Research on Political Socialization: A Historical and Contemporary Overview

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Abstract

Political beliefs vary from person to person. The question is, how do they acquire them? The solution is believed to be rooted in political socialization. Socialization is the process of acquiring values, beliefs, and political orientations, and it teaches individuals acceptable norms and behaviours to ensure society's functioning. Humans can function within society once they learn its norms and behaviour. Political socialization is no different. Political socialization teaches humans acceptable norms and behaviours by showing how others act and think in political culture. Considerably, there has been an increased focus on political socialization research. There is an obvious possibility that in new and re-established democracies, concerns are being raised about the next generation'' political awareness and values. Understanding political socialization as a way to get plugged into a regime's political culture comprises cognitive, normative, and affective components. The origin and evolution of political attitudes and their change throughout life were the subjects of different studies. Research on political socialization proliferated through the 1960s and 1970s among scholars in Political Science, Sociology, Education, and Psychology. This paper reviews and synthesizes researchers' attempts at political socialization.

Keywords

Political Socialisation, Political Attitudes, Political Learning, Political Beliefs

Introduction

Political socialization refers to forming political beliefs and opinions that impact an individual's behaviour in social contexts. The acquisition of political attitudes, beliefs, opinions, and behaviours occurs through political socialization. Fred I. Greenstein comprehensively defines this process as "political learning, formal and informal, deliberate and accidental, throughout the lifespan, encompassing explicit political learning as well as seemingly non-political education of socially relevant political attitudes." People learn about how the political system works through political socialization. Learning about their political culture, values, and ideologies, they better understand how government should operate.

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Socialization passes on both written and unwritten rules of society generationally. Being a part of a community and learning about its customs and traditions strengthens an individual's connection to the political world by enhancing their political identity on a personal level. Their role as active citizens is explained to them, and they may decide to get involved in politics. Early studies of formal training for democratic citizenship dating back to the 1900s laid the foundation for the concept of political socialization. It was believed that parents and teachers would instil the political system's norms and values in children through hierarchical teaching methods.

Since the introduction of the term 'Political Socialization' by Herbert Hyman in 1959, there has been a multitude of studies conducted from the 1950s to the 1980s aimed at comprehending how people learn about government and form political opinions. The focus of these studies was on topics such as partisan identification, trust in government institutions and actors, and voting behaviour. However, by the 1990s, questions were raised about the underlying theoretical assumptions, such as system stability and citizen compliance. Surveys were heavily utilized to examine complex relationships. In recent years, political socialization has been revitalized with an emphasis on civic engagement and civic education, as there is increasing concern about low political interest, modest participation, and turnout among youth.

The field of political socialization is growing, with a surge in classroom civics instruction and service learning. Scholars in the academic community are giving growing attention to the study of both the normative and behavioural aspects of non-electoral involvement and mass media's influence on political socialization. The emergence of digital technologies and the internet has opened up new avenues for research in this field.

Communication scholarship has contributed to the revitalization of socialization scholarship by developing theoretical and analytical frameworks. A concept such as deliberative democracy has been associated with research on political socialization since scholars use political discussion to socialize and learn about politics.

Background

Only in the past few decades has political socialization become a central research concern. It is not surprising that political philosophers have been fascinated by how a child acquires behaviours appropriate to being a citizen since Plato and Aristotle. Nevertheless, until a few decades ago, political scientists devoted little to systematically studying this phenomenon. In 1959, American sociologist Herbert Hyman published a book titled *Political Socialization: A Study in the Psychology of Political Behavior* to bring attention to what he viewed as an essential and under-explored field of research within political science. Hyman aimed to encourage them

to pay more attention to this neglected field. This research aimed to consolidate the limited information currently available on the political inclinations of children and youth.

He argued that "political behaviour" is "patently" "learned behaviour" and therefore represents a unique perspective. In the decade following his seminal book on political socialization, Dennis (1968) and Marsh (1971) critiqued published research that they argued was lacking theoretical and operational rigor. Using the literature to synthesize, he outlined the relations between participation, party orientation, and democratic versus authoritarian tendencies and highlighted areas that require further study.

Two types of knowledge-related goals are generally sought in political socialization research. The purpose of this research, in the first place, is to gain a deeper understanding of how political systems function and develop over time. Furthermore, researchers want to find out how individuals develop a political identity. Researchers who study political socialization begin by examining the political system. Their research aims to determine whether there are any differences between how political systems function and develop. From this viewpoint, political socialization is seen as a way to promote support for existing political systems and enhance them through the development of public opinion. For political systems to function effectively, it is assumed that individuals' knowledge, opinions, skills, attitudes, behaviours, and patterns significantly influence how they perceive politics, make decisions, and behave. A growing consensus suggests that governance, harmony, cooperation, and a country's political stability are closely tied to its political socialization. The concept of political socialization, viewed as a "system," refers to the process by which individuals form political views that eventually aggregate and shape the nation's political landscape.

Political socialization is a major focus in political science, beginning with Hyman (1959) and including prominent scholars such as Dawson (1966), Greenstein (1965), and others. In addition, several social science theorists have explored the intersection of politics and socialization, including C. H. Cooley, Jean Piaget, Robert M. Bourdieu, Berger and Luckmann, and Kohlberg.

Political socialization can broadly be divided into two categories: intergenerational transmission of a society's political culture (Langton, 1969) and personal growth in an individual's values and self-identity (Sears, 1975). The concept of political socialization has caused some confusion in sociology due to the wide variety of perspectives on its definition. The beginnings of research on political socialization are a matter of dispute, with some authors, such as Niemi and Hepburn (1995), considering it a continuation of 1950s research on political behaviour. Although Columbia Studies are not explicitly identified as political socialization research,

their innovative approach and significant findings make them widely considered the first survey-based attempt in the field (Berelson et al., 1954).

The field of political socialization has undergone numerous changes and developments. During the late 1950s and early 1960s, political socialization researchers' main areas of interest were childhood socialization and ideology. Later, these scholars shifted their focus to the direct impact of media messages on political socialization. Additionally, the focus shifted from studying childhood to adolescence: a phase of citizens' political development.

In simpler terms, political socialization researchers seek to answer the question: What determines the timing, manner, and factors leading to individuals acquiring political knowledge and forming political opinions, attitudes, skills, behavioural intentions, and patterns? Furthermore, how do these relate to the political system and their cognitions, opinions, attitudes, skills, behavioural intentions, and patterns?

Based on these objectives, the following sub-fields of study can be established: political systems, forces of political socialization, and steps involved in political socialization. The early 1900s were characterized by significant changes brought about by globalization and the rise of new development models. These exogenous forces of globalization and modernization have transformed nations' socio-economic, cultural, and political structures. As described by Austin and Nelson, political socialization is "the process of acquiring relevant knowledge, skills, and dispositions that enable individuals to function successfully within a socially and politically based environment." In Ball's definition, developing attitudes and beliefs toward the political system is the process of political socialization. This paper provides an overview of political socialization studies so far. We then conceptualize how political socialization is shaped to draw insights for future research.

Review of Political Socialisation Studies so far

Political socialization has a multifaceted history. As early as the beginning of the century, there were some intellectual origins within the field of education research. This section aims to analyze in depth the existing research published in academic journals and other literature, which led to the development of this review. Based on our extensive search of the literature, we uncovered 18 publications that are relevant to the topic.

Particularly Merriam's (1931) study of formal aspects of civic training during the 1920s and 1930s and Inkeles, Levinson (1969), who studied inter-nation personality differences during and after World War II, provides another example of intellectual ancestry. The Newcomb (1943) study at Bennington is widely recognized as the preeminent examination of political attitudes in the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s.

Additionally, several studies, such as Hollingshead (1949) and Stevenson & Stuart (1958), have investigated children's views on social class and race.

In the late 1950s, three roughly concurrent developments initiated a sustained and focused study of political socialization. Herbert Hyman's book, *Political Socialization* (1959), was the first to define the subfield by summarizing much of the existing literature at the time. In addition, Easton and Hess initiated two studies at the universities of Chicago and Yale. These two studies have revealed somewhat surprising findings about children's political idealization. These findings have been summarized by Greenstein (1965), Hess & Torney (1967), and Easton & Dennis (1969). Research conducted in New Haven and Chicago explored the formation of political attitudes among elementary school children using data collected from various grade levels. Children's perspectives on authority are shaped by their experiences and subsequent studies.

The study by Jennings, M. K., & Niemi, R. G. (1974) brought another significant development in the mid-1960s. The study aimed to identify young people's political ideas more precisely by interviewing their parents, teachers, and school principals. Like other studies that examined pre-adult political learning, this study draws heavily on election studies from the 1940s (particularly Bernard R. Berelson & Paul F. Lazarsfeld & William N. McPhee, 1954; Campbell et al., 1960). The study identified the family as a significant factor in shaping political attitudes and behaviour, especially regarding voting and partisanship. Accordingly, political socialization places substantial emphasis on party identification and agent strength in socialization.

Research in several fields began in the early 1970s to fill in apparent gaps in earlier research and broaden its scope. Investigators began their study by examining subgroups of the American population, particularly those with attitudes different from those of middle-class whites. The level of trust that blacks and whites place in politicians has been reported to differ in various studies (Abramson, 1977). Additionally, extensive research has been conducted on Mexican-American children (Garcia, 1973) and rural Appalachian youths (Hirsch, 1971), and numerous articles have also been written on these groups.

Socialization studies have also undergone an internationalization trend. It is important to note that Torney's (1975) survey of civics education in 10 countries from 1971 provides a comprehensive overview of the subject matter. There have been several efforts to address methodological challenges in the study of political socialization, including works by Greenstein & Tarrow (1970), Vaillancourt (1973), Niemi (1974), and Tedin (1976). Studying the effects of socialization is like putting a puzzle together. Each study brings another piece to the table, slowly revealing the underlying patterns and complexities contributing to the whole picture.

The world of political socialization has undergone a radical shift in recent years. This work is interconnected in three ways, emphasizing studying the adult life span in recent years. Most of a person's physical, psychological, and social development occurs during childhood and adolescence, and adulthood is a period of relative stability. Our brains are still developing during childhood and adolescence, and we are open to more influences than we are in adulthood. This is the reason why adults tend to be more resistant to change.

On the other hand, generational, period, and life cycle effects can still cause changes in our attitudes and beliefs throughout adulthood. Do significant adult changes arise solely from generational differences? Do adults develop politically in stages? Do major or catastrophic events cause most changes? This emphasis on external factors in adult socialization calls for a deeper examination of the political and social impacts of various events and generational changes.

This phenomenon also highlights the importance of considering multiple disciplines when analyzing the trajectory of individuals and societies. Socialization research in this area comprises much theoretical and relatively little empirical work. These guidelines can provide a valuable starting point for exploring how individuals learn about and form political beliefs.

Media and peer influence on forming political beliefs and attitudes has become the focus of political socialization research. Additionally, technology, globalization, and social media have been gaining attention. There has been a considerable amount of attention given to the role of media messages in political socialization and its direct effects on it. Additionally, the focus shifted from studying childhood to adolescence: a phase of citizens' political development.

Conclusion

Though still widely accepted, many findings of political socialization research may need to be updated or a product of spurious variables in light of more recent studies. Moreover, today social media has also emerged as a significant socializing agent for developing political attitudes and preferences in the modern world. Other socialization agents may be overlooked as a result of this phenomenon. As a secondary point, researchers often justify their studies by highlighting that political attitudes and preferences learned in childhood are likely to persist throughout life. Accordingly, early adoption results in a higher level of persistence in political attitudes and values. Furthermore, some scholars believe that the aging effect significantly impacts attitudinal change, thereby underestimating how adults can change their attitudes.

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