wider array of issues covered by the field.

## Themes and applications

The long affair between political science and psychology is well documented in both the political and the psychological literature. The definition of political psychology as a subfield, however, remains controversial. Huddy, Sears, and Levy (2013) define political psychology as an application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics. Bar-Tal (2003) similarly claims that what makes political psychologists unique is their use of psychological knowledge to analyze political issues. In support of this proposition, Huddy and colleagues (2013) provide a long list of psychological approaches that have been applied to the study of political processes. For example, psychological studies of personality are applied to research on mass and elite political behavior, behaviorist learning theories to the analysis of mass political attitudes such as mass communication effects; developmental theories to political socialization processes; incentive theories to the study of mass political behaviors such as collective action and violence; social cognition theories to the study of electoral behavior and mass communications, political reasoning, and political information processing; and intergroup relations theories to the study of prejudice, stereotyping, and intergroup conflict.

Although this characterization of the field is quite common among scholars and students of the discipline, the question of whether political psychology is merely applied psychology has been the subject of much debate (Schildkraut, 2004). In defense of the field, some political psychologists emphasize that most political-psychological research integrates insights from psychology and political science. In fact, some psychological phenomena, such as stereotyping, prejudice, group conflict, and political leadership, are inherently political and cannot be examined fully outside their political context. As Huddy and colleagues (2013) note, most political science theories are essentially psychological in that they rest on implicit assumptions about the cognitive and emotional mechanisms underlying political behavior and decision-making. Furthermore, they argue, political psychological research can even shed light on basic psychological concepts, such as motivated reasoning.

Other political psychologists maintain that even if the characterization is apt, attempts to apply psychological theories to political contexts are no less rigorous than other forms of political science research (Schildkraut, 2004). As Krosnick and McGraw (2002) argue because political science aims to deepen our understanding of political phenomena, any research that contributes to this endeavor is of value, even if it is based applying psychological theories to political settings. One such contribution is

the incorporation of psychology-based concepts, variables and theories into rational choice models. Indeed, psychological research has offered experimental evidence for deviations from rational decision-making. Nevertheless, by identifying numerous psychological factors that cause people to behave inconsistently from rational choice models, political psychology not only complements, but also augments some rational choice predictions (Mintz, Geva, Redd & Carnes, 1997; Schildkraut, 2004).

Research in political psychology is not only theoretically rigorous but also has practical relevance. Aside from deepening our understanding of political phenomenon and posing and testing theoretical concepts, political psychology also aims to offer specific recommendations to the resolution of particular political problems, such as conflicts, protests, and terrorism. In fact, Crenshaw (2002) argues that the most important contribution of political psychology lies in its applicability to real-life political problems and policy issues, such as ethno-nationalist conflict, terrorism, and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. Drawing on empirical findings and theoretical developments, political psychologists can point political leaders and policy-makers to decision-making models, offer paths to conflict resolution that might bring bitter enemies to the bargaining table, and suggest campaign managers and strategic consultants useful models of political marketing and voting behavior.

In the course of its development, the discipline has seen the rise and demise of many theories and approaches analyzing political behavior and decision-making. Thus, any attempt to account for the full range of research areas in the field will only reflect one's subjective perspective and location among the wide range of research agendas. Some researchers focus on elite behavior (power motivations, charismatic leadership, psycho-biography, decision-making, bargaining, etc.), whereas others study behavior at the mass level (obedience, participation, political violence, socialization, beliefs systems, mass communication, etc.). Some emphasize personality and motivational psychology, and others focus on the cognitive mechanisms underlying political behavior.

Notwithstanding the differences in foci and research interests, political psychologists of all specialties share the central concern with understanding human nature and the relationship between human nature and its effects on political processes. The main questions in the field, whether they focus on elites or masses, attitudes or behavior, and emotion or reason, are all based on the belief that political actors—their beliefs, past life experiences and personalities—are at least somewhat significant in determining political outcomes. In the past two decades such leading theories as social identity theory (Tajfel & Terner, 1979), system justification theory (Jost & Hunyady, 2002), social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1993), terror management theory (Greenberg, Solomon, & Pyszczynski, 1986), politicized collective identity (Simon & Klandermans, 2001), poliheuristic theory and polythink (Mintz & DeRouen, 2010) have received considerable attention in the literature in the field.

# The fifth era of research in the field: Broadening political psychology

While Sidanius and Jost (2004) suggested a fourth era in political psychology, this section extends their idea to suggest that we are currently entering a fifth era in the field, in which political psychology broadens into three new areas of research:

- 1 Biology, genetics, and neuroscience
- 2 Clinical political psychology (CPP)
- 3 Behavioral political psychology (BPP)

## Biology, genetics, and neuroscience

In an article published in *Political Psychology*, Peter Hatemi and Rose McDermott (2012) called for broadening political psychology to include cognitive neuroscience and neuropsychology, physiological psychology, genetics, and endocrinological and psychopharmacological approaches and methods in the study of political behavior, political decision-making, political leadership, and political action. These approaches hold great promise for a more comprehensive and complete understanding of political psychology by explicitly incorporating, for example, "neurobiological aspects of human nature into future models of political attitude and action" (Hatemi & McDermott, 2012, p. 21).

Indeed, a special issue of *Political Psychology*, published in June 2012, was dedicated to the political psychology of biology, genetics, and behavior. Such classical topics in political science as ideology, voter turnout, candidate evaluation, public opinion, and race attitudes and stereotyping were studied using neurobiological and other innovative approaches. Examples of topics studied, include an fMRI analysis of negative stereotyping, race attitudes and norm violation (Schreiber & Iacoboni, 2012), predicting voter decision-making and election outcomes based on nonfacial aspects of candidates' appearance (Spezio, Loesch, Gosselin, Mattes & Alvarez, 2012), explaining voter turnout based on heritability in a twin study (Loewen & Dawes 2012), studying the link between public opinion and evolutionary psychology (Peterson, Sznycer, Cosmides, & Tooby, 2012), and the relations between psychological predispositions and political ideology (Verhulst, Hatemi, & Eaves, 2012). The American Political Science Review has also recently held a debate on the subject of genetics and politics. Broadening political psychology to include these areas will require, however, "a change in training and incentive structures," including changes in the curriculum and in the way we educate graduate students (Hatemi & McDermott, 2012, p. 22).

#### Clinical political psychology

Another promising yet neglected approach to political psychology is clinical political psychology (CPP). For example, clinical studies that address the effect of trauma in

conflict areas, the short- and long-term impact of war on children's anxiety, depression, social skills, whether it is in the Kongo, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, Israel, Egypt, and other war-affected areas. Thus far, most of political psychology dealt with the effect of psychological factors on political behavior. Yet the effect of conflict, terrorism, social protest, riots and demonstrations on the psychology of human beings is critical to understanding political psychology as well, and serves as a promising avenue for research.

#### Behavioral political psychology

Another meta-approach that is likely to receive a lot of attention in the next decade or so is what is called, behavioral political science (BPS) or behavioral political psychology (BPP). BPS is defined as "everything that is not rational choice" (Mintz, Taber, Valentino, & Wayne, 2015). The approach includes the role of framing and counterframing, analogies, biases, emotions, morality, culture, leadership psychology, leadership style and personality, and information processing in the study of intergroup and intragroup relations and politics. Traditional dependent variables such as conflict, terrorism, violence, race, immigration, and attitudes will continue to attract considerable attentions. However, whereas these topics have dominated research in the past few decades, BPP is likely to receive even more attention in a globalized and interdependent world, with the rapid expansion of Internet technology and global movements toward the recognition same sex-marriage and gay rights that open up new avenues for research.

#### **Conclusion**

Five decades since taking its first steps as a unique academic field, political psychology is an established interdisciplinary field with its own professional association (ISPP), organized sections within the American Political Science Association and the International Political Science Association, its own journals (*Political Psychology* and *Advances in Political Psychology*), a summer academy and summer schools, and undergraduate and graduate courses and programs. Dedicated to the analysis of the interrelationships between psychological and political processes, the field of political psychology now attracts scholars from a diverse range of disciplines, including political science, psychology, neuroscience, biology, economics, history, international relations, philosophy, sociology, and communication.

The ever-growing interest in the topics addressed by political psychologists is reflected in the large number of books published in the field, in the marked increase in the number of submissions to *Political Psychology*, and in political psychologists' increased involvement in real-life processes of policy-making. By broadening the scope of research in political psychology to include biological, behavioral, and clinical approaches, political psychology is expected to make a huge contribution not only to the understanding of political processes but also to the understanding of basic psychological science.

SEE ALSO: Emotion in Politics; Foreign Policy Analysis; Ideology; Leadership, Political; Political Cognition; Public Opinion; Social Movements.

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