

PSYCHOLOGY AS A SITE FOR POLITICAL DEBATE¹

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The discipline of psychology consists of an eclectic collection of diverse studies oddly collected together within one academic rubric. We find clinical, social, developmental, experimental, theoretical, historical understandings of the psyche with diverse interpretations of self/soul/mind/brain/behaviour/cognition/subjectivity. This diversity is enough to create voracious political partisanship within the discipline. Vast differences in orientation across fields of inquiry tend to generate uncongenial political debate.

The question of whether psychology as a whole is a suitable site for political debate tacitly proposes a topic around which psychology's divergent interests might come together. Perhaps this kind of political discussion could further understanding between uncongenial schools and camps. Debating what is the correct orientation to the subject of psychology has generated entrenched and unyielding positions but perhaps inquiry into underlying political ideologies would help us to understand the diversity of approaches. An understanding of the political dimensions of the psyche of psychology might help to sketch some useful common ground.

We can begin with theoretical insights into the relationship between the psyche and politics. Psychoanalytic theorists explain how the private domain of the psyche reflects characteristics of the political domain and conversely how political features of one's society also affect the emergence of psychological characteristics. This understanding begins with Freud's general claim that social and psychic dynamics are interrelated. As we both resist and understand the political dimensions of our existence we thereby come to understand and resist ourselves.

In this case, political debate is entirely appropriate to psychological inquiry because our political beliefs are implicit in our understanding of the psyche and our approaches to research. What we determine to be the subject of our research in psychology is going to be shaped by our political beliefs. Are we implicitly promoting a liberal, communitarian, anarchic, autocratic, democratic, or technological understanding of self? It makes a difference in psychology to the assumptions that we make and in our approach to research. The questions we ask and the ways we attempt to answer them are shaped by our understanding of how to govern the self. Thus political inquiry is not only appropriate but also ethically necessary for the disciplines of psychology to explicate the vision of the good life they are tacitly promoting.

There may be no escaping the interpolation of the political into the subject of psychology. This speaks to psychology's responsibility to become aware of how political understandings are always already present in the diversity of research agendas. Awareness of political ideologies that constitute psychology may further our understanding as a unified but multivocal discipline while generating greater respect for our differences and greater trust from a public that can discern our politics.

¹ Published as Baydala, A. (2002). Psychology as a site for social political inquiry, *PsyPAG Quarterly*, December.