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# All Politics is Psychological: A Review of Political Psychology Syllabi

Deborah J. Schildkraut

Browsing the book exhibit room at any major political science conference these days, one notices what seems to be a bonanza of new edited volumes that examine political psychology as a discipline within political science or provide a variety of research essays aimed at introducing the reader to the subfield.<sup>1</sup> Although psychology has always been an important component of political analysis, the prevalence of these books suggests a growing, or renewed, interest among political scientists in using insights from social and cognitive psychology to understand political phenomena—an interest that spurs these scholarly attempts to demarcate the conceptual and methodological structure of political psychology as a subfield. As Wendy Rahn, John Sullivan, and Thomas Rudolph have noted, this interest has emerged over the years partly in response to the rise of rational choice theory in political science.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of the specific topic at hand, political psychology research often challenges the assumptions of rational choice models and adds nuance to the insights of rational choice theory. It offers rigorous empirical demonstrations of how systematic and predictable psychological processes affect whether traditional assumptions of rationality do or do not hold and, conversely, how the structure of political institutions affects psychological processes. These empirical critiques and modifications of rational choice theory make political psychology a compelling line of inquiry to scholars from a variety of methodological and substantive backgrounds.

Accompanying these attempts to locate the subfield's identity is what seems to be a rise in the number of political psychology course offerings at the graduate and, especially, undergraduate levels.<sup>3</sup> In this essay, I examine a set of these syllabi in order to assess the state of the subfield. I considered a total of 27 syllabi (from 21 institutions—14 public, 7 private), nearly all of which were sent to me by the staff at *Perspectives*.<sup>4</sup> Twenty-two were undergraduate

courses, and five were graduate courses, all aimed at providing a general overview of the field. In the following discussion, I do not analyze the graduate and undergraduate courses separately. For the most part, there were few differences between the two, save for the volume of reading and scope of assignments.<sup>5</sup>

The time constraints of a semester (or quarter) and limited technical training of many students (especially undergraduates) will always lead to some disjuncture between the material we assign and the full breadth and depth of research developments within the field. Nonetheless, this set of syllabi serves as a useful entry point for evaluating the state of the field and how we teach it. In general, the syllabi are unified by a central concern for understanding the relationship between human nature and political phenomena. This age-old preoccupation is studied in an impressive variety of ways, which presents challenges of substantive coherence and syllabus design. The challenge of coherence also presents itself when assessing the extent to which political psychology “simply” borrows insights from psychology and applies them to political contexts. The content in the syllabi reveals some tension between the parent disciplines, but as I argue below, it does not necessarily have serious pedagogical consequences. What does have pedagogical consequences, however, is whether departments treat political psychology as a distinct subfield. Most institutions do not, and the result is a heavy U.S. focus in the classroom. Whether this U.S.-centric slant is a problem and, if so, how we might address it is something those of us who teach political psychology courses should consider, and I offer some suggestions in this regard. Despite these challenges, the syllabi I examined suggest that there is a pretty good match between what political psychologists do and what they teach. After examining these syllabi, one appreciates most of all the dynamism and energy of a subfield in a sophisticated and productive stage of its development.<sup>6</sup>

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## The Challenge of Scope

Political psychology, as a formal subfield, is a relative newcomer to political science. But the questions political psychologists explore have been around for centuries, if not

millennia. As George Marcus notes, “[E]ngaging this field is a challenge as it can be claimed that every variant of politics has at least some political psychological dimension.”<sup>7</sup> David Sears, Leonie Huddy, and Robert Jervis maintain that nearly all politics and political science theories are psychological at root because they “rest on assumptions, usually implicit, about how people think and feel.”<sup>8</sup>

Nearly every syllabus in political psychology begins by commenting on the vastness of the field. Because the questions political psychologists explore touch on practically every aspect of politics, the “bewildering diversity” of alternatives available when it comes to choosing topics and readings is daunting.<sup>9</sup> As Marcus notes, “[T]he challenge of constructing a first course in political psychology is made difficult with so many choices as to the theoretical approach, method, and substantive areas of application.”<sup>10</sup> Likewise, Margaret Hermann observes, “[I]t has been difficult to arrive at a consensus about the nature of the field and how to train its future professionals.”<sup>11</sup> Consequently, most attempts at creating a textbook for survey courses have failed to produce volumes that garner widespread acceptance. The closest thing to a textbook political psychologists seem to have had in recent years is *Explorations in Political Psychology*, edited by Shanto Iyengar and William McGuire.<sup>12</sup> But only 4 of the 27 courses I examined assigned most of it.<sup>13</sup> It seems that the rich variety of potential readings inclines us to find existing texts inadequate and leads to frustration for teachers. Our embarrassment of riches has also, I presume, contributed to the recent wave of edited volumes. As more and more undergraduate courses are taught, the desire for the perfect text grows stronger.

The main questions in the field, whether they focus on elites or masses, attitudes or behavior, emotion or reason, all come back to a central concern with understanding human nature and the relationship between human nature and political processes. Specifically, the dominant research agendas include: determining what factors and conditions (including the media, candidate messages, memory, information flows, perceptions of risk, emotions, and personality) affect decision making for both leaders and citizens; identifying and seeking means to reduce stereotypes and prejudice; uncovering the roots of, and aiming to lessen, group conflict; understanding how attitudes and environment affect behavior, especially with regard to mass-scale violence and genocide; studying the effect of personality types on attitudes and behavior; and understanding how where we come from (i.e., culture and family) affects who we are, and how we can alter the way our personal histories affect our behavior. In layperson’s terms, much of political psychology asks, “Why do people think such horrible things about one another, why do they do such horrible things to one another, and what can political actors and institutions do to ameliorate these horrible thoughts and actions and make them less common?” Otherwise, the field also concerns itself with evaluating citizen competence and under-

standing how people make more mundane decisions about politics. All of the syllabi I examined are concerned with these general themes to varying degrees.

### **“Merely” Applied Psychology?**

The first sentence of *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology*, one of the new edited volumes, defines political psychology as “an application of what is known about human psychology to the study of politics.”<sup>14</sup> The editors who penned this definition make no apologies for characterizing the subfield as an application of another discipline’s theories to political science, yet the question of whether political psychology is merely applied psychology is one that political psychologists have debated for some time. Defenders of the subfield tend to offer two responses to the applied psychology critique. First, a significant amount of political psychology research addresses topics that truly require us to *blend* insights from psychology and political science. Second, even when the characterization is apt, merely applying psychological theories to political contexts is still a valuable endeavor for political science.<sup>15</sup> The validity of both responses is evident when surveying the scholarship and topics covered in the syllabi.

#### ***The first response: Psychology is necessary but insufficient***

Certain phenomena with psychological dimensions are inherently political and simply cannot be examined fully outside their political context. Mass violence is one such phenomenon. Many political psychologists attempt to understand how and why leaders, institutions, and individual citizens develop practices that result in violence on a massive scale and seek to determine the kinds of political structures that might decrease the likelihood of genocide and violence. No such attempt can succeed if it does not address the complex interactions between human nature and political struggles over power and resources.

The transition from stereotyped beliefs and prejudice to group violence can be disturbingly swift. Indeed, the relative ease with which seemingly normal, well-adjusted people participate in heinous acts of violence motivates many political psychologists’ research agendas. Accordingly, the study of “extreme politics,” “destructive obedience,” and “good versus evil” garners substantial attention in our courses, appearing in 17 (63 percent) of the syllabi I examined. Several of these courses teach classic studies of obedience, including Stanley Milgram’s famously disturbing experiments in which subjects administer electric shocks to other subjects despite their cries of pain. As is well known, Milgram’s own motivation was to understand how the atrocities of the Holocaust could have happened. Many courses also examine the role personality plays in shaping whether people have a psychological need to defer to authority and simultaneously to dominate others. Several readings on this

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“authoritarian personality” are used, though Bob Altemeyer’s work on right-wing authoritarianism is the most common.<sup>16</sup> Not surprisingly, case studies serve as a primary means for analyzing the psychology of mass violence. Common case studies include the Holocaust, mass rape in Bosnia, the Rwandan genocide, disappearances in Argentina, the Cambodian genocide, and the My Lai massacre in Vietnam.<sup>17</sup> These studies examine how difficult life conditions, political culture, personality dimensions, institutional design, particular leaders, and other psychological, political, and economic factors combine to create the conditions under which mass violence may occur.

In addition to examining this “continuum of destruction”—the psychological and contextual conditions that lead people down the path of mass violence—instructors also use case studies to examine two other sets of actors during violent times: bystanders and altruists.<sup>18</sup> Ervin Staub, in particular, highlights the importance of individual (e.g., rescuers) and institutional (e.g., the United Nations) bystanders in affecting the scope of atrocities, noting that only a few bystanders need to act in order to disrupt the continuum of destruction. Once they act in ways that challenge the legitimacy of the perpetrators’ actions, they are no longer bystanders, of course. In standing up to injustice, individual bystanders can transform into heroes. As such, the study of altruistic behavior often accompanies the study of destructive behavior. In our courses, human nature at its worst is often paired with human nature at its best. Half of the courses that examine group violence also examine altruism, primarily with Kristen Monroe’s exploration of human nature through interviews with rescuers during the Holocaust, heroes, and philanthropists.<sup>19</sup>

Research on stereotyping, prejudice, and group conflict—key precursors to mass violence—provides another example of how blending insights from both psychology and political science is necessary in order to understand certain political phenomena, and it too accounts for a substantial portion of the material covered in many political psychology courses. Twenty-three (85 percent) of the syllabi cover topics related to stereotypes and identity in some form, with racial and ethnic concerns topping the agenda. Most instructors jump right in to racial and ethnic stereotypes (a handful also include gender), without examining the more general phenomenon of stereotype formation and the various psychological needs that stereotyping fulfills. A few do consider the instinctual and cognitive economizing aspects of stereotype formation absent the complications of real-world racial and ethnic politics. But in general, students seem to be learning about the psychological mechanisms involved in stereotyping as a byproduct of studying the dynamics of stereotypes in the realm of race and ethnicity. I suspect this conflation of process and context derives largely from the centrality of the context to our academic interest in stereotyping in the first place and from the realization that in order to reduce the role that harmful stereo-

types play in everyday politics, we need to understand both the basic apolitical cognitive function of stereotyping and the ways in which stereotypes are used by political elites, the media, and other institutions.

The debate about symbolic racism in the United States is by far the most common topic covered in the area of stereotype formation and change and the effects of stereotypes on policy preferences. The symbolic racism argument maintains that prejudicial beliefs today are no longer grounded in beliefs about biological inferiority but rather in the belief that minorities, specifically blacks, violate cherished American norms, such as the work ethic and self-reliance. The “symbolic racist” feels that structural barriers to equality in the United States have been removed, and that enduring gaps between blacks and whites in achieving “the good life” must therefore be the fault of blacks themselves. Such perceptions lead to resentment toward blacks and to opposition to government policies aimed at reducing racial inequalities.<sup>20</sup> The symbolic racism argument has been critiqued from multiple angles. Some scholars contend that conflict over resources and status drives racial attitudes. Others charge that racism today is the same as racism of old, and that symbolic racism scholars unjustifiably conflate old-fashioned racism with ideological conservatism. Still others argue that humans, by nature, inevitably form group-based hierarchies that result in institutions and cultural practices perpetuating domination and oppression—a theory known as social dominance.<sup>21</sup> Various aspects of this debate are covered in 12 (44 percent) of the syllabi.<sup>22</sup>

Racial and ethnic stereotypes involve assessing groups rather than individuals. The process of forming a sense of one’s own self vis-à-vis salient groups in society and the effects of that self-identification on beliefs constitutes another core component of some courses. The main theories covered include social dominance, realistic group conflict theory, the minimal group paradigm, and social identity theory. No single set of readings, however, dominates.<sup>23</sup> The central debates in these units are whether group identities are a cause or consequence of group conflict and the extent to which group identities are malleable. Ten courses (37 percent) cover the chicken-and-egg problem we encounter when trying to untangle the relationship between group identity formation and group conflict.

In this area, unlike with stereotyping, we often teach the psychological phenomena distinct from racial and ethnic contexts and then consider particular case studies. In fact, many of the insights into group identity and group conflict that are taught in the courses come from experiments involving artificial, arbitrary, and apolitical groups rather than from actual events. Transitioning from the lab to the real world is especially tricky in this area because, as an increasing amount of research illustrates, actual settings condition and complicate the psychological processes that unfold in the lab. Not all groups are created equal. Though arbitrary

at root, group identities have real and enduring consequences once they come into existence, a fact that is nearly impossible to recreate in a short laboratory experiment. As the social dominance research illustrates, the ways in which people's group identities affect their attitudes and behavior depend on where in the social hierarchy they are located. For example, Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto demonstrate, using data from a variety of countries, that members of socially dominant groups are more likely than members of socially subordinate groups to display the classic in-group favoritism that is often portrayed as a rather universal psychological tendency. Likewise, they document how the priming of stereotypes can induce stereotype-confirming behavior among members of subordinate groups, which can then legitimize and perpetuate the social hierarchy.<sup>24</sup> In short, the group dynamics on display in laboratories with apolitical and arbitrary groups differ in important ways from the dynamics that exist when social groupings are entrenched and hierarchically ordered. The implication, of course, is that what it takes to overcome such entrenched inequality and prejudice might be different from what it takes to overcome lab-based group conflict.

If paying attention to such real-world complexities is important, so too is avoiding the tendency to just throw up our hands and lament that people have always formed—and always will form—groups arbitrarily and discriminate accordingly. Rather, we should do more than we seem to be doing to encourage our students to appreciate the coexistence of malleability and stability in group-based identities and hierarchies, and to consider how such malleability and stability interact with political institutions. Only by doing so can they move beyond the defeatist view that we're simply hard-wired to treat one another so poorly (a conclusion that's difficult to avoid in many group-conflict readings) and begin to consider realistic forms of institutional design that could make our world a more harmonious place. In other words, our course material should devote more attention to research on what public policy can do to mitigate group conflict. Articles by Leonie Huddy and Myron Rothbart and Oliver John are good examples of scholarship that forces us to contemplate the role of public policy in shaping group dynamics, yet they appear in only a handful of the syllabi.<sup>25</sup> Works such as these should be assigned more widely. Recent work by H. D. Forbes, which exhaustively assesses the conditions under which increased contact between groups helps or hinders the development of peaceful intergroup relations, would also be an appropriate addition to syllabi.<sup>26</sup>

A final example of how both psychology and political context are required to understand political phenomena is the study of political leadership, which appears in 17 of the syllabi (63 percent). Examples of questions explored in this line of scholarship are: What if FDR hadn't been president during the Depression? What if Hitler had not come to power? What made these and other men such effective leaders? What psychological factors got in the way of their achiev-

ing even greater success? What conditions lead political elites to make the decisions they do? Some readings focus on just one leader, while others study personality and leadership in general or analyze the psychobiographies of several leaders.<sup>27</sup> Political scientists must consider the role of individuals in determining outcomes because so much of what we do is devoted to explaining and predicting political events. The people at the helm matter. At the same time, we cannot understand the actions of individual leaders without properly understanding contextual matters, including the leader's immediate circle, domestic politics, and world events. Irving Janis's work on groupthink is the most common work assigned for studying how psychological factors (group-level and individual-level) and political factors interact in policy making and decision making, appearing in nine (37 percent) of the courses.<sup>28</sup>

### *The second response: Context is key*

Often, research in political psychology does entail applying theories developed in rather apolitical contexts to the world of politics, and much of our course content includes this kind of material. In response to the concern that borrowing tools developed in another discipline renders their subfield a lesser academic endeavor than other forms of political science inquiry, political psychologists maintain that if their goal is to arrive at complex and generalizable explanations of political phenomena, then the source of their methodology is irrelevant. As Rahn, Sullivan, and Rudolph argue, since political science aims to deepen our understanding of power, conflict, and governance (the essence of politics), research that contributes to such understanding is of value, even if it mainly consists of applying derivative theories to political settings.<sup>29</sup> Likewise, Jon Krosnick, and Kathleen McGraw note that applying psychological theories to a political context—in their terminology, “psychological political science”—improves our understanding of the context, which is a worthwhile end because it advances the main goal of political science as a discipline, that is, “to understand how and why the processes of politics unfold as they do.”<sup>30</sup> Indeed, many of us are driven, to put it bluntly, by a desire to make the world a better place. If applying psychological theories to political contexts aids us in this effort, then we welcome this approach.

A fair amount of research on information processing, which accounts for much of the contemporary political psychology research agenda, could be characterized as “applied.” Information processing is concerned with the cognitive and affective factors that shape how people interpret information. Inquiries in this field examine topics such as how information stored in long-term memory influences the weight and affective tags people assign to new information, how long new information remains accessible before it is forgotten, and the conditions that determine which kinds of information are remembered.<sup>31</sup> In

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other words, the information processing approach examines how contextual factors interact with individual-level predispositions to shape new evaluations.<sup>32</sup> The effort required to assess new information is taxing, which leads people to use shortcuts (a.k.a., heuristics). Determining what those shortcuts are, what conditions influence when people are likely to use different types of shortcuts, and whether those shortcuts lead to faulty or biased decision making are major concerns of research in information processing. These concerns are prominent in many political psychology courses: twenty-three (85 percent) of the syllabi address topics in information processing.

Some of the readings included in information processing sessions are those one would expect to find in a public opinion class; they emphasize vote choice, attitude stability and change, challenges to the “citizens are incompetent” paradigm, and the effects of the media and mass communication on individuals.<sup>33</sup> Many of the information processing readings, however, examine complex cognitive mechanisms through intricate experiments—material that goes far beyond the traditional public opinion syllabus.<sup>34</sup>

Many courses feature recent and intriguing research on information processing—work exploring the intersection of affect and cognition and the motivational goals that determine the type of information processing people use. Even though these lines of inquiry can sometimes lead to contradictory predictions, they are similar in that they challenge assumptions about what constitutes rational behavior, and they show how systematic factors lead to predictable (and reasonable) deviations from standard interpretations of rationality. Herbert Simon’s classic article on bounded rationality and Amos Tversky and colleagues’ work on prospect theory are common introductions to challenges of the rational actor model. They are typically supplemented by more recent information processing analyses.<sup>35</sup>

Fifteen of the courses I examined (56 percent) allot time to studying the relationship between affect and cognition, nine of them emphasizing the work of Marcus and colleagues on affective intelligence.<sup>36</sup> This work demonstrates that anxiety promotes sophisticated political judgments because it dislodges people from their cognitive-economizing habits and forces them to pay attention to, rather than ignore, new information. Though some psychologists might not consider this insight to be especially new or noteworthy, political psychologists have found it compelling because it challenges the prevailing conventional wisdom in political science—not to mention centuries of political theorizing—that insists that emotions wreak havoc on reasoned decision making.

Work on motivated reasoning is equally compelling in its challenge to the rational actor model. According to the theory of motivated reasoning, there are conditions under which people are motivated to seek out and evaluate all available information before making political judgments and other conditions under which people are motivated to main-

tain prior beliefs. In other words, our goal is sometimes to be accurate and other times to arrive a predetermined answer.<sup>37</sup> In the latter case, we engage in “belief preserving distortions,” and we either disbelieve new information that contradicts our existing beliefs, or we discount the weight placed on that new information when making political judgments.<sup>38</sup> The latest research on motivated reasoning aims to flesh out the exact nature of the relationships among motivations, individual-level characteristics, and attitude stability and change. Motivated reasoning is not as common in the syllabi as affective intelligence, appearing in some form in only six syllabi (22 percent), but given the pace at which new insights into motivated reasoning are appearing and the centrality of information processing to political psychology overall, I expect that its role in our courses will increase in the coming years.

Unlike the studies of mass violence and group conflict described earlier, information processing research in political science does more borrowing from psychology than interdisciplinary blending. It would be hard to deny, however, that our understanding of the relationships between political actors, institutions, and citizens is improved by incorporating heuristics, emotions, motivations, and memory into our models. As Krosnick and McGraw point out, such incorporation challenges “reigning presumptions,” requires political scientists to reconsider their prior beliefs about the way political processes operate (causing anxiety for some and belief-preserving distortions for others), and leads to future research that can clarify and extend our understanding of political phenomena.<sup>39</sup>

Political psychologists have spent a lot of time defending their subfield as political science. Though it is useful for scholars in any area to ponder their field’s strengths and weaknesses, I am not convinced that this debate is particularly worthwhile as far as our courses are concerned, especially our undergraduate courses. Few students care about which parent discipline plays a greater role in theory development, nor should we expect or want them to. They are interested in studying how human nature and politics interact. Whether course content blends or borrows, studying that interaction is exactly what they get. Exposing them to both the blending and borrowing scholarship described thus far ensures that they leave our classes more sophisticated and thoughtful observers of politics than when they entered.

### **Sometimes You Feel like a Subfield; Sometimes You Don’t**

Even though looking to psychology to illuminate political phenomena is not new, designating courses as belonging to the particular subfield of political psychology is still rare. Political psychologists have their own journal (*Political Psychology*), professional association with annual meetings (International Society of Political Psychology), summer

training program (Summer Institute in Political Psychology), and organized section within the American Political Science Association, yet few departments formally recognize political psychology as a distinct area of specialization. Space constraints preclude my addressing the question of whether gaining formal subfield status within political science departments should be a goal for political psychologists. It is important to acknowledge, however, that the way in which institutions incorporate political psychology into their curricula has pedagogical consequences.

At one institution where I have taught, for example, my undergraduate political psychology seminar was listed as a course offering in American politics. With good reason, my students often asked, “Why American politics?” My answer was not necessarily satisfying: That’s where my main research and interests lie. My syllabus includes the requisite disclaimer: “Most of the readings emphasize politics in the United States, though the field itself speaks to every aspect of political science.” And I allow students to select international or comparative topics for their final project if they wish. Other syllabi make similar references to a focus on American politics. Even in those syllabi without such references, many subjects and readings reflect a U.S.-centric slant, especially for the sessions on racial stereotyping and prejudice, the media, socialization, and candidate evaluation. When studying stereotypes and prejudice, for example, most assigned readings deal with black/white relations in the United States and concentrate especially on the debate about symbolic racism. Some of these studies speak to universal phenomena that just happen to be examined using data from the United States. Whether their expected outcomes are indeed universal can certainly be tested in other locales. But students’ exposure to political psychology research conducted on these topics in other countries remains minimal. And although stereotyping is a universal human phenomenon, symbolic racism is distinctly American; the perceived violation of “cherished American values” (such as individualism, the work ethic, and self-reliance) is central to its existence.<sup>40</sup>

Noticing this U.S.-centric trend, I began to wonder whether other institutions likewise “count” political psychology as American politics. I turned to departmental Web pages to gather some data on this question. As table 1 indicates, 10 of the 27 courses (37 percent)—a plurality—come from institutions that consider their introduction to political psychology as part of the American politics subfield, and this figure actually understates the proportion of the syllabi that are largely focused on the United States. One course is considered part of international relations. Two are from psychology departments, not political science (though both of them focus heavily on American politics).<sup>41</sup> Three are what I call “homeless.” In these cases, departments consider political psychology to be within the department of political science as a whole, but refrain from classifying it within one of their formally established sub-

**Table 1**  
How political psychology courses are “counted” by their departments

Subfield	No. of courses	Percentage
American Politics	10	37.0
International Relations	1	3.7
<i>Political Psychology*</i>	6	22.2
Other subfield	2	7.4
Psychology department	2	7.4
Miscellaneous (“homeless”)	3	11.1
Undetermined	3	11.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>27</b>	<b>100</b>

\*Four of the six courses in a political psychology subfield are from the University of Minnesota. The other two are from SUNY Stonybrook.

fields. Two syllabi are from the University of Iowa, where political psychology courses belong to a distinct subfield called “Political Communication and Political Processes.” Of the 21 institutions that provided the syllabi, only two—the University of Minnesota and SUNY Stonybrook—have a distinct political psychology subfield. Together, these two institutions account for all 6 of the 27 courses (22 percent) that are counted administratively within a political psychology subfield.

I suspect that a plurality, if not a majority, of people who teach political psychology in the United States were trained primarily as Americanists and have come to specialize in political psychology. Many groundbreaking studies have been conducted in the United States because that is where the interests of many scholars lie and/or because that is where many scholars collect their data (especially when they rely on undergraduates to participate in experiments). The prevailing preoccupation with American politics thus constrains literature searches when designing syllabi. Good comparative work in political psychology exists, but our familiarity with that work remains thin. Additionally, I have found that students are particularly engaged by course material when they can personally relate to the issues being studied. If I have a choice between two readings that examine online versus memory-based candidate evaluation, one involving the U.S. political system and the other involving the internal politics of a European country, I’m more likely to select the reading on American politics in large part because I think my students will get more out of it. I do not, in other words, exempt myself from this critique.

But people in other countries watch television news, vote in elections, harbor prejudiced views, and make political decisions, too. We tend to assume that the way the media affects public opinion in the United States is the way the media affects public opinion elsewhere or that the conditions that reduce the stereotypes whites have for blacks in

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the United States are the conditions that will reduce the stereotypes dominant groups have for oppressed groups elsewhere. This projection of U.S. findings to other countries probably is valid in many cases. But it might be problematic as well, and exploring the extent to which our findings are extensible is one area where the courses are particularly weak.

Some readers might argue that the goal of political psychology is to show how insights from psychology add to our understanding of political phenomena and that there is nothing wrong with domestic American politics providing the main vehicle for achieving that end. Others will point out that there is indeed a fair amount of course content already that addresses comparative and international politics. This is particularly true for units on group violence, genocide, terrorism, altruism, the personality of political leaders, and social dominance.<sup>42</sup> These are the units most likely to involve international inquiry in part because of their inherent characteristics (e.g., most modern cases of mass violence have occurred beyond American borders) and because our students are already likely to possess some level of familiarity with the particular case studies (e.g., Adolph Hitler or Saddam Hussein). Both claims—that our courses do cover politics elsewhere and that a U.S.-centric slant is not problematic—have merit. Still, I urge instructors to at least consider whether their pedagogical aims dictate that more comparative work be included.

*Political Psychology* has done an admirable job of exposing American scholars to cross-cultural examinations of the relationship between human nature and politics. For example, a recent special issue of the journal was devoted to the study of patriotism and national identity in Europe. One article in particular tested the adequacy of different measures of nationalism in the Netherlands, Slovakia, and the Basque region of Spain—each a location at a different stage of its formal development as a nation-state.<sup>43</sup> This study attempts to develop measures that can be used in various settings, to identify the psychological needs that motivate nationalism, to distinguish neutral love of country from more malevolent manifestations, to examine the relationship between regional, national, and international attachments, and to test the nature of these relationships in different countries. Love of country is a universal phenomenon, but it might not operate the same way in all places. Contextual and cultural factors matter, something that only comparative work such as this can really address. Little of this kind of work, however, has made it into political psychology syllabi at American colleges and universities.

Instructors interested in expanding the reach of their courses both geographically and substantively might want to consider the body of research on political tolerance, which has done an admirable job of analyzing how individual-level psychology, domestic political context, and political culture affect support for civil liberties in a variety of countries. It has also effectively combined substantive inquiry

with creative experiments and productive debates about measurement. Yet only five of the courses I examined (19 percent) cover tolerance explicitly, relying heavily on the work of John Sullivan.<sup>44</sup> In addition to Sullivan's seminal work, instructors might also include the work of Marcus and colleagues and of Jim Gibson and Amanda Gouws.<sup>45</sup> Marcus and colleagues test their model of how tolerance judgments are made with data from the United States, but their model could easily be applied to other locales. Gibson and Gouws essentially do just that, demonstrating the limited yet non-trivial utility of Marcus's insights in analyzing political tolerance in South Africa. In doing so, they make a compelling argument for the need to compare findings from tolerance studies in the United States with findings from tolerance studies elsewhere by demonstrating that the degree to which perceived threats are real—a factor that can vary greatly across time and space—can affect tolerance levels more than the specific details of situations in which civil liberties are at stake. Adding this line of work to our courses would provide students with the opportunity to learn about complex theories of attitude-formation, to contemplate how domestic political contexts condition such attitude-formation, to learn about contemporary political struggles outside of the United States, and to engage in important debates about how political institutions might help to resolve conflicts over civil liberties and foster greater tolerance.<sup>46</sup>

Until more institutions have distinct political psychology programs, faculty and students will probably continue to examine political psychology largely from within primary training as Americanists, which will perpetuate the U.S.-centric nature of introductory courses. Currently, there does not seem to be a consensus within political science or across institutions about whether political psychology is a subset of some other aspect of political science (such as American politics) or whether it is a distinct subfield in its own right. Whether more political science departments come to treat political psychology as a distinct subfield is something that only time will tell. In the meantime, we should at least recognize that the institutional design of our departments has consequences for what we do in the classroom and contemplate whether those consequences require attention.<sup>47</sup>

### **Methodology: A Plea for Attention**

Thus far I have discussed two critiques of political psychology as it is taught in our courses: the lack of attention to solutions to group conflict and the heavy focus on American politics. To these, I add another: more courses should devote further attention to methodology. Only eight undergraduate syllabi and one graduate syllabus (33 percent of the courses overall) address methodological issues. It could be that students evaluate experiments as a methodology throughout the semester as they discuss particular studies. If so, instructors do not indicate that on their syllabi. With



only the syllabi as a guide, I am left to conclude that the methodological concerns that experiments raise, including generalizability, external validity, samples of convenience, and ethical issues, are not getting the attention they need.

Many of political psychology's contributions to political science come from studies that use experiments. The very technical way in which much of this research is described requires that students understand experimentation, not to mention statistics, if they are to comprehend the results. Unless our students are also taking psychology courses, they are unlikely to be learning explicitly about the benefits and limits of this useful methodology. My sense is that undergraduate research methods courses in political science are still not especially common, are rarely required, and when available, tend to concentrate on statistical methods, such as regression, and ignore experiments and qualitative methods. I open this can of worms only to note that although it would be unfortunate if students came away from their political psychology courses associating experiments *only* with political psychology and not other subfields in the discipline or thinking that political psychologists *only* use experimental methods, I consider that a risk worth taking because for most students, the alternative is to have no formal introduction to experimentation at all.

Including a section on methodology need not detract unduly from time devoted to more substantive issues. In my undergraduate course, for example, I reserve only two hours of class time for experimentation. The unit occurs a few weeks into the semester, once students have become comfortable with political psychology as a line of inquiry. I have them read Donald Kinder and Thomas Palfrey's article on the pros and cons of using experiments in political science and Milgram's experiments on obedience to authority, which offer opportunities for methodological and ethical critiques.<sup>48</sup> I then have students come to class with a written description of their own idea for a political psychology experiment. I ask them to articulate the hypothesis to be tested by the experiment and its political implications, explain how the control and treatment conditions will enable the hypothesis to be tested, explain how their participants would be recruited and how they would be assigned to the different conditions, and discuss potential ethical or external validity problems with their design. Once in class, the students then critique one another's ideas. I have found that this approach results in a solid foundation that students use throughout the remainder of the semester as they encounter increasingly complex theories and research. This limited amount of class time is sufficient to provide enough familiarity so that students get more out of the substantive readings and, consequently, out of the course overall. In order for students to truly appreciate political psychology as a discipline, and to begin to think about how they themselves might contribute to the field, they must understand experimentation.

## Conclusion

As many have noted, the subfield of political psychology is vast. This vastness is at the root of its appeal. It also brings challenges when teachers must choose what topics and readings to include in their syllabi, which sometimes give the impression that the field lacks coherence. Since nearly every aspect of politics is affected by how people think and feel, nearly every aspect of political science can be, and is, subject to analysis by political psychologists. Whether it is a subfield or not and whether it is "merely" applied psychology or not are important debates, and the content of our courses illustrates these tensions even if they are not addressed explicitly. From the daunting array of possibilities, some consensus does however emerge with regard to the field's core topics and contributions. Overall, various aspects of attitude formation dominate, from the mundane (vote choice) to the intensely personal (self-identification) to the oppressive (stereotypes and prejudice) to the horrific (acceptance of, and participation in, mass violence). Unifying themes include the human tendency to seek out cognitive economy and the role that personality and perceptions of norm-violation and threat play in motivating group identification and conflict. I argue that instructors should consider including more units on methodology, on comparative work, and on the conditions that minimize the extent to which people do horrible things to each other (i.e., when the contact hypothesis works, or when conformity and bystander passivity can be overcome).

The syllabi speak to the impressively rapid pace with which new "instant classics" are emerging. Several works appearing in many of the courses have been published within the last ten years.<sup>49</sup> This outpouring of innovative research that makes genuine strides in the study of human nature adds to the challenge of designing a syllabus. After all, there are only so many weeks to a semester and only so much we can expect our students to read. But this challenge also makes it exciting to be a part of this field now.

Perhaps the most satisfying part of being a scholar in this field, and of teaching it to others, comes from the field's ability to help us understand salient political realities that emerge from interactions among people and institutions. It is difficult to avoid daily reminders of myriad ways human beings find to engage in conflict. The constant parade of hatred and seemingly senseless decision making underscores the timeliness of our course content. Studying contemporary conflicts from a political psychological perspective provides endless opportunities for our students to connect with the real world of politics and power. Many of the issues we explore are driven by our own normative concerns, such as how decisions should be made and how people should act toward one another. Our courses challenge our students to reconcile their own normative perspectives with the realities of context and the human condition.

Robert Lane writes that political psychology research is essential for getting us closer to "answer[ing] the urgent

question: How can governments help people become more self-confident, psychologically secure, humane, empathetic, responsible citizens?"<sup>50</sup> Indeed. In advancing that cause, engaging with research in political psychology can have a personal impact as well. When we learn about humans as a collective, we also learn about ourselves. We begin to understand our own motivations, thoughts, and behaviors, and we become more understanding of other people. In my course, for example, when we read Staub's discussion of bystanders, students always come to class telling stories of things they have witnessed that illustrate the phenomena under investigation. These observations sometimes concern trivial topics. For example, one woman came to class on the day we were discussing bystanders and told the class that she had been at a lecture the day before where no one got up to close the door though a lot of distracting noise was coming from the hallway. Before having done the reading for the class, she said, she would have sat there just like everyone else hoping that someone would get up and close the door. But because she had just read about pluralistic ignorance (interpreting the inaction of others as an indication that the status quo is acceptable), the diffusion of responsibility (doing nothing because we assume that someone else will act at some point), and the important role bystanders can play in shaping outcomes, she got up and closed the door. Obviously, the consequences of her action pale in comparison to the actions (and inactions) of people we read about, but her thoughts and behavior had been clearly altered by what she was learning in our class. Should she ever find herself a bystander in a situation with more serious consequences, she will be much less likely than everyone else to fall victim to pluralistic ignorance and the diffusion of responsibility. Similar examples occur regularly with nearly every topic we study; students are continually sharing how their own experiences are both explained and altered by the course material. When we strive to understand the interaction between human nature and political processes, our own behavior often changes. In other words, in studying what makes for the responsible, empathetic, and humane citizenry that Lane hopes for, we become more responsible, empathetic, and humane ourselves.

## Notes

- 1 Kuklinski 2002; Kuklinski 2001; Lupia, McCubbins, and Popkin 2000; Monroe 2002; Renshon and Duckitt 2000; Sears, Huddy, and Jervis 2003.
- 2 Rahn, Sullivan, and Rudolph 2002. See also Sullivan, Rahn, and Rudolph 2002.
- 3 Sears, Huddy, and Jervis 2003.
- 4 Several of these syllabi are available at the Web site of the International Society of Political Psychology (<http://ispp.org>).
- 5 The staff at *Perspectives* also sent syllabi that emphasize particular aspects of political psychology rather than general overviews of the field. For instance, some centered on methodological issues, one dealt primarily with leadership, another with persuasion and propaganda, and still another with group conflict. For the sake of the overall coherence of this essay, I chose not to include the more specialized syllabi in this discussion.
- 6 See Rahn, Sullivan, and Rudolph 2002 for documentation of political psychology as a subfield on the rise.
- 7 Marcus 2003, 411.
- 8 Sears, Huddy, and Jervis 2003, 11.
- 9 Deutsch and Kinnvall 2002.
- 10 Marcus 2003, 411.
- 11 Hermann 2002, 43.
- 12 Iyengar and McGuire 1993.
- 13 Other textlike books included Fiske and Taylor's *Social Cognition* (1991) and Kressel's *Political Psychology: Classic and Contemporary Readings* (1993), but these books were assigned (whole or in part) in even fewer syllabi than Iyengar and McGuire.
- 14 Sears, Huddy, and Jervis 2003, 3.
- 15 Rahn, Sullivan, and Rudolph 2002.
- 16 Altemeyer 1988; Altemeyer 1996.
- 17 Kressel 2002; Staub 1989; Kelman and Hamilton 1989.
- 18 Staub 1989.
- 19 Monroe 1996.
- 20 Sears 1988; Kinder and Sanders 1996.
- 21 Bobo 1988; Sniderman et al. 1991; Sniderman and Piazza 1993; Sidanius 1993; Sidanius and Pratto 1999.
- 22 Literature on the symbolic racism debate that appears in other courses includes Kinder and Sanders 1996; Mendelberg 2001; and Gilens 1999.
- 23 Sidanius 1993; Huddy 2001; Tajfel and Turner 1986; Rothbart and John 1993; Brewer 1991.
- 24 Sidanius and Pratto 1999.
- 25 Huddy 2001; Rothbart and John 1993.
- 26 Forbes 1997.
- 27 Renshon 1995; George and George 1956; Greenstein 1987; Greenstein 1992; Barber 1972; Winter 1987.
- 28 Janis 1972.
- 29 Rahn, Sullivan, and Rudolph 2002.
- 30 Krosnick and McGraw 2002, 82. Also see Krosnick 2002.
- 31 Fiske and Taylor 1991; Lodge and Hamill 1986; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995.
- 32 Taber 2003.
- 33 Converse 1964; Campbell et al. 1976; Lane 1959; Lane 1962; Lane 1972; Iyengar and Kinder 1987; Mutz 1998; Mutz 1992; Gilens 1999; Ansolabehere et al. 1994.
- 34 E.g., Fiske and Taylor 1991; Tversky and Kahneman 1974; Wyer and Ottati 1993; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995.

- 35 Simon 1985; Tversky and Kahneman 1981; Quattrone and Tversky 1988.
- 36 Marcus and MacKuen 1993; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000.
- 37 Lodge and Taber 2000; Taber, Lodge, and Glathar 2001.
- 38 Fischle 2000.
- 39 Krosnick and McGraw 2002.
- 40 Sears et al. 2000.
- 41 Including psychology syllabi in this review might strike some as problematic. The content of those two syllabi, however, is more or less indistinguishable from the content of the political science syllabi.
- 42 Two social dominance readings appear in the syllabi: a chapter in the Iyengar and McGuire volume (Sidanius 1993), and a book-length version (Sidanius and Pratto, 1999). The chapter is more U.S.-centric than the book, which analyzes data from all parts of the globe.
- 43 Dekker, Malova, and Hoogendoorn 2003.
- 44 E.g., Sullivan et al. 1981; Shamir and Sullivan 1983.
- 45 Marcus et al. 1995; Gibson and Gouws 2001.
- 46 Professors can also turn to some of the new edited volumes, such as *The Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology* (Sears, Huddy, and Jervis 2003) for good descriptions of some very interesting comparative work being done in the field.
- 47 Several other topics appear in the courses, but not often enough to warrant a distinct discussion. These topics include socialization, attribution, gender, psychoanalysis, developmental psychology, social capital, political trust, deliberation, and early contemplations on human nature, such as Hobbes and Rousseau. Nearly every syllabus included one topic that I considered to be “miscellaneous.” The range and frequency of miscellaneous topics further points to our embarrassment of riches, yet it also confirms Margaret Hermann’s observation that scholars in the field have yet to arrive at a consensus regarding what must be covered in a survey political psychology course. As the field continues to mature, greater consensus may indeed be achieved. We will have to wait until *Perspectives* revisits these syllabi reviews in 20 years or so to find out for sure.
- 48 Kinder and Palfrey 1992; Milgram 1963.
- 49 Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Mutz 1998; Gilens 1999; Kinder and Sanders 1996; Lodge, Steenbergen, and Brau 1995; Monroe 1996; Sidanius and Pratto 1999.
- 50 Lane 2003, 782.
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### Undergraduate Syllabi

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Mendelberg, Tali. Princeton University: Fall 2003. Political psychology.

Sears, David. University of California, Los Angeles: Spring 1999. Seminar in political psychology. <http://ispp.org/syllabi/searssyl.html>.

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