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Encyclopedia of Psychology: "Political Psychology"

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POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

Political psychology is an interdisciplinary academic specialty focusing on the study of psychological processes that influence political behavior. Accordingly, a more precise label for the discipline might be the psychology of politics or psychological political science.

Contemporary political psychology draws from all cognate areas of psychology, with the strongest emphasis on social, cognitive, personality, and developmental psychology, motivation and emotion, and cognitive neuroscience. It also draws abundantly from its other parent discipline, political science, including the field of international relations. Furthermore, it has ties with political communication, economics, philosophy, sociology, and other related disciplines.

Development as an Organized Discipline

Scholarly interest in the impact of psychological processes on political behavior is as old as psychology itself. However, as an organized discipline—marked by the founding of the International Society of Political Psychology (ISPP) just three decades ago, in 1978—political psychology is comparatively young.

As stated on its web site (www.ispp.org), the ISPP is a nonprofit, nonpartisan, academic, scientific, and educational organization that aims “to establish a community of scholars and concerned individuals in universities, government, the communications media, and elsewhere who have scientific and practical interests in examining the relationship between political and psychological phenomena; to facilitate communication of scientific research, theory, and practice across disciplinary, national, and ideological boundaries; [and] to increase the theoretical and practical significance of political psychology both inside and outside academia.”

The formal establishment of this emerging field was heralded by the *Handbook of Political Psychology*, edited by Jeanne N. Knutson (1973), founder of the ISPP. *The Psychology of Politics*, by William F. Stone (1974), represented the first attempt to produce a text specifically for courses in political psychology, although few such courses existed at the time. Today, courses in political psychology are offered at universities around the world. The ISPP journal, *Political Psychology*, “dedicated to the analysis of the interrelationships between psychological and political processes,” was first published in 1980, further consolidating political psychology as a self-conscious academic enterprise. Landmark publications of the 1980s included *Political Psychology*, edited by Margaret G. Hermann (1986), and David O. Sears’s (1987) article “Political Psychology” in the *Annual Review of Psychology*.

In 1991, the Ohio State University, with support from the ISPP, launched the first annual Summer Institute

in Political Psychology (SIPP), an intensive program of study for graduate students, directed by Margaret G. Hermann. The program moved to Stanford University in 2005, under the direction of Jon A. Krosnick. In response to the burgeoning growth of political psychology in its first two decades, the ISPP formulated a “third decade plan” that included commissioning a new handbook for the psychology of politics, as well as a periodic volume to report theoretical advances, conceptual breakthroughs, and cutting-edge research. Consequently, the Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology was published in 2003, edited by David O. Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis, followed by the first issue of *Advances in Political Psychology*, edited by Margaret G. Hermann (2004).

Areas of Inquiry

As political psychology is an emerging field, its subject matter is still in a state of flux. However, a review of books in the field and the organizational framework of recent programs of the ISPP’s annual scientific meeting reveal a common core of overlapping topics and specialties.

Cognition, Affect, and Motivation in Politics. Traditionally, much of the research in this area has focused on political decision making. A more recent trend is the growing interest in cognitive neuroscience and the role of emotion in politics.

Political Socialization. This area examines political development across the life span, including the development of political identity, ideological resonance, attitudes, and values.

Political Personality and Leadership. This domain of research focuses on what political scientists refer to as political elites. Areas of interest include psychodynamically oriented personality profiling and psychobiography; the analysis of personality or leadership styles, traits, and types; the motivational profiles of leaders; and structural and stylistic aspects of cognitive variables pertaining to the political behavior of individual leaders.

Political Participation. The focus of this area is the political behavior of ordinary citizens, referred to by political scientists as mass politics. It includes the study of political communication; impression formation; public opinion and the media; voting behavior; political cynicism, activism, and alienation; and political attitudes, values, and ideology.

Intergroup Relations. Topics at the forefront of this area include social identity, prejudice and stereotyping, intergroup conflict, and conflict resolution.

International Relations. This area, more closely related to political science than to psychology, examines psychological processes in foreign policy behavior,

including topics such as perception (and misperception) in international politics, international negotiation, and more recently, globalization.

Political Stability and Change. This is a broad area of study, including topics such as democracy, civic engagement, social movements, collective action, social justice, war and peace, genocide, and terrorism.

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