

# Social psychology and politics



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# Introduction

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In this free course, *Social psychology and politics*, you will look at how social psychology can help you to better understand politics. You will explore how and why people engage with politics, e.g. through social movements, protests and activism. You might be asking yourself: why would a *social psychologist* be interested in all of this, rather than a politician, a policy-maker, an economist, or a political theorist? The answer – as you will see in this course – is that many of the concepts that social psychologists are interested in, such as personality, identity and groups, are relevant to the ways in which people relate to political processes. During this course you will be introduced to some of the ways that social psychologists have considered the political. You will also be encouraged to think critically about the norms of ‘good citizenship’ and consider how psychologists themselves can be activists.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD317 Advancing social psychology](#).

# Learning Outcomes

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After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand why social psychologists are interested in politics
- understand the role of personality, groups and sociocultural context in political action
- understand what is meant by 'scholar activism'.

# 1 Social psychology and the study of politics

In 2016, there were numerous political changes across the globe, contradicting assumptions about the political world that many people may have taken for granted. For example, in the United Kingdom, this could be seen in the 'Brexit' vote (i.e. the referendum vote in favour of Britain leaving the European Union) and, in the USA, in the unexpected election of Donald Trump as President. These are not just changes to political worlds; they also represent profound changes to psychological and social worlds: to how people see themselves in relation to others. For instance, the vote to leave the European Union not only caused political rifts in the UK, but also redefined relationships between families and friends (e.g. see the *Guardian's* article: [Families divided by Brexit](#), 2016); a good reminder of how the 'personal' is also 'political' and vice versa.

Social psychology attempts to understand such political events by asking fundamental questions about how and why people engage with political processes and structures. Why do people vote the way they do? Why do some people become activists, while others do not get involved? What is the appeal of the political ideologies to which some devote their lives? How do people understand politics in an everyday sense?

The answers to these questions can be quite different depending on what social psychological approach you take. For some social psychologists, the answers lie within the individual, e.g. as part of their personality. Others, however, look for answers at the group level, or their social identity, e.g. in the ways in which identities are related to the groups to which people feel they belong. And finally, some take a more sociocultural perspective, looking at the ways in which politics relates to broader cultures and discourses that construct social worlds and determine the possibilities for political action. In the following three sections you will examine examples from each of these different social psychological approaches – i.e. *personality, social identity, and social constructionist approaches* – and how they can be used to help better understand the political. Each of these approaches is also covered in the Open University course DD317 *Advancing social psychology*.

## 1.1 Consolidation quiz

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered so far.

### Activity 1 Consolidation quiz

Answer the following multiple choice questions, then read the feedback below.

1. Social psychologists are interested in the study of politics because:
  - ☐ (a) Social psychology can provide important insight into how people engage with the political
  - ☐ (b) Social psychological concepts are important for understanding political concepts

- (c) Political issues have social and psychological consequences
- (d) All of the above

#### Discussion

D is the correct answer here. Social psychologists are interested in studying the political because social psychological concepts, theories and research are highly relevant to the ways in which people relate to political processes and structures. This can aid understanding of how such structures and processes function (or not!). Likewise, the political is an important aspect of social worlds, and therefore the political has much to reveal about the relationship between the individual and the social, which is a key question in social psychology.

2. If a social psychologist took an individual-based approach to the study of politics, they would likely focus on:

- (a) Personality
- (b) Group structures
- (c) Culture
- (d) Social identities

#### Discussion

A is the correct answer here. Social psychologists who take an individual-based approach to the study of politics might, for example, examine the relationship between political behaviour and personality. This will be covered in Section 2.

3. A group-based approach to the study of politics would include investigating:

- (a) The link between personality and political behaviour
- (b) The link between personality and culture
- (c) How people's identities relate to their group memberships
- (d) How people's identities relate to their personalities

#### Discussion

C is the correct answer here. A group-based approach would look at how political actions and behaviours relate to a person's group memberships. This will be covered in Section 3.

4. Social constructionist approaches are an example of:

- (a) An individual perspective
- (b) A group-based perspective
- (c) A sociocultural perspective
- (d) All of the above

#### Discussion

C is the correct answer here. Social constructionist approaches are an example of a sociocultural perspective. They focus on the ways in which the political relates to broader cultural understandings and discourses that construct social worlds, and determine the possibilities for social and political action. This will be covered in Section 4.

## 2 Politics and personality

Social psychology has a long history of examining the relationship between the personal and the political. Much of this work has focused on the concept of personality – a highly familiar, and yet complex, psychological concept. Traditionally, personality is viewed by psychologists as the collection of traits, needs, values, self-beliefs, and social attitudes that make a person unique. This approach also suggests that each person exhibits consistent and stable patterns of behaviour across situations and contexts (McCrae and Costa, 2008). Researchers working with this approach explore differences between people at the level of their personalities, and how these *individual differences* have a meaningful and predictable impact on political attitudes and behaviours.

The earliest example of this approach is *The Authoritarian Personality* by Adorno, Frenkel-Brunswick, Levinson and Sanford (1950), who proposed a specific set of personality characteristics (the ‘authoritarian personality’) to explain why some people were drawn to prejudiced and anti-democratic political beliefs, while others were not. Although there have been serious criticisms of the work of Adorno et al. (Christie, 1954; Christie and Cook, 1958; Stone, Lederer and Christie, 1993), there have also been some significant findings in this field of research. For example, it is often the case that those who score highly on the right-wing authoritarianism scale are more highly prejudiced towards out-groups and minorities (e.g. Altemeyer, 1981).

Since this early work, there has been an explosion of research on the relationship between personality and politics including (but not limited to): whether people self-identify as liberal or conservative (Jost, 2006), who people choose to vote for (Caprara, Barbaranelli, and Zimbardo, 1999; Caprara, Schwartz, Capanna, Vecchione, and Barbaranelli, 2006; Schoen and Schumann, 2007), and what political candidates people prefer (Barbaranelli, Caprara, Vecchione, and Fraley, 2007). This research shows a relatively consistent pattern of findings, for example, that those who identify with, and vote for, left-wing political parties tend to describe themselves as more open-minded and creative, while those who identify with, and vote for, more right-wing political parties tend to describe themselves as more orderly, conventional and organised. What this suggests is that people who vote for different political parties are also different at the level of their individual psychologies, and this can explain differences in voting patterns.

### 2.1 Consolidation quiz

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered here.

#### Activity 2 Consolidation quiz

Answer the following multiple choice questions then read the feedback below.

1. Which of the following statements form part of the definition of personality:
  - ☐ (a) The set of traits, needs, values, self-beliefs, and social attitudes that determine a person's personal identity
  - ☐ (b) Relatively stable over time
  - ☐ (c) Useful in predicting people's political beliefs, attitudes and behaviours

- (d) All of the above

#### Discussion

D is the correct answer here. Traditionally, personality is viewed by psychologists as the collection of traits, needs, values, self-beliefs and social attitudes that determine personal identity and are relatively stable across time and context. Research shows that personality can have an impact on political beliefs, attitudes and behaviours.

2. A type of personality that is associated with prejudiced and anti-democratic political beliefs is the:

- (a) Introverted personality
- (b) Neurotic personality
- (c) Authoritarian personality
- (d) Democratic personality

#### Discussion

C is the correct answer here. In *The Authoritarian Personality*, Adorno et al. (1950) proposed a specific set of personality characteristics (the 'authoritarian personality') characterised by prejudiced and anti-democratic political beliefs.

3. Research on the relationship between personality and politics shows:

- (a) No relation between personality and political behaviour
- (b) That personality can impact on voting preferences
- (c) That personality is not a useful concept for this field of study
- (d) That personality does not exist

#### Discussion

B is the correct answer here. Research shows that those who vote for different political parties are also different at the level of their individual psychologies, and that this can explain their differences in voting patterns.

## 2.2 Activism orientation

In 2011, following the massive uprisings that came to be known as the Arab Spring, [Time magazine declared 'The Protester' as its person of the year](#). Could anyone be a protester? What is it that makes someone a political activist? To answer this question, Corning and Myers (2002) adopted an individual differences approach (i.e. focusing on the study of personality traits) to study individual political behaviour. These authors set out to develop a way of measuring an individual's 'activism orientation', which they define as:

An individual's developed, relatively stable, yet changeable orientation to engage in various collective, social-political, problem-solving behaviours spanning a range from low-risk, passive, and institutionalized acts to high-risk, active, and unconventional behaviours.

(Corning and Myers, 2002, p. 704)

This definition suggests that each person has a different orientation towards political action, and that this determines how likely they are to take part in political action. Those who are high in activism orientation are much more likely to engage in political action than

those who are low in activism orientation. This orientation is developed through life experiences and socialisation processes, and is thought to be relatively stable. However, this is not to say that it cannot change over time, as ongoing life experiences can change a person's orientation towards activism. Corning and Myers (2002) use the example of going to university, where people may enter new social environments and encounter activists, as an experience that could change people's orientation towards activism.

## 2.3 Are you an activist?

In order to measure a person's activism orientation, Corning and Myers developed the activism orientation scale (AOS, Corning and Myers, 2002). You can use the AOS to measure your own orientation towards activism, and to compare it to the activism orientation of others. You could also use it to track your activism orientation across time (if you feel like completing it more than once!). The AOS has 35 items, and begins with asking how likely it is that you will engage in specific political activities in the future. You can indicate your likelihood for each activity using a scale with points of 0 (extremely unlikely), 1 (unlikely), 2 (likely), or 3 (extremely likely).

You can access [the AOS here](#). Complete the scale and then go to the following section to score your answers and find out your activism orientation.

## 2.4 Assessing your activism orientation

Once you have completed all 35 items on the AOS scale, follow the instructions below to get your AOS score, and find out what this tells you about your activism orientation in relation to others.

### Activity 3 Assessing your activism orientation

1. Sum your answers to all the questions. This should give you a number somewhere between 0 and 105. What does this number mean?

#### Discussion

The higher this number is, the higher your activism orientation is. This tells you something about your propensity to engage in activism overall. At the time of Corning and Myers' (2002) report, the mean activism orientation, based on US American respondents, was 37.81. Is your activism orientation higher or lower than this average?

2. In addition to the measure of activism orientation, the AOS has two subscales: the 'conventional activism subscale' and the 'high-risk activism' subscale.

To get your high-risk activism score, sum your answers to items 5, 14, 16, 17, 21, 28, 35. This should give you a number between 0 and 21.

To get your conventional activism score, subtract your high-risk activism score from your answer to Question 1. This should give you a number between 0 and 84.

What do these numbers mean?

#### Discussion

According to Corning and Myers at the time of their report (2002), using a US American sample of respondents, the mean for the high-risk subscale was 2.92. This



reflects the fact that not many people have an orientation towards high-risk activist behaviours. Was yours higher or lower than this? The mean for conventional activism in the same study was found to be 34.89. Was yours higher or lower than this? What does this tell you about your own propensity to engage in more conventional forms of activism?

## 2.5 Evaluating the activism orientation scale

Having completed the activism orientation scale, think about its strengths and weaknesses.

### Activity 4 Evaluating the activism orientation scale

What were your experiences of filling out the activism orientation scale? How easy or difficult did you find it? Did you feel that it captured and/or explained your feelings and attitudes towards activism?

*Provide your answer...*

### Discussion

You will probably have found this task fairly easy. Scales like this are designed to be straightforward for participants to fill in. On the other hand, you may have found that the scale didn't really relate to you and to your life experiences. Or, that the questions were quite hard to answer (or to answer them in the way that you wanted). A common issue that people raise with these kinds of scales is that it does not allow for an 'it depends' kind of answer. Also, whether or not people are willing to display a political poster, or attend a political meeting, can depend on exactly what political causes such actions relate to. You may feel differently about acting on behalf of a political party as compared to an environmental charity, for example. This can be a problem with scales like this because they attempt to generalise across a variety of different contexts. In theory, it shouldn't be a problem, as your activism orientation – like all individual differences – is thought to be relatively stable and so context shouldn't be an issue. However, there are questions about whether this is always the case, and whether it is possible to generalise across a wide range of different social contexts and conditions under which political action occurs. This point will be picked up again in Section 4 of the course.

## 3 Social identities and collective action

Politics almost always involves social groups. Think back to the 2016 USA election race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton and see if you can list any social groups that you heard about in the coverage of their campaigns. You could be thinking about the different ways in which women and women's groups were discussed and represented, or about how migrants and ethnic minorities were central to many debates. Or, you may be thinking about what it means to be a Republican or a Democrat, left or right wing, American and/or Mexican. These different social categories are a key part of politics. However, they also form an important part of people's psychologies, contributing to their sense of self. For this reason, many social psychologists have long argued that the psychology of groups has much to offer in understanding political processes (Sindic and Condor, 2014).

Much of the study in this area draws on *Social Identity Theory (SIT)*, developed by Tajfel and Turner who wanted to understand the social psychological processes that underpin intergroup relations (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel and Turner, 1979). There is now a collection of social psychological theories, that draws on the basic assumptions of SIT, which is generally called the *Social Identity Approach (SIA)*. The main assumption of this approach is that every person has a distinct personal identity but also social identities that connect them to other people. According to the SIA, group memberships are important parts of a person's self-concept and how they value themselves (e.g. their self-esteem). They provide people with a sense of their place in the world and where they stand in relation to others.

The SIA argues that in certain situations it is social, as opposed to personal, identities that determine how people behave. This is because there are some contexts in which people see themselves and others in terms of specific group memberships, rather than as unique individuals. A good example is sporting events, e.g. a football match, where people are likely to identify with others who are fellow supporters of their team and to see them as being part of their group. Likewise, people are likely to see the opposing team's supporters as members of a different group. In these contexts, it is group memberships that determine how people behave towards others. As you will see in the next section, this has been useful for understanding different aspects of collective political action, such as social movements and political protests.

### 3.1 Consolidation activity

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered here.

#### Activity 5 Consolidation quiz

Determine whether the following statements are examples of personal or social identity:

Statement	Identity
I am a woman	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am a great cook	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I love to dance	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am a Labour member	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I like to read	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am a Manchester United supporter	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am a good singer	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am a Dad	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I am British	<i>Provide your answer...</i>
I want to travel the world	<i>Provide your answer...</i>

### Discussion

Statement	Identity
I am a woman	Social
I am a great cook	Personal
I love to dance	Personal
I am a Labour member	Social
I like to read	Personal
I am a Manchester United supporter	Social
I am a good singer	Personal
I am a Dad	Social
I am British	Social
I want to travel the world	Personal

## 3.2 Social identities and the dynamics of crowds

People are increasingly using mass protest as a method of demanding political changes. Indeed, there has been a surge in protest events across the globe (see the [GDELT Project](#), which maps protests happening around the world). From a social psychological perspective, these events raise a number of important research questions. For example, what governs what happens at such events, and why do some events remain peaceful and others turn conflictual? Social psychologists have found that it is groups and not individuals who are the main engine of social conflict and social change (Reicher, Haslam, Spears and Reynolds, 2012).

One of the earliest studies in this area was a field study of the St Pauls riots in Bristol, England, on 2 April 1980 (Reicher, 1984). These riots started when the police raided the Black and White Café in the St Pauls area of Bristol, against a background of increasing racial tension in major British cities in the 1980s (Reicher, 2001). Reicher's systematic analysis of this event highlighted the ways in which participants described themselves in terms of shared social identities, as members of the St Pauls community. To be from St Pauls for some people meant being oppressed by institutions such as the police, being exploited by financial institutions and living in poverty within an affluent society. Accordingly, the police, financial institutions and symbols of luxury were the targets of attacks during the conflict. The behaviour of the protesters could therefore be understood in relation to their membership to specific groups (Stott, Drury, and Reicher, 2016).



**Figures 1 and 2** Occupy London protest and 'This is what a feminist looks like' shirt – both point to the importance of building shared social identities in political action (e.g. the 99% against the 1%, and feminist identities)

Subsequent studies have led to the development of a general model of crowd behaviour: the *Elaborated Social Identity Model (ESIM)* (Drury and Reicher, 1999; Reicher, 2001; Stott and Drury, 1999; Stott and Reicher, 1998). The ESIM starts from the position that crowd events are typically intergroup encounters, and examines how the identity of a group may develop and change as a result of interactions between groups. For example, a crowd of protesters can become united and develop a shared 'anti-police' identity, when

the police use coercive force that is perceived by protesters as illegitimate and wrong (Reicher, 1996; Reicher and Haslam, 2011; Stott and Reicher, 1998; Stott and Drury, 2000). According to this perspective, the interaction between protesters and the police can explain what turns a crowd from peaceful to conflictual.

### 3.3 Social identities as political motivations

Some researchers have focused on social identity as an individual motivational factor that can help better understand why people engage in collective action (Van Zomeren, 2016; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). One such example is the *Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA)*, which seeks to explain how individuals engage in political action to achieve group goals. This covers a variety of different kinds of political action, including mass revolutions and uprisings (such as the 2011 'Arab Spring' mass protests), or, more typically, when individuals seek change within an existing social system (such as when residents of a neighbourhood collectively organise a collective clean-up of their streets). The SIMCA proposes that there are three core motivations for people to engage in political action:

1. *Group identification*: the degree to which people feel that they are part of a group
2. *Group-based injustice*: the perceived and felt unfairness related to the group's treatment or position in society (e.g. feeling discriminated against)
3. *Group efficacy*: the belief that the group can achieve its goals through collective action

These three core motivations all predict political action, but it is group identification that is the most important. The more strongly a person identifies with a group, the more strongly they perceive they are being discriminated against (group-based injustice), and the more strongly they are likely to believe that the group can achieve its goals through collective action (group efficacy). As an example, consider the protest against the rise of student tuition fees in the UK in 2010. According to the SIMCA, the more an individual identified as a student, the more likely they would have been to feel that they were being discriminated against, and the more likely they would have been to feel that they could achieve their goals through protest than if they didn't identify as a student at all.





**Figure 3** Tuition fees protest in London

## 3.4 Consolidation quiz

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered here.

### Activity 6 Consolidation quiz

Answer the following multiple choice questions and read the feedback below.

1. Social identity approaches argue that:
  - ☐ (a) If people see themselves and others in terms of group membership, then they behave towards others as members of a group rather than as unique individuals
  - ☐ (b) If people see themselves and others in terms of group membership, then they behave towards others as unique individuals as opposed to members of a group
  - ☐ (c) If people see themselves and others in terms of group membership, then their personalities change
  - ☐ (d) All of the above

#### Discussion

A is the correct answer here. Social identity approaches argue that when people are in situations where they see themselves and others as members of a group (e.g. in a crowd protest situation), then they will behave towards others as if they too are members of a group, rather than as a collection of unique individuals. So, for example, at a football match you might identify with others who are supporting your team, and see those supporting the opposing team as members of a different group.

2. Reicher's (1984) analysis of the St Pauls riots in 1980 helped to understand:

- (a) The ways in which crowds are important contexts for mobilising people's social identities
- (b) The ways in which people's actions in crowds are directed by their shared sense of group membership
- (c) The ways in which the actions of crowds are limited and directed by group norms about what is considered appropriate action in a given context
- (d) All of the above

#### Discussion

D is the correct answer here. Reicher's (1984) analysis of the St Pauls riots helped us to understand how people's social identities (e.g. as members of the St Pauls community) can be mobilised in crowd protests. Reicher showed the ways in which people's actions within crowds were related to this shared identity, in the sense that their actions were directed by shared group norms about what was considered appropriate in that context.

3. The Elaborated Social Identity Model of crowd behaviour (ESIM) focuses on:

- (a) How social identity is a core individual motivational factor for engaging in protest
- (b) How social identity is formed as a result of early childhood experiences
- (c) How identities within a group may develop and change as a result of interactions between these groups
- (d) How social identities are not important for understanding events like mass political protests

#### Discussion

C is the correct answer here. The ESIM starts from the position that crowd events are typically intergroup encounters, and examines how group identities may develop and change as a result of interactions between these groups.

Considering the Social Identity Model of Collective Action (SIMCA), decide whether each of the following statements is an example of (a) group identification, (b) group-based injustice, or (c) group efficacy:

I see myself as a student.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy

I feel that we are able to change the government's economic policies of austerity.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy

I feel connected to other students.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy

I feel angry about the gender pay gap.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy



It is not right that the super-rich don't pay their fair share of taxes.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy

I feel we can make a real change in society if we work together.

- (a) group identification
- (b) group-based injustice
- (c) group efficacy

## 4 A social constructionist approach

The focus of a broadly social constructionist approach is on how people construct and create their social worlds through talking, interacting, arguing, and engaging with one another (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1991; 1994; Potter, 2000; Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). This approach requires a certain way of thinking about the social world: rather than seeing it as existing separately from you as an individual, you have to think about how it is socially constructed or made (and remade), and also the implications of different ways of constructing the world.

To help you to begin to think about what this approach might look like in practice, read the following extract taken from a letter to a British newspaper editor about those applying for asylum in the UK:

Bad feeling occurs when refugees are housed ahead of homeless British citizens. No-one begrudges genuine refugees a home, but when bogus ones are housed within weeks and UK citizens, black and white, are left to rot in hostels, it does seem unfair?

(‘Letter to the Editor’; *Daily Express*, 15 August 2001, taken from Lynn and Lea, 2003, p. 433)

In this extract, there are two different ways of talking about or *constructing* refugees – ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’. These have very different implications. ‘Genuine’ refugees are seen to be deserving of a home in the UK, whereas ‘bogus’ refugees are constructed as unfairly taking homes away from others. You might also notice that this is presented as a common-sense fact, as something that ‘everybody knows’, rather than as something that needs to be proven or evidenced in any way. However, ‘genuine’ and ‘bogus’ may be understood differently in different contexts and by different groups of people, and some people might even contest the distinction between these two types of refugees altogether. The social constructionist approach considers the wider sociocultural context in which these constructions are embedded, for example, looking at how ideological traditions shape how people and communities make sense of the world around them.

Social psychologists working in this field are interested in discourses like this because the ways the social world is constructed can have very real social consequences, such as justifying the exclusion of some people from housing in the above example. They also tell us something about how the social world works, e.g. what is considered to be ‘common-sense’ and how these assumptions may change or be contested in different contexts. In other words, this approach helps to understand the politics of common sense, that is, the ways that some constructions become dominant but also how they might be challenged. Relevant research includes studies on how issues like race, immigration, refugees, asylum seekers, terrorism, climate change and war, are constructed in political debates (e.g. De Castella and McGarty, 2011; Every and Augoustinos, 2007; Kurz, Augoustinos, and Crabb, 2010; Tileagă, 2009), and also how these issues are understood by ‘lay’ people in everyday life (e.g. Figgou and Condor, 2007; Gibson and Hamilton, 2011; Andreouli, Greenland and Howarth, 2016).

These approaches invite you to think *critically* about the political: to examine and challenge how different ways of constructing political issues relate to power and to maintaining particular social relations, which are often unequal and exclusionary (Billig et al., 1988). To exemplify these points, the next section looks at the ways in which this

social psychological approach has been applied to understanding one particular aspect of the political: citizenship.

## 4.1 Constructing contemporary citizenship

This section will focus on social psychological work on the concept of *citizenship*.

### Activity 7 Pause for thought

Before you start exploring academic work on citizenship, you should have a think about what citizenship is, and what it means to you. Write a list of all of the things that you think citizenship is and some examples of what you think citizenship looks like.

*Provide your answer...*

Many people think of citizenship as a status: being a member of a nation-state and having a set of rights and duties in relation to that specific national community. The list you just made could include such rights, for example, the right to hold a particular passport, being able to vote, and the ability to travel. Or, you may have outlined duties such as obeying the law, being a member of a jury, and paying taxes. This focus on rights and duties is a conventional understanding of citizenship, however, it is not the only way in which contemporary citizenship can be understood. Your list may, for example, contain ideas about what it means to belong, e.g. that we should share values, common ancestry, or a language. Citizenship is determined by such sets of shared assumptions and expectations about what it means to be a 'good' or 'normal' citizen.

To unpack the meanings of citizenship further, you can think about British citizenship and, in particular, the changes to the rules that allow migrants to formally become British citizens. During 2004–2005, the British government introduced two new processes for all migrants wanting to remain in the UK indefinitely and become citizens: citizenship tests and citizenship ceremonies. The stated aim of these new procedures was to instil new British citizens with a sense of belonging and commitment to the United Kingdom, and to evaluate their knowledge of British culture in order to assess their potential to integrate. These citizenship regulations have been controversial because they draw on ideas of cultural similarity, rather than on political values. In other words, critics argue that this model of British citizenship departs from a civic understanding of citizenship (i.e. based on common political values, such as respect for the rule of law) to a more ethnic understanding of citizenship (i.e. based on common ancestry and cultural traditions).

This example shows that 'what citizenship is' is not static or neutral. On the contrary, it is dynamic and politicised. In this example, changes to British citizenship law can be said to be in line with specific political projects, such as addressing presumed problems of social cohesion. Therefore, while citizenship may appear to be a simple matter of one's legal status, this example shows that defining the boundaries of citizenship is based on assumptions about what holds communities together and therefore who is included and excluded from these communities (Andreouli and Dashtipour, 2014; Barnes, Auburn and Lea, 2004; Gray and Griffin, 2014).

## 4.2 Citizenship as a practice

Social psychologists have argued that citizenship needs to be understood as something that people *do*, as opposed to something that people *have* (Barnes, Auburn and Lea, 2004). Citizenship is studied in this field as a practice through which people make political claims in order to acquire rights and entitlements, but also as a practice of contesting and denying these rights.

The work of Barnes et al. (2004) on New Travellers in England is a good example of this social psychological approach to citizenship. New Travellers, also known as New Age travellers, are communities of people with a nomadic lifestyle originating in the free festival movement of the 1970s. New Travellers, particularly in the summer months, travelled in convoys across the country and camped in festival locations during the 1980s and early 1990s. New Travellers were very often met with local opposition, with groups of local residents protesting and putting pressure on local councils against camping. The media also portrayed them in a negative light, with stories about drug use, squalor and general lack of civility. Eventually, in the beginning of the 1990s, the British government passed legislation that made travelling life difficult (e.g. more stringent laws about trespassing) and, as a result, New Travellers are now a rare sight in Britain.



**Figure 4** Summer solstice sunrise, Stonehenge, Wiltshire, England

For Barnes et al. (2004), debates about the rights of New Travellers to camp in rural areas were essentially debates about the definition of 'normal' and 'good' citizenship. By depicting New Travellers as uncivil invaders who disrupt the normality of rural England, the media and anti-traveller groups were essentially arguing that New Travellers violated the norms of 'good' citizenship. To explore these claims, Barnes et al. studied letters of complaint to local council officials. Their analysis focused on the ways in which claiming citizen identities was used to argue against New Travellers. For instance, by positioning themselves as concerned local citizens, complainants were able to present themselves as representing the views of the entire community and as having the entitlement to speak up against New Travellers and call the local council to account. This study shows the ways in which rights and entitlements are not simply emanating from one's citizenship status, but are built up through processes of claims-making.

## 5 The politics of psychology

So far in this course, you have looked at the different ways in which social psychology can be used to understand the political. But what about the politics of psychology itself? Some social psychologists take an explicitly political stance and actively engage with questions of social justice and social change. While this is not a prevailing perspective in the discipline of psychology, there is a growing number of critically oriented scholars who are challenging the mainstream and are thinking about psychology in a more politically explicit way. Here, you will consider the work of two such psychologists – Mark Burton and Carolyn Kagan – both of whom work in the field of liberation psychology.

### Activity 8 Pause for thought

As you learn about the work of these two academics, reflect on what it means for a discipline to be explicitly political, and whether this is something that we should be striving for. Write down your thoughts now, and then see if these two academics in the following sections can inspire you to rethink your position in any way.

*Provide your answer...*

### 5.1 Liberation psychology: An interview with Mark Burton

Liberation psychology was pioneered by Ignacio Martín-Baró, and informed by the work of the educational philosopher Paulo Freire. Liberation psychologists work with marginalised and oppressed communities to understand and improve the reality of people's lives. Liberation psychology has a much more explicit social justice and social change agenda than would ordinarily be found in more mainstream psychological approaches. It is focused on action and practice; on 'what works' and what is relevant for understanding and transforming the experiences of people in these communities. It also sees the role of psychologists as fundamentally different from mainstream approaches: the psychologist is more engaged and actively involved in social transformation and liberation (Burton, 2004; 2013; Burton and Kagan, 2009).

Listen to the following short interview, where Mark Burton talks about the origins of liberation psychology and discusses six key principles of this approach.

Audio content is not available in this format.

### 5.2 Consolidation quiz

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered here.

### Activity 9 Consolidation quiz

As you saw in the interview extract in the previous section, Mark Burton and his colleagues have come up with six key principles for liberation psychology. Below, you will see the six principles and an example or definition for each one. Match each principle with its correct definition.

Social problems are generated through social processes

Prioritises work with the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised

Consciousness raising

Being critical of the ways in which 'problems' are presented to us

Developing theory from practice and experience

Using more 'creative' approaches, e.g. drama, photo, voice etc.

Match each of the items above to an item below.

Understanding social justice and the social system

Understanding the perspective of people who are in oppressed social systems

Becoming aware of social forces and relations that affect people

Going beyond appearance and questioning ideology

Taking a stance on theory; not being theory led

Taking an eclectic approach to method

#### Discussion

Principle	Definition
Understanding social justice and the social system	Social problems are generated through social processes
Understanding the perspective of people who are in oppressed social systems	Prioritises work with the poor, the vulnerable and the marginalised
Becoming aware of social forces and relations that affect people	Consciousness raising
Going beyond appearance and questioning ideology	Being critical of the ways in which 'problems' are presented to us
Taking a stance on theory; not being theory led	Developing theory from practice and experience
Taking an eclectic approach to method	Using more 'creative' approaches, e.g. drama, photo, voice etc.

## 5.3 Scholar activism: An interview with Carolyn Kagan

The term 'scholar activist' is used to describe academics who take an explicitly political standpoint in their work. These academics use their work to address the big problems of society, for example, inequality and exclusion. They have an explicit social change

agenda and engage in activities like influencing policy or public opinion, or taking part in different forms of social activism (e.g. protest).

Listen to the following short interview, where Carolyn Kagan outlines what it means to be a scholar activist in relation to her own work in liberation psychology. She talks about the importance of including scholar activism in her teaching with students and how universities should use their resources for the betterment of society.

Audio content is not available in this format.

## 5.4 Consolidation quiz

Before you go on to the next section, check your understanding of some key concepts that have been covered here.

### Activity 10 Consolidation quiz

Which of the following ideas does Carolyn Kagan outline as important for being a scholar activist? Choose one from each pair below.

- ☐ Working within your discipline
- ☐ Collaboration
- ☐ Neutrality
- ☐ Working across boundaries
- ☐ Transformational change
- ☐ Scientific rigor
- ☐ Value-free science
- ☐ Partnership
- ☐ Strategic alliances
- ☐ Individualism
- ☐ Taking an objective stance
- ☐ Critical reflection
- ☐ Participatory action research
- ☐ Top-down priorities
- ☐ Critical engagement with policy
- ☐ Producing generalised theories
- ☐ Universalism
- ☐ Reciprocity
- ☐ Mutuality
- ☐ Behaviour change



## Conclusion

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In this free course, *Social psychology and politics*, you have looked at some of the ways in which social psychologists have engaged with the political. Theories of individual differences highlight the ways in which political behaviours, attitudes and beliefs relate to differences in individual psychologies, such as activism orientation. Social identity approaches, on the other hand, look at the ways in which behaviour relates to the groups that people belong to, and highlight the importance of these shared social identities for understanding collective action. Finally, social constructionist approaches focus on the sociocultural context and critically interrogate the ways in which political concepts, like 'good' citizenship, are constructed. This work as a whole highlights the ways in which social psychological concepts are vital in helping to understand how and why people engage in political processes and structures. In addition, it highlights the ways in which social psychology can itself be political: by taking an explicitly political stance on what the social world should look like.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course [DD317 Advancing social psychology](#).

## Take the next step



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