

## **Bringing the Group Back Into Political Psychology: Erik H. Erikson Early Career Award Address**

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Erik H. Erikson, after whom the Early Career Award is named, was a distinguished psychologist who made many contributions to the study of the individual. His fame comes in part from his contribution to the idea that the individual develops in context. The course of human development is shaped by historical, social, and cultural forces. Human beings are capable of tremendous growth because they are able to integrate multiple influences from a variety of sources, internal and external.

I wish to elaborate on some research ideas that are linked to Erikson's insight that individuals must be understood in their context. Context is a huge word with rich meanings, and I have something more specific in mind. What I care about here is a particular facet of context—social groups.

The study of individuals in groups is old and well established. Think of Allport's classic study of prejudice, which launched the study of group prejudice; Sherif's Robber's Cave experiment, a founding study of group identity and conflict; Sherif's autokinetic effect, which established the notion of self-perpetuating group norms; Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo's prison simulation, which showed the power of a group's role expectations; Asch's study of perceptual distortion, which established the power of groups to shape perception; or Milgram's studies of conformity, which implied that group leaders derive considerable power from the authority imbued in their roles. All of these have remained well known for decades, and deservedly so.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Allport (1954); Sherif, Harvey, White, Hood, and Sherif (1954); Sherif (1936); Zimbardo (1972); Haney, Banks, and Zimbardo (1973); Asch (1946, 1951, 1952); Milgram (1963, 1974).

But to some extent the study of individuals in groups has continued more robustly outside the field of political psychology than inside it. The impact of group variables—variables that measure in some way the influence of a group's characteristic, process, membership, or identity—on individuals and on group decisions features prominently in several areas of political science where political psychology has made few recent inroads. These include the study of Congress and legislatures, government bureaucracy, courts and judges, and relations among units of government, such as executive-legislative interactions or federalism. In these areas of research there has been a good deal of attention to what are essentially group structure variables, such as formal rules or procedures for voting, for speaking, or for influencing the agenda. There has also been a good deal of attention to the structure of group roles, such as the structural role advantages or limitations of the president, members of Congress, or Supreme Court justices. In the literature on game theory and social dilemmas, group structure reigns supreme, with much attention devoted to the structure of incentives facing individuals interacting in a group situation, to the impact of the size of the group, and to the group's decision rules or opportunity for discussion on the group's collective and individual behavior (e.g., Ostrom, 1998; Guarnaschelli, McKelvey, & Palfrey, 2000).

By contrast, contemporary research on groups in political psychology is less frequent, less structured, and less salient than it should be both within political psychology and outside of it. Here I want to make a case for a more vigorous study of individuals in group contexts within the field of political psychology. For that to happen, we need scholarly controversies over significant hypotheses with wide and deep implications. We need scholars to address each other back and forth and the evidence to accrue cumulatively around clear and central lines of argument. To be sure, we have such fruitful literatures in political psychology, but the most prominent ones tend not to involve groups as a central concept.<sup>3</sup>

There is a partial exception to what I have just said, and that is the study of intergroup conflict in general and racial attitudes in particular.<sup>4</sup> In this research area we can find a literature that meets all the criteria I have just laid out for productive scholarship on groups. The spark that launched this literature is the theory of symbolic racism, with origins in the early 1970s and a line of argument that continues today with a revised and renamed concept, racial resentment (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; McConahay & Hough, 1976; Sears & Kinder, 1971). The symbolic racism theory argues that a new form of racial prejudice emerged with the civil rights revolution of the 1960s, that it is cleanly distinguished from segregationist, biology-focused prejudice, that it blends the traditional American values

<sup>3</sup> E.g., the literatures on the benefits or limitations of heuristics, on priming effects, and on the role of self-interest in motivation, where there is only sporadic attention to groups in any sense.

<sup>4</sup> On intergroup relations in general, see, for example, the symposium in the December 2004 issue of *Political Psychology* on theories of social dominance orientation, social identity, and system justification. There is also the extensive literature on party identification, which in the early years cast it as a form of social affiliation, reinforced recently by Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002.

of hard work and individualism with antiblack beliefs and affect, and that it powerfully shapes views on government's obligation to African Americans.

This theory, because of its provocative, sharply delineated hypotheses and consequent powerful results, launched a literature of its own, with controversy flaring over each claim in the argument (Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Feldman & Huddy 2005; Kinder & Mendelberg, 1995; Sears, Sidanius & Bobo, 2000; Sniderman, Crosby, & Howell, 2000). I will now briefly describe each side in the controversy.

Realistic group conflict theory emerged as a response to research on symbolic racism (Bobo, 1983; Glaser, 1994). It has since evolved to stand on its own terms, with a welcome expansion in scope beyond whites' attitudes toward African Americans (Bobo, 1988; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996). One branch of realistic group conflict theory now focuses on what I see as a close cousin of racial resentment, *laissez-faire* racism, which while sharing many of the characteristics of racial resentment stands apart from it because it is rooted not in individual psychology but in whites' defense of their changing racial group interests (Bobo & Kluegel, 1997).

Social dominance theory emerged later, as a second alternative to theories of symbolic racism and racial resentment (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). It too begins with structural arrangements and material, concrete interests, and, as does realistic group conflict theory, also quickly moves to encompass ideologies and cultural forms that justify inequality. It shares with the theory of racial resentment the assumption that prejudice is important, and that we should study individual variation in the tendency toward social dominance (a desire to dominate other groups), but shares with realistic group conflict theory the assumption that the individual's position in a hierarchical society matters too (with race acting as one means of stratification).

From an entirely different perspective came another response to symbolic racism, found in the research of Sniderman and colleagues. This research began as a criticism of symbolic racism research, especially objecting to the notion that cherished American principles were contaminated by racism and arguing for the important role of political orientations such as conservatism. That work subsequently evolved in an independent direction to study ethnocentrism in a variety of other forms and settings (Sniderman, Peri, de Figueiredo, & Piazza, 2000; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993, 2000; Sniderman, Hagendoorn, & Prior, 2004). But the original impetus was a close reading and contention of the claims of symbolic racism theory. The research thus proceeded from highly specific, detailed criticism of symbolic racism to the establishment of an alternative, coherent argument about the importance of political ideology and principles in shaping views of government's role in ameliorating racial inequality.

I believe that the controversy over the nature and effects of racial prejudice was to the benefit of political psychology. It produced sharp hypotheses that diverged from each other in clear ways, leading to testable implications and novel

findings, not to mention an accumulation of large-scale datasets that continue to be mined today (see, for example, Kinder & Sanders, 1996; Sniderman & Piazza, 1993). True, the alternative hypotheses have multiplied at what at times seemed a distressingly high rate, prompting some to wonder whether we have too many approaches and not enough arrivals.<sup>5</sup> And some observers (bystanders) have expressed perplexity at the insistence that one hypothesis is more valid than the others (Hochschild, 2000). But the research did firmly establish that “racial considerations remain critical for shaping Americans’ attitudes and policy preferences” while also documenting that “politics and ideology matter” as well, if less so (Dawson, 2000, pp. 344–345). And it led to methodological and data innovations and a high level of interest in the important real-world phenomenon of ethnocentrism broadly speaking.

The increasing momentum of this literature prompted a variety of other studies of racial attitudes that also paid close attention to the psychological underpinnings of group-centered opinion and behavior (e.g., Alvarez & Brehm, 1997; Berinsky, 1999; Bobo & Kluegel, 1993; Federico, 2004; Gilens, 1999; Glaser, 2002; Glaser & Gilens, 1997; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Hutchings, Valentino, Philpot, & White, 2004; Kinder & Winter, 2001; Krysan, 1998; Kuklinski et al., 1997; and Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002). As do the studies that revolve around the controversy over prejudice, some of these works also present clear and tightly argued arguments, original methods or data, striking findings, and attempts to pit each hypothesis against its sharply differentiated alternatives. The most valuable of these studies offer up a summary of our conventional understanding of racial attitudes and their results, and in close argument show us that this understanding is incorrect in light of decisive tests among competing hypotheses (e.g., Gilens, 1999; Glaser, 2002).

This literature on racial attitudes started out relatively narrowly and with implications limited to racial politics; but as it developed it began to offer fruitful implications for a variety of themes. Social dominance theory has gone farther than any in a direction far removed from racial attitudes. It offers insights into gender, class, the nature of punitive political regimes, war, rape, and evolutionary theory, to name just a few. Other works are rather more limited in their scope but still have gone beyond racial attitudes to make important points about other phenomena in political psychology. These include the nature of covert political communication found in implicit campaign messages (Mendelberg, 2001; Valentino, Hutchings, & White, 2002); the impact of ballot structure on the considerations voters use in referenda (Glaser, 2002); the influence of material self-interest and group interest (Bobo, 1988; Bobo & Hutchings, 1996; Sears, Van

<sup>5</sup> There are also studies in political science in the more sociological tradition that explains racial attitudes as a function of the impact of racial composition or interracial contact, e.g., Carsey, 1995; Kinder and Mendelberg, 1995; and Oliver and Mendelberg, 2000, now extended to other groups. But with these and a few other exceptions that literature has not delved deeply into the psychology behind the effects.

Laar, Carrillo, & Kosterman, 1997); ethnocentrism in general (the recent work of Sniderman and colleagues); the causes of behavior as distinguished from opinion (Green & Cowden, 1992); the role of media representations of stereotypes (Gilens, 1999); and more.

Political psychology needs more work that highlights groups and that is characterized by forceful, provocative arguments, definitive tests of sharply opposing hypotheses, demonstrations of unexpected and striking findings, and the other traits of the 1940s and 1950s literatures on groups. The racial attitudes literature helps in this regard. But while it has focused on identification with ascriptive groups, and on the attitudes and stereotypes that tend to follow, it has not focused much on other important aspects of groups. That literature has not had much to say about group characteristics or processes.<sup>6</sup> A few interesting exceptions can be found in the literature on social identity and in African-American politics. In the latter area, some scholars have paid attention to individual-level processes but embedded them in a lengthy study of how the group formed its political consciousness and used its group infrastructure to mobilize politically (see especially Cohen, 1999, and Dawson, 1994, who relies on social identity theory). But in general, we need to know much more. What is it about groups that distinguishes them from individuals, from conversational pairs, and from institutions? What theories do we have that tell us what variables make a group a group? These questions were well addressed by many of the classic group studies which launched this essay. We need to better address them today.

To be sure, it is much easier to study group variables in political psychology when the group is small. The contemporary literatures I've mentioned take up large—actually, huge—social groups in society. It is a monumental task to pose sophisticated questions about individuals while simultaneously exploring the dynamics of groups with membership in the millions. We are ill trained for such an enterprise, which requires methods and sensibilities rooted in a variety of disciplines, including not only political science and psychology, but sociology and history as well. But the payoffs to doing so are great, as the notable exceptions show (e.g., Cohen, 1999; Dawson, 1994; McAdam, 1982).

How do we move with renewed vigor toward the study of groups? There are several possible lines of advance. They all share in common a methodological move. The methodological unit of analysis in contemporary literatures has tended to be the individual, with only occasional work striking off into the analysis of individuals embedded in social environments (Kinder & Mendelberg, 1995; Oliver & Mendelberg, 2000). To understand groups we need to study the group as a unit of analysis (though not as the only unit of analysis). We need to focus

<sup>6</sup> This is beginning to change in political science as more work comes out on differences across racial and ethnic groups with different historical and structural experiences (Oliver & Wong, 2003). There is also growing interest in how subordinate groups develop political consciousness, with some attention to individual-level variables (Cohen, 1999; Davis & Brown, 2002; Dawson, 1994, 2001; Gurin, Hatchett, & Jackson, 1989; Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Hochschild 1995; McAdam, 1982; Tate, 1993).

more attention on the group characteristics and processes in which individuals are embedded and conduct more multilevel work that attends to the individual operating within an environment of group characteristics.

One promising area is deliberative democracy, which tends to take place in groups (a neglected but important fact). Along with a general resurgence of interest in civic participation and civic life (APSA's Standing Committee on Civic Education and Engagement, 2004), attention to the democratic potential of citizen deliberation has intensified dramatically in recent years (Barabas, 2004; Delli Carpini, Cook, & Jacobs, 2003, 2004; Fung, 2004; Gastil, 1993; Iyengar, Luskin, & Fishkin, 2003; Karpowitz, 2003; Mendelberg & Karpowitz, forthcoming; Sulkin & Simon, 2001; Walsh, 2004a, 2004b; see also the more established literature on conversation partners, e.g., Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Mutz, 2002; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Mutz, Reeves, & Taylor, 2001). Theorists and real-world practitioners have both been involved in bringing the potential of public discussion to public awareness. Government units at all levels, from federal agencies to state and local governing boards, and in hundreds of cities and even in states (such as Oregon), have turned to town-meeting style forums to encourage citizen participation (Ryfe, 2005). That participation is, by design, highly specific—it is centered not on individual acts such as voting, writing letters, working on campaigns, or contributing money, and not on interaction between people in pairs, but on a discursive exchange among people in a group setting. Delli Carpini and colleagues estimate that approximately 25% of the public attends a meeting to discuss a public issue at least once a year (2003, pp. 14–15). This figure conforms to similar estimates from the National Election Studies (APSA, 2004). Increasingly, whether through the initiative of policymakers or on the instigation of ordinary citizens, the “real world” is practicing deliberation, often in group settings.

There have been few but highly informative studies of these real world deliberations. The classic work is by Mansbridge (1983), who conducted lengthy participant observation of New England town meetings and a participatory workplace in Chicago. Importantly for this essay, all of these are essentially group situations. The book is neglected in political psychology, perhaps because it emphasizes a normative and sociological approach, but actually it has rich insights for political psychology. Mansbridge posits a continuum of democracy running between two opposing archetypes: adversarial and unitary. In adversarial democracy, preferences are fixed, and the purpose of discussion is to negotiate and logroll. The protection of interests is the chief goal, to be assured by procedures such as one person one vote. On the other hand, in unitary democracy, preferences are not fixed, and the purpose of discussion is to arrive at common understandings based on empathy and a sense of linked fate.<sup>7</sup> Relevant procedures for unitary democ-

<sup>7</sup> Although in recent work Karpowitz and Mansbridge (2005) argue that during deliberation participants should not only forge common interests but also attempt to discover existing interests in a process of “dynamic updating.”

racy include equal speaking opportunities and regular deliberative events. In other words, unitary democracy rests on deliberation, and deliberation is only suitable in unitary democracy.

The thick descriptions and her close-to-the-ground observations of these meetings, coupled with her strong and clearly delineated arguments, are fertile ground for sharply differentiated hypotheses about groups that political psychologists could formulate and test. For example, ongoing work by Karpowitz (Karpowitz, 2003; Karpowitz & Mansbridge, 2005) takes Mansbridge's distinction between unitary and adversary systems seriously and puts it to a test in a town undergoing lively debates about its future as a community. Corroborating Mansbridge, Karpowitz finds that some citizens who participated in unitary-style, deliberative meetings were more supportive of the apparent consensus emerging from these meetings; but others were not, and in fact perceived the meetings as unfair and biased (Karpowitz, 2003). Intersecting with the work of Tyler (2001), he finds that the opportunity for voice alone does not fully predict satisfaction; obtaining one's preferred outcome also determines satisfaction with deliberation. And in fact, when deliberation does not create consensus, those who stand apart from the will of the majority emerge all the more determined to fight on, with as adversarial an arsenal as possible. The latter point is echoed in Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) as well as Mendelberg and Oleske (2000). Hibbing and Theiss-Morse (2002) argue that sometimes, the opportunity to express one's voice backfires when the target—in this case, an authority figure—does not appear to take that voice into full consideration.<sup>8</sup> Along similar lines, Mendelberg and Oleske (2000) find that unitary democracy encompasses such normatively undesirable situations as a racially segregated meeting whose purpose is to resist racial desegregation. Furthermore, they find in that setting that language which at first appears to conform to the requirements of normative deliberation and seems universal does not appear that way in meetings where racial diversity creates opinion heterogeneity and thus where conflict is high.

What these and other recent or forthcoming pieces do is to take a normative literature that argues strongly for the desirability of deliberation, and put its sharp predictions to an empirical test (see also Mendelberg, 2002, and Mutz, 2002, although her work has not dealt with groups directly). These strong predictions about what citizens will do in reality if given opportunities to deliberate are at the heart of what is fruitful about the investigation of deliberation. The precise and strong claims about the desirability—or undesirability—of deliberation allow us to bring back the study of group phenomena in a way that will generate productive controversy. In other words, the goal is to steer clear of predictable, “so what” kinds of findings while refocusing attention on the role of groups in the political psychology of individuals.

<sup>8</sup> This study did not use a group situation, so it is not as useful to us in thinking about the resurgence of group studies, but it does help in thinking about fruitful directions more generally.

The work of Druckman offers another interesting and productive recent avenue of research on group deliberation (Druckman, 2004; Druckman & Nelson, 2003). Druckman studies deliberation less from the point of departure of normative expectations for democracy and more as one of several possible constraints on the seemingly irrational, capricious effects of framing on public opinion. Framing effects have generated considerable interest among scholars of public opinion and political psychology because of the normative implication that the public is unable to fulfill its democratic functions without basic levels of opinion stability. If survey questions that differ in seemingly random and small ways can generate vastly different results and political implications (Bartels, 2003), and seemingly small cues in media coverage or political campaigns—even a single word—can dramatically alter public preferences (Mendelberg, 2001), then how can the public be relied upon to have sensible, stable preferences and to hold officials accountable when their actions do not match those preferences? The concern about framing is located in precisely these kinds of seemingly random, and logically equivalent, alterations of information provided to the public.

Druckman turns in part to group deliberation as a solution; group deliberation can serve as the anchor to counter the framing-induced volatility of individual attitudes. As in the work of Mansbridge and studies inspired by it, what matters about groups is their heterogeneity. Druckman randomly assigned individuals to homogenous or heterogeneous groups (as well as to a no-discussion control). He found that groups characterized by a robust diversity of opinion are able to counteract the impact of frames. Conversely, groups with homogenous (relevant) opinions reinforced the misguided confidence people feel in their incorrect decisions. That is, people inclined to mistakenly believe that seemingly disparate but logically equivalent frames are different are substantially reinforced in their mistakes when they talk with similar others. These are not altogether surprising findings given the older literature on “groupthink,” though I note that other work in group deliberation has not found much effect for group heterogeneity or disagreement (Price, Goldthwaite, Cappella, & Romantan, 2003; Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002). But Druckman not only finds strong effects of group heterogeneity, but also points out for the first time the direct implications of opinion diversity for an important normative question about the democratic capacity of ordinary citizens. What is quite surprising, in other words, is that homogenous groups can neutralize the impact of “equivalence”—that is, logically equivalent but seemingly disparate frames—for “experts” (these are people who know more than usual about how to avoid being led astray by such frames and who are well motivated to do so).<sup>9</sup>

This work demonstrates how the resurgence of the group in political psychology can yield insights of great interest well beyond groups and speak to the core issues of the discipline. Those issues include the longstanding normative

<sup>9</sup> Measured by a Need for Cognition scale and the number of courses in economics and statistics.

questions of whether the public can fulfill its democratic role as watchdogs of the elites, or whether instead elites can manipulate the public through seemingly relevant but actually misleading frames. They also include normative issues surrounding public participation in politics and how it can be enhanced in egalitarian and democratic ways.

Now would be a good time to note that an important aspect of these studies is that they study groups, not just pairs (dyads, in “psych speak”). There has been a good deal of work in the past decade or so on political discussion (e.g., Huckfeldt, 2001; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1995; Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, & Levine, 1995; Mutz, 1998, 2002; Mutz & Martin, 2001; Mutz, Reeves, & Taylor, 2001). Conspicuously missing in that literature is the study of groups. There are references to the individual’s social network, but the networks are not studied as networks or groups, but taken apart and studied as the individual discussants of the individual respondent. The unit of analysis remains, almost exclusively, the individual, and the studies ignore the opportunity to examine the network as a supplementary unit of analysis. A partial and welcome exception comes in the few studies that examine the impact of conversation partners on an individual not just in dyads but in some way that accounts for the cumulative effect of multiple discussion partners. Huckfeldt, Beck, Dalton, and Levine, for example, examine “the extent to which the dissemination of public opinion depends on political communication that occurs across the boundaries of cohesive social groups” (1995, p. 1032). In this study the individual’s discussants are not taken one at a time but instead aggregated to form a picture of the person’s immediate social group, which tends to be socially cohesive and offers rather homogenous political views.<sup>10</sup>

In order to move forward we need more studies that take groups as a unit of analysis alongside the individual. That is, we need studies that employ multi-level analysis where the individual functions as part of a group and each influences the other. These can be laboratory based studies, but they can also consist of field experiments that make good use of naturally occurring deliberative events (e.g., Walsh, 2004b) or participant observation of racial talk (Harris-Lacewell, 2004; Walsh, 2004a). Of course, the deliberative poll is an example of how to do both—have controlled experiments in natural settings that mimic and contribute to real-world political exchanges among representative samples of voters (Luskin, Fishkin, & Jowell, 2002). The key in the analysis of deliberative polls is to examine not only the individual but also the deliberating group.<sup>11</sup>

In 1961 Sidney Verba published his first book, *Small Groups and Political Behavior*. In this book Verba argued that political scientists should pay close

<sup>10</sup> There is good reason to study the social forces embedded in group discussion. As Mutz notes, “in personal, face-to-face settings, the observer and the observed can continuously monitor one another; thus there is a tremendous potential for normative social influence” (1998, p. 205).

<sup>11</sup> Luskin, Fishkin, and Jowell (2002) attempt a group analysis but they have too few groups to work with. A more robust attempt is found in Price et al., 2003.

attention to group settings in analyses of public opinion. He sought to demonstrate “that the small group approach, at first glance quite remote from the study of political affairs, has certain unique contributions to make to political science” (1961, p. 3). But the book did not make much of a splash, and Verba went on to help found the tradition of individual-level survey analysis of political behavior. The rest of the discipline followed that latter track, abandoning the path laid out in Verba’s first book. It is past time that we return to Verba’s original exhortation and take up the study of small groups in political behavior. The results will no doubt illuminate far more than small groups, shedding light on civic participation, leadership, social cleavages, and processes of communication, among other topics of great and lasting interest to political psychologists.

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