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A Political Psychology

Marshall H. Segall

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*Human Behavior and Public Policy:
A Political Psychology*

Marshall H. Segall
Syracuse University

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About the Author

Marshall H. Segall (Ph.D. Northwestern University) is Chairperson of the Graduate Interdisciplinary Social Science Program in the Maxwell School of Syracuse University. As Professor of Social and Political Psychology at Syracuse, he directed that university's Program of Eastern African Studies for several years.

An early participant in the development of cross-cultural psychology, Professor Segall has spent many years in Africa where he founded the psychology program at Makerere University in Uganda and conducted research projects reported in numerous journal articles and in the co-authored volume (with Donald Campbell and Melville Herskovits), *The Influence of Culture on Visual Perception*. His other publications include *Visual Art: Some Perspectives from Cross-Cultural Psychology*, *Becoming Ugandan: The Dynamics of Identity in a Multi-Cultural African State*, and a fieldwork manual for cross-cultural research on communication via facial expression (with Carolyn Keating and Allan Mazur). He is now completing a textbook on cross-cultural psychology.

Professor Segall is an active member of the American Psychological Association, the Society for the Psychological Study of Social Issues, the International Association of Cross-Cultural Psychology, the Society for Cross-Cultural Research, and the International Studies Association.

Preface

My aim in this book is to stimulate academic psychologists and their students to consider whether knowledge of the hows and whys of human behavior matters to anybody else. Should persons outside the academy care about psychological data and theories? Conversely, should psychologists attend to what non-psychologists need to know? In short—is psychology, and ought it be, relevant?

I am convinced, as are many (but by no means all) of my professional colleagues, that the facts and theories that have been generated by psychological research comprise practical knowledge of potentially great value. I view much psychological knowledge as worth acquiring for reasons other than passing courses, earning degrees, and attaining comfortable status in the world-after-college.

That world—the “real world” as many academics half-jokingly dub it—is the psychologist’s ultimate laboratory. It is the origin of all questions that peak the psychologist’s curiosity and the only place in which his/her tentative answers may meaningfully be put to the test. The classroom, the scholar’s study, and the specially contrived psychological laboratory are intellectual sanctuaries into which selected stimuli are allowed to flow and distractions are screened out. The best of these sanctuaries are *not* built of ivy-covered stone; the walls of those that function best are transparent and porous. Many psychological sanctuaries are of this loose-weave variety. Inward through their walls have streamed questions that cause wonder wherever human lives are lived and outward have trickled

some answers that could enhance those lives.

This book, I hope, will demonstrate that the products of psychological research, both the findings that are already extant and those that we are equipped to uncover, contain guidelines for all who seek not only to understand but to improve the way humans relate to their environment and to each other. I have tried to make this book a testament to the proposition that the criterion against which psychology ought be judged is its contribution to the search for a better world. Material included in this book was selected because of its relevance to this search. As clearly as I could, I have tried to make that relevance explicit.

What I have called “the search for a better world” is, of course, not without controversy. Indeed, the search may best be characterized as a weighing and sifting of public policy alternatives, all of which have something to commend them. Policy dilemmas are inherently normative conflicts that are ultimately resolvable only in the political arena. Moreover, their resolution requires multiple contributions from all branches of enquiry—scientific, social scientific, and humanistic. Thus, public policy *cannot* be shaped exclusively by psychology nor can policy dilemmas be resolved by psychologists. But to the degree that public policy dilemmas involve disputes over what the lay person likes to call “human nature,” the policy makers, whoever they are, need the best information psychologists can provide them. It is my conviction that most policy dilemmas involve psychological disputes and that, for many of those dilemmas, psychological disputes are central.

Examining knowledge about *human behavior* for its applicability to *public policy* dilemmas is an ongoing enterprise that I call *political psychology*. This book, then, and the scholarly pursuits which I hope it encourages, comprise an operational definition of “political psychology.” This phrase has been used by others to mean other things—the psychology of politicians and voters, for example—but I would hope that the study of political behavior will come to be seen as part of the much larger enterprise which I am here calling political psychology. Knowledge of voting behavior and theories about the personalities of political elites surely constitute significant aspects of what we need to know as we continue to strive to reshape society into a better home for our psyches. But so is information about socialization practices in different cultures (or for different persons within single cultures), and so are theories about the factors that influence human abilities and skills, and so are the findings of experiments on aggression, on obedience, and on

teachers' expectations regarding their pupils. Indeed, all of these kinds of data and theories may be more central to the enterprise I am calling "political psychology" than is research on political behavior *per se*. Hence, this book deals not with political psychology as the political behavior students define it, but rather with a panoply of somewhat more "basic" psychological issues that have political implications.

If one of the by-products of my definition of political psychology is a blurring of the distinction between basic and applied psychological research, all the better. For, as much of the book attempts to show, that is a pseudo-distinction, an effect of which has been to cause us to overlook much that is already known and useful. Many of today's policy errors might have been avoided had some of yesterday's "basic" information been employed by the policy maker.

I wrote this book in the hope that it would be used in interdisciplinary social science courses, in courses concerned with public affairs, and in psychology courses taught by the increasing number of academics who either share my bias that psychology is and ought to be relevant or who wish to explore that premise with their students. I know that most of their students, like most of mine, wonder whether psychology *is* relevant, and many of them wish it were. Some academics, I know, have been distressed by the clamors of their students for "relevance." In the Sixties, many university teachers, psychologists among them, deplored student challenges to "knowledge for its own sake" and resisted their demands that all intellectual inquiry be bent toward sociocultural change. In the Seventies, those teachers are confronted by a neo-relevance movement, marked by demands that the curriculum become more vocationally oriented. Aspects of these calls for relevance are distressing but I see no satisfactory defense for "knowledge for its own sake." Neither do I see any need for drastic changes in what research we do, how we do it, or in what we teach about what we have learned from that research. What ought to be changed is *how* we teach, and this book constitutes my efforts to facilitate that change.

Rather than teaching psychology as a list of topics that happen to have interested psychologists (e.g., perception this week, attitude change the next), we can expose students to what we have learned in ways that make clear how that information pertains to issues that concern them. College students, preparing for lives and careers, just might find that information worth learning.

It has been my experience at Syracuse that this approach to the teaching of psychology—the approach I have dubbed political psychology—reaches student and, in their vernacular, turns them on. It turns them on to learning much that psychologists have learned, some of it of a rather technical nature and much of it methodological as well as substantive. They do so, I believe, because they see easily why they ought to learn it—because it matters.

To teach psychology in this way is not to pander to anti-intellectualism, to naive revolutionary aspirations, or to renascent Babbity. On the contrary, properly done, it can engender respect for the efforts of the intellectual and awareness that his vineyard is the same one in which the most action-oriented, practical, socially aware among us toil. The university then is seen as a part of the world, not apart from it.

As is often asserted in the following chapters, human behavior is not a random process; it is orderly. It has “causes” and the means to discern those causes are at hand. My own behavior in writing this book and, earlier, in formulating the attitudes that are reflected in it, has been caused by numerous forces. Among them, of course, were social forces—influences derived from other persons. To many, I owe intellectual debts; to others, I owe other kinds of debts, for (often unknown to them) they helped to create a social environment which set the stage for the particular developmental path along which my life has evolved.

Three psychologists, more than any others, have caused me to become a political psychologist. Donald Campbell must, however much it may embarrass him, be designated my mentor. He taught me, as he has taught many others, that there is virtually no question pertaining to human existence that might be ducked by the psychologist. He has shown and continues to show the less creative among us how we might reinterpret what we already know in order to see how it might apply, and, best of all, he has taught us how to revise and sharpen our methodologic and analytic skills to work on problems the solutions of which have thus far escaped us. My intellectual debts to Donald Campbell will be obvious to the reader throughout this book.

Leonard Doob has served preeminently as a role model for me. How much I have emulated him and how great the gap between model and follower will be apparent to any who have read his pathfinding works in political psychology—on propaganda, on culture-change in Africa, on the psychology of nationalism, and on efforts to resolve international conflicts.

To Otto Klineberg, I owe another significant debt. It is to this

pioneer social psychologist, who dared to study intergroup relations in the United States and among nations in the world at a time when academic respectability demanded obeisance to “pure science,” that I and all other political psychologists must attribute our courage. We need so little because he displayed so much.

To Dean Alan Campbell of the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University must be credited the maintenance of an intellectual atmosphere that encourages all social scientists, psychologists included, to apply themselves to the policy dilemmas of the city and the world. And the founders of the Maxwell School must be noted for their wisdom, some 50 years ago, in creating the chair of Professor of Social and Political Psychology and placing in it Floyd Allport. This book has been written mostly in my Maxwell School office, which I will always think of as Floyd’s.

Numerous colleagues at Syracuse—among them Arnold Goldstein, Sidney Arenson, and Clive Davis—and many students—including Walt Shepard, Susie Kelman, Sharon Dyer, Carrie Faupel-Keating, Robert Feldman, David Giltrow, Geri Kenyon, Maire Dugan and Jane Steinberg—bore with me during the years this book germinated and took shape. They all contributed to its completion. The perseverance and skills of Sarah LaMar and Penny Andreas, who transcribed my notes and prepared the manuscript, were beyond all reasonable expectation. And two first-rate executive secretaries—Gloria Katz and Ann Hayes—relieved me of burdens that would have kept this book an unrealized ambition. To all—my thanks.

Marshall H. Segall

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Psychology's real-world relevance

By the latter half of the 20th century, psychology could claim to have become a productive science. From meager beginnings toward the end of the 19th century, marked by the accomplishments of a few philosophers and physiologists like Wundt in Germany and Sechenov in Russia and self-declared psychologists like James and Titchener in the United States, the scientific study of human behavior has grown steadily. In the brief course of 100 years, psychology has become a thriving intellectual enterprise involving thousands of researchers in many hundreds of centers throughout the world.

Each month, in dozens of different periodicals, there appear reports of new empirical research findings, as well as conceptual articles in which earlier findings are interpreted in the light of various psychological theories. The sheer quantity of behavioral facts (not to mention the varieties of competing interpretations which the facts have spawned) that line the library shelves exceeds the ability of any single reader to digest them. So, it may confidently be asserted, a very considerable body of psychological information has accumulated during psychology's first century as a science.

Certainly, the time has come to ask whether all this information adds up to knowledge. And, if it is knowledge, whether it is useful. What have psychologists learned about human behavior and what difference would it make if more people knew what the psychologists have learned? Have they, in fact, learned anything coherent

about human nature in a century of effort to develop a science of behavior? Is what they've learned of any value to those who would attempt to improve the quality of human life?

Questions like these have influenced the writing of this book. Admittedly, however, the questions are rhetorical; the book has been written with the conviction that considerable information is available about the hows and whys of human behavior and that this comprises a form of knowledge that *does* have implications for public policy. The intent of the book, then, is to review some examples of psychological knowledge and to consider some of their policy implications.

It is, thus, a book with a definite point of view. Some readers might label this a bias or a prejudice, since, at the very outset of the book, before any evidence could possibly be marshaled to support it, a bold assertion is being made: to wit, *there are significant insights latent in the findings of scientific psychology which could enhance general understanding of social problems and guide the formation and implementation of policies to ameliorate them.*

A claim such as this cannot go unchallenged. Many people doubt its validity, and for more than one reason.

To begin with, there are many who challenge the very premise that psychology is scientific, or can ever become scientific. These people, impressed by the dazzling variety of behavioral patterns which humans display, bewildered by the array of environmental events which comprise the context in which behavior occurs, and confronted by the phenomenological "evidence of wilful control over their own actions, conceive of behavior as essentially unpredictable." As B.F. Skinner has commented, "It is easy to conclude that there must be something about human behavior which makes a scientific analysis . . . impossible" (Skinner, 1971, p. 7).

Those persons who cling to the view that behavior is just the outward manifestation of self-regulating, free-willed, autonomous beings, functioning haphazardly, are not even likely to read this book. Why not? Because people tend to expose themselves to information that supports the beliefs they hold and to shun communications that challenge them.

The principle of selective exposure to attitudinally relevant information may be derived from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and has received empirical support from many studies (e.g., Erlich *et al.*, 1957) which showed that recent car buyers read more advertisements about cars they had already chosen than about cars they had rejected. Freedman and Sears (1965) also