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Abstract

Political psychology is an exciting field because it is directly and immediately relevant to current events. This feature of the field is also a drawback as it can unintentionally limit the knowledge of the field to current events and prevent the development of generalizable knowledge. We discuss how using representative samples, representative political systems, and representative stimuli can help political psychology develop a more comprehensive political psychology with knowledge that is both generalizable and relevant.

Public Significance Statement: This commentary summarizes three potential problems for drawing broad conclusions about politics from research that focuses on specific political events and situations.

Keywords: Political Psychology, Representative Designs, Moral Judgments

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Brexit. Le Pen. Wilders. Golden Dawn. Trump. The re-emergence of right-wing populism in Europe and the United States inspires questions that political psychology is poised to answer. Why are people anti-Semitic? Why don't people have empathy for refugees? Can countries balance nationalism and multiculturalism? When do facts matter? One of the key reasons students choose careers in political psychology is because of their desire to understand why politics is the way it is and maybe even make the political world a better and more humane place. When the world gives political questions, it jumpstarts political psychology. Undoubtedly, the current and chaotic political climate will inspire a generation of political psychologists.

The motivation to understand the political here and now is a powerful motivation. It can be found in research on opposition to bussing to integrate schools (Sears, Hensler, & Speer, 1979) to more recent work on terrorism's effects on political attitudes (Van de Vyver, Houston, Abrams, & Vasiljevic, 2015), the roots of opposition to the United States' first Black president (Payne et al., 2010), and the underpinnings of attitudes about foreclosure assistance during the Great Recession (Brandt, 2013). Obviously, this list is incomplete. Open up any issue of *Political Psychology* or this current issue of *Translational Issues in Psychological Science* and you can find papers aimed at understanding recent political events.

Political psychology's challenge is to channel the motivation generously provided by current events into new and exciting studies that advance (political) psychological theory and reveal generalizable knowledge. This is a real challenge. Although understanding the roots of opposition to bussing and why people oppose foreclosure assistance were timely questions, it is not clear that the message from these studies will generalize and help us make predictions in new settings. For example, symbolic politics, more so than self-interest, underlies opposition to bussing (Sears et al., 1979), but we do not know if this is an effect specific to bussing, specific to racial policies in modern (~post-Civil Rights legislation) American

politics, or a finding that is expected to hold for all racial policies in the United States and throughout the world. To be clear: It might, but the evidence on bussing does not speak to this question.

It is worthwhile to think about why it is unclear if findings aimed at understanding specific (and often at the time, current) political events are generalizable knowledge. We highlight three key reasons.

1. Representative Samples. When political psychologists suggest that findings are not generalizable, this is typically linked with the use of non-representative and student samples (Henry, 2008; Sears, 1986). Some of the psychological processes and social factors that influence bachelor students are likely different from those that influence the general population, making university students less than ideal participants for political research. However, there are well-known methods for overcoming this typical critique, such as readily available representative data (e.g., American National Election Studies, Time Sharing Experiments in the Social Sciences) and online community samples (e.g., Mechanical Turk). Although neither are perfect solutions, they go a long way to helping political psychologists avoid studying the psychology of (only) bachelor students. Indeed, the studies of current events mentioned above all use non-student samples (Brandt, 2013; Payne et al., 2010; Sears et al., 1979; Van de Vyver et al., 2015). That said, the representativeness of the sample is not the only shortcoming that can prevent generalizability. There are other ways that a study can fall short of representativeness that have received less attention. We will highlight two and point to solutions to these problems.

2. Representative Political Systems. Psychological findings do not travel well. Most psychological studies are conducted on so-called WEIRD samples (Western, Educated, Industrialized, Rich, Democratic), yet many findings - including basic perceptual findings - do not generalize outside of WEIRD contexts (Henrich, Heine, & Norenzayan, 2010). Political psychology is no different. It too is largely based on Western samples, making it is impossible

to know if our theoretical knowledge extends to other countries. This insight may be especially relevant to political psychology because even effects observed in Western democracies can differ substantially from one another. For example, links between values, motivations, and political identification differ across Europe (Thorisdottir, Jost, Liviatan, & Shrout, 2007). Although these differences are not as substantial as they could be, other studies find that the typical positive association between cultural right-wing beliefs and economic right-wing beliefs found in America is not universally positive, even in culturally similar countries (Malka, Lelkes, & Soto, in press). For example, the association is typically near zero in the Netherlands, but next door in Germany the association is typically negative (and sometimes *more* negative than it is positive in the United States). Studying Americans gives a false sense of the positive correlation between different types of right-wing beliefs.

It is not always easy to address this problem, but there are some methods that can help. One is to use the publicly available, international survey data, such as the European Social Survey and the World Values Survey. These data sets do not contain the measures necessary for all of your research questions, but when they do they are a powerful tool for testing the robustness of a relationship across political systems. There are also country specific, publicly available panels, such as the LISS Panel (Netherlands) or the SOEP (Germany) that can supplement American data. Another method to address political system representation is to collaborate with researchers in other countries. Taking this "many labs" approach of conducting the same study simultaneously in multiple countries can help researchers know when and if their results are constrained to a particular political context. They also have the added benefit of extending your collaborator network. Although cross-national collaborations are challenging, they are a useful tool as large-scale replication projects (Klein et al., 2014) and the field of Cross-Cultural Psychology have demonstrated.

3. Representative Stimuli. The third, and perhaps less obvious, way studies can lack representativeness is in the representativeness of stimuli. When we focus our efforts on

particular current events our stimuli will not be representative; our inferences will be limited to that particular current event. The importance of representative stimuli has been known (Brunswik, 1947; Fiedler, 2011), but it has not filtered into the field of political psychology (see Kessler, Proch, Hechler, & Nägler, 2015 for a similar idea). When we use non-representative stimuli, even if we use representative samples of participants from a representative sample of countries, we cannot generalize our findings beyond the stimuli that we use in a particular study. This is a problem if we aim to generalize beyond a particular target group, experimental vignette, or moral judgment.

This is not immediately obvious. Imagine if we conducted a study to test if conservatives disliked Americans with brown hair more than liberals, but only use one photo of an American man of Middle Eastern decent (i.e., a man from a group conservatives typically do not like; Brandt, in press). We might conclude that conservatives have a strong bias against Americans with brown hair, despite the fact that our photo was likely not representative of Americans with brown hair. This example is extreme to make the point, but the problem easily arises.

For example, until recently research found that conservatives were more prejudiced than liberals (Sibley & Duckitt, 2008). The typical study used low status and disadvantaged target groups who were either perceived as liberal or emblematic of liberal political causes. This is not a representative sample of important groups in society (Koch et al., 2016). However, when we use a representative sample of target groups in (American) society, we find that liberals and conservatives express similar amounts of prejudice, but towards different groups (Brandt, in press). Expanding the stimuli set to a representative sample of stimuli changed our conclusions.

In other work on moral decision making (Wagemans, Brandt, & Zeelenberg, 2017), similar issues were tackled by using a well-validated measure of moral judgment including a wide range of moral judgments. Prior work made it difficult to test if emotions had specific

relationships with moral judgments in specific moral domains or across many moral domains, because research used unstandardized and ad hoc measures of moral judgments covering limited portions of the moral domain (e.g., Cheng, Ottati, & Price, 2013; Horberg, Oveis, Keltner, & Cohen, 2009). By using a validated measure that spanned many moral domains (Clifford, Iyengar, Cabeza, & Sinnott Armstrong, et al., 2015) we were able to test if disgust sensitivity predicted harsher moral judgments across domains or were specific to a particular domain (Wagemans et al., 2017). We found that disgust sensitivity was more strongly related to judgments in the purity domain than any of the other moral domains.

To address the representative stimuli problem, researchers need to generate a representative sample of stimuli from the population of stimuli they would like to generalize to. In the case of groups, researchers can ask participants to generate lists of important social groups in society and use the most often mentioned groups (Koch et al., 2016). In the case of political policies, researchers can select policies that have been discussed in mainstream media outlets over the last months. In the case of moral judgments, researchers can select morally relevant scenarios from across the various moral domains (Wagemans et al., 2017) or use scenarios based on participant generated examples of immoral behaviors. All of these strategies can help researchers generate broader samples of stimuli to maximize the chances of generalizability beyond specific sets of stimuli.

Conclusion. Political psychology is exciting because of its clear relevance to current events. However, harnessing our excitement about current events to produce generalizable knowledge is a central challenge. Here we suggest researchers pair investigations of current events with methods to enhance generalizability beyond their own countries and specific sets of stimuli. Although no solution is perfect, the more steps we take as a field to testing the generalizability of our findings, the better predictions our theories will make in diverse environments. This change in practice will help us develop a more comprehensive political psychology with knowledge that is both generalizable and relevant.

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