Psychology 490
Fall Term 1999

Term Paper Assignment

The term paper is intended to encourage you to think about some concept(s) of political psychology. You could apply these concepts to the analysis and understanding of some concrete political or historical event. Or you could review the literature on some concept or topic that is especially interest to you – going beyond what was covered in class, or focusing on something that was not covered in class. The important thing is that you be interested in the topic of your paper. Feel free to discuss your ideas with Elisabeth or me.

Length: Approximately 10-15 pages, though covering your topic appropriately, and writing well, are much more important than length as such.

Due: At the beginning of class on December 9.

The following books, which give a broad overview of many different political psychology topics, will be on reserve soon:


In addition, there are two journals that are especially likely to have interesting articles:

- Political Psychology [this is the journal of the International Society of Political Psychology; it is highly interdisciplinary]
- Political Behavior [its articles tend to have more of a “political science” approach]

Over the past few years, I have accumulated some references on a few particular topics, as shown below. These are not “privileged” topics; they are only suggestions. The important thing is to develop a topic that is of consuming interest to you.
1. Some aspects of war or international crises.

This could involve a political-psychological study of conflict and war in general, or of the conflict escalation (or peaceful resolution) process in a particular crisis or series of crises. I encourage you to consult primary materials.

The following edited books contain relevant articles and chapters about many different political-psychological aspects of conflict and war. They will be on reserve.


The following books and articles discuss connections between gender and war:


The following books and articles contain lists of “crises” that escalated, and did not escalate, to war:


The following mega-site has links to lots of materials from and about the Cuban Missile Crisis: [http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/cuba.htm](http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/cuba.htm)

2. Analysis of the psychological aspects of recent terrorism – international or domestic.

There are many examples, including Timothy McVeigh (convicted of blowing up the federal building in Oklahoma City), Theodore Kuczynski (UM’s most famous math Ph.D. and the self-confessed Unabomber), and the many and varied militia movements. In addition, there is the fictional *Turner diaries*, a book that seems to have attained cult status among many domestic groups. Websites of some “terrorist” organizations are given in this webpage:


The following references on terrorism may be useful:


3. An interview-based study of generational differences in political-psychological socialization and understanding of politics.

The idea of “political generation” is emerging as an important concept in recent theory and research on political socialization. As will be discussed in class on November 9, this concept suggests that the events that occur during one’s adolescence and young adulthood (roughly from ages 15-23) often play an important part in shaping adult political life. Memories of these events may form a lasting “lens” through which people perceives later events, and an enduring framework for organizing their political and social beliefs.

Can you observe these effects in talking with people who should be from different “political generations?” Select and interview two people, one each from any two of the following five different “generations:”
First, ask your interviewees about what they feel has been the most important public event that has occurred during their lifetime — what it is, how they understood at the time, how they understand it now, and what “lesson(s)” they feel this event has for understanding later events. A good way to ask begin this line of questions might be as follows:

“Tell me about the things that have been important for your own life. For example, what national event or series of related events has the greatest effect on your life — making you the kind of person you are, with the needs, beliefs, and values that you have? There are no right or wrong answers — pick whatever you feel was the most important event or events.”

Do people of different ages give different answers? Did the events mentioned by your interviewees occur during the hypothesized “critical” stage of their lives (roughly between ages 15-23)?

Then ask your interviewees about their views on some of the following specific political issues and events: (Be sure to ask both interviewees about the same issues so you can compare their responses.)

1. Women’s rights and gender-related issues (equal employment, equal pay, and equal political power; abortion)
2. Sexual orientation and gay rights
3. Race relations and affirmative action programs
4. The role of U.S. military force in today’s post-Cold War world (e.g., the bombing of Kosovo)
5. American economic health and trade competitiveness
6. Financing the government (taxes, and government expenditure)
7. Welfare reform
8. Health care
9. Crime
10. The Clinton-Lewinsky affair and Clinton impeachment
Among the people you interviewed, do you find any connection between “generation” (and the events that shaped it) and later political views? How do your results fit with what we have read and discussed about political generations?

In writing up the results of your interviews, place your interviewees into “generations” according to the table on the previous page. Indicate the events that they mentioned, and their views on specific political issues and events. Describe what connections you find, if any, between generation and political views. Evaluate the concept of “generation” based on your results.

The following general readings on the concern of “generation” are useful, in addition to the reading in the syllabus:


And the following reading is a particularly interesting analysis of “Gen X”: