Review Essay

Political Psychology


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This marvelous book is an excellent, thorough, and highly readable account of the development of political psychology as a trans-discipline. It provides an in-depth evaluation of political psychology, not only as an interdisciplinary subfield of two well established disciplines – political science and psychology – but also as a unique perspective that has developed its own literature and practitioners, with the investigation of the intersection of human psychology and political phenomena as their primary focus. This volume illustrates the evolution of the endeavor, as scholars who specialize in political psychology developed their own journal, created an international society that sponsors yearly conferences, provided for specialized training in the field, and stimulated impressive amounts of relevant research.

As is apparent in the volume, the applications of political psychology are immense. The fertile foundation of interdisciplinary scholarship in political psychology has resulted in research that continually evolves, evaluating events, issues, and individuals with a lens that supports diverse theoretical applications. As editor Linda Shepherd notes, applications range from public opinion to elite decision-making; from inter-group conflict to political leadership; from theories of personality development, individual cognition, and individual motivation to mass political behavior, international conflict, and mass communication. Research in political psychology clearly evaluates the collective as well as the individual, with multiple concerns including personality, behavior, cognition, process, and context, as well as interactions between any or all of these.

Importantly, this volume indicates that political psychology has enabled advances in research and understanding of the myriad of precursors leading to individual and collective behavior. Shepherd makes the argument that political psychology as a successful interdisciplinary field was foreshadowed by the need to solve practical problems. Specifically, the issues revealed in the advent and events of World War II stim-
ulated interdisciplinary scholarship concerned with evaluating the role of personality in leader and follower behavior, the use of psychological warfare, political socialization, and the development of personality as it is related to decision making, cognition, and motivation, within individual and collective frameworks.

The volume also provides excellent illustrations of the fact that political psychology has benefited tremendously by the use of multiple methodologies, used separately and in concert to explain the interaction of psychological and political phenomena. Multiple methodologies drawn from political science and psychology, as well as methods specifically developed by political psychologists to meet the unique needs and requirements of interdisciplinary and cross-cultural investigations, have generated research in the field that is powerful and compelling. Whether quantitative or qualitative, experimental or survey, content analytic or psycho-diagnostic; methodological approaches in political psychology have benefited from the willingness of scholars to blend and apply relevant and diverse techniques to effectively assess political events, leadership, personality, orientation, and behavior. As exceptional chapters in the volume clearly indicate, unique methods have and will continue to be developed to allow and enhance the measurement of key variables relevant to theories within the corpus of political psychology.

This volume will establish a baseline for future development and research in political psychology and is a significant contribution to the field. The chapters contained herein describe, evaluate, and track the development of the subfield of political psychology. Contributors provide important explanations for the evolution and current state of political psychology; they do so while identifying major developments that affect and define the specialization, discussing factors accounting for these developments, investigating the major approaches to the subfield, dealing with the practical application of research in political psychology, accounting for trends, and evaluating current resources.

One of many areas of significance for the volume is the evaluation of the state of infrastructure in political psychology by noted author and professor Kathleen M. McGraw. Dr. McGraw orients her evaluation of infrastructure with a discussion of the theoretical placement of political psychology within the two disciplines from which it grew. Her detailed investigation of subfield infrastructure includes analyses of national and international resources in the area of education, professional associations, and research. She has carefully tracked and provided evidence for the increasing presence of political psychology in the major journals of political science and reports on these trends as well as the current parameters of undergraduate and graduate coursework and programs in political psychology. McGraw provides unique and relevant information about the ongoing development of NSF funding for research
relevant to agendas within political psychology and describes developed programs within private foundations that have the potential of expanding opportunities for funding and training. This important chapter ends with commentary on current research in political psychology with specific discussion of public policy implications and the possibility of synthesis between positive political theory (rational choice) and behavioral approaches to decision making.

The next chapter “Personality Theory in the Analysis of Political Leadership: Trends, Schemas, and Opportunities” was provided by Elizabeth Marvick and Betty Glad, both of whom have separately served as active leaders in the International Society of Political Psychology and the International Political Science Association, as well as contributed books, edited books, and published multiple journal articles within the field of political psychology. Their chapter analyzes the development of research in political psychology with specific reference to influences from theories of personality. Personality theories are traced as they evolved and as they came to be integral components in research in political psychology and the analysis of political leadership. The authors demonstrate the use of a variety of analytic techniques, including depth psychology, ego psychology, and narcissistic processes in understanding linkages between personality and political behavior. Interesting and detailed examples are drawn from psychoanalytic studies of political leaders including Abraham Lincoln, Woodrow Wilson, Winston Churchill, George Washington, Mohandas Gandhi, Nelson Mandela, Mustafa Kemal, Dwight D. Eisenhower, and Charles de Gaulle, among others. The authors proceed to review and examine findings that evaluate connections between individual personality, goal definition, relationships, and adaptation to the political environment. An exhaustive treatment, this chapter also looks at relationships between leaders and advisors with a far-reaching discussion of operative psychic mechanisms that serve to enhance affective ties and thereby increase the influence of specific advisors, some of whom emerge as strategic actors. Significantly, this chapter also highlights the influence of the role of personality within institutional environments and documents the effect of environment on behavior.

Political psychology has, since its inception, had an international focus. Political psychology as an international enterprise is evaluated in a chapter by noted author and leader in the field of political psychology, Peter Suedfeld along with colleague Ian Hansen. Entitled “The Many Faces of International Political Psychology,” this unique chapter provides a detailed discussion of the international scope of the discipline including overviews of international theoretical developments, international theoretical diversity, international collaboration, and publications with specific international focus. Suedfeld and Hansen employ an adaptation of Adair’s empirical markers of internationalization to investigate the process and progress of internationalization
in the discipline of political psychology. The authors discuss the predominance of western models (North American and European), including the important role that is played by recognized norms of scientific research and the publication process, specifically pointing to lessons learned and experience gained that will enhance political psychology and provide a “rich source” for hypotheses and theories within international political psychology. The multiple influences and constraints of culture and cross-cultural research receive detailed focus in the authors’ evaluation and in their recommendations for formation of robust theory in a fully internationalized political psychology. In one of many important sections within this chapter, the authors point to the value of continued interaction and feedback between non-Western cultural traditions in the growth of political psychology as an international enterprise.

The comprehensive nature of this volume is further illustrated by a valuable and focused discussion of the application of political psychology in the domain of international relations and foreign policy decision making. Donald A. Sylvan, a well-known scholar in the area of foreign policy decision and an active leader in political psychology organizations, teamed with Brent Strathman to contribute “Political Psychology and the Study of Foreign Policy Decision Making.” This chapter demonstrates the myriad of ways in which scholarly research in foreign policy decision making (FPDM) has benefited from the interdisciplinary approach of political psychology and from the attributes of those trained in political psychology. The authors make clear that unique components of research in applied computer systems, designed to simulate the processes and structure of decision making, progressed from within and contributed to the corpus of political psychology. The chapter provides important insights into information processing and foreign policy decision making while reviewing relevant research from political science, psychology, political psychology, and decision theory.

David G. Winter, prolific author in the area of motivation theories and applications as well as a significant leader in the field of political psychology, contributes the article “Refocusing Political Psychology: The Search for a Twenty-First Century Agenda” which examines the origins of political psychology, discusses current challenges in the subfield, and offers specific recommendations for a dynamic and influential future. This article establishes the rich historical foundation of early influences in the subfield and presents an analytical overview of political psychology as an interdisciplinary response to critical events within the twentieth century. Winter’s fine chapter presents political psychology as a lens that enhances the analysis of individuals, events, and trends. He argues that the field was the result of a natural progression from efforts to understand the psychological foundations of the democratic process, leadership, and inter-state rela-
tions. Winter maintains that the various intellectual, methodological, and educational agendas within the field will be influenced by escalating bureaucracies of globalization, inevitably transcending national and cultural boundaries and resulting in transformations in perception, behavior, and political response. Winter draws from a wide variety of literary, political, and psychological resources to evaluate the attributes of a political psychology operating at the crossroads of internationalized technologies, economies, corporate structures, and media. This sweeping approach incorporates insightful analysis into the psychological and political effects of twenty-first century changes as well as a discussion of the evolution of modern industrial capitalism as it affects individual perception, psychology, behavior, governance, legitimacy, and bureaucratic conduct. Winter expands his discussion to include the critical issues of income inequality, political and psychological responses to relative deprivation, ethnic stratification, nationalism, prejudice, and violence, each discussed from within the evolution of research in political psychology. He then moves to the intricate political and psychological issues of skepticism, cynicism, and corruption, as well as the erosion of political and economic institutions to conclude that forces of globalization are changing politics, economics, and interactions between the two, and that these changes should and do continue to influence research in political psychology. Winter’s treatment mandates a sustained and enriched research agenda within a political psychology of the twenty-first century.

Editor of this volume, author, and chair of the Psycho-Politics Research Committee of the International Political Science Association, Linda Shepherd provides insightful final commentary in her chapter “Concluding Remarks: Developments and Trends in Political Psychology.” In this chapter, Shepherd attributes the rapid maturation and growth of political psychology as a subfield to the “acknowledged importance and relevance of research at the intersection of political and psychological processes” as well as the fact that political psychology has opened up new perspectives in the exploration of political behavior and psychological phenomena. Political psychology has questioned the assumptions of both of its parent disciplines and derived its own principles and unique approaches based upon innovative interdisciplinary analyses and rigorous, systematic research methods. Maintaining that political decision making is based upon a series of processes, both complex and dynamic, that are best understood with reference to evolving contexts and unique contingencies, Shepherd argues that scholars within the field of political psychology, trained in an interdisciplinary context and required to understand multiple fields as well as interactions between these fields, are uniquely able to undertake research characterized by the complexity of the human condition. In
an inspiring conclusion, Shepherd cites the ability of political psychology to respond to philosophic, political, and psychological calls for the creation of systems within which “individuals might flourish, the public good might be promoted, and self-rule would ennoble citizens rather than provide a platform for tyranny of the majority.” If human development can be a meaningful cross-cultural goal, according to Shepherd, then it is political psychology, investigating the dynamic interactions between the polis and human psychology, which is uniquely equipped to move research positively toward that goal.