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Politics

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One way to look at politics across the life span is to consider the links between political structure and culture, on the one hand, and political socialization, on the other hand. There is some congruence to be found here. As is the case with language (e.g., if you grow up in an English-speaking country, you learn to speak English), political culture *naturally* and *usually* leads to congruent political socialization—for the most part. Consider how children's moral judgments reflect the politics of the society in which they live. For example, one research study posed moral dilemmas to 12-year-old children from societies around the world, societies that differed in how *authoritarian* versus *democratic* they were. The results indicated a positive correlation between how *pluralistic and democratic* a society is and the degree to which children who lived there balanced *adult-* versus *peer-oriented* responses; the more authoritarian the society the more adult oriented the children. How does this association occur? It appears that the socialization practices of parents and teachers (along with mass media) play a crucial role. This entry provides a brief overview of how political socialization is a life-span developmental process that reflects the human ecology in which political and cultural forces interact in shaping the life course of individuals and groups.

An Ecological Perspective on Politics

The core insight of human ecology is that development always arises and proceeds *in context*. Thus, if the question is “Does X cause Y?” the best scientific answer is generally, “It depends.” History and culture provide important dimensions of the context in which political socialization occur. The links between parental socialization practices and political ideology have been a topic of research at least since the end World War II, when social psychologists trying to understand the rise of fascism in Germany, Italy, and Japan identified the role of *the authoritarian personality* among the populations in these three countries as a significant contributing factor. Research in the United States focusing on the 2016 presidential election revealed that supporters of the top three Republican Party candidates (Donald Trump, Ted Cruz, and Marco Rubio) scored much higher on a measure of *authoritarianism* than did those supporting the two Democratic Party candidates (Hillary Rodham Clinton and Bernie Sanders). Only the more *moderate* Republican candidate (John Kasich) had authoritarianism scores resembling the two Democrats. Key to *authoritarianism* in this research is the degree to which adults value obedience versus independence among children. This makes the links to the international moral dilemma research clear.

Terrorism and Politics

In the 21st century, one of the most powerful *political* issues affecting children is terrorism. Hardly a week goes by in the United States and, to varying degrees, in the rest of the world that the word *terrorism* does not appear in the collective consciousness as represented, channeled, and shaped by the mass media in its many print, broadcast, and Internet manifestations. Relatively few children worldwide (and even fewer children domestically in the United States) have been the specific actual targets of acts of terrorism; some have; and most are growing up in a world in which terrorism in its many aspects is a salient cultural phenomenon. Modern research demonstrates that political terrorism produces both the direct traumatic effects of being a victim and indirect effects of living in communities and societies in which the threat of terrorism is on the minds of children but perhaps more importantly, of adults, generally, and parents and policy makers in particular.

Of course, the politics of terrorism is highly subjective. For example, the Founding Fathers of

the American Revolution were themselves involved in various *terrorist* acts against the British colonial government and their domestic political opponents in the run-up and follow-up to the Declaration of Independence in 1776. The first four American presidents were active in the political struggle for independence that had included numerous acts of terrorism. Those who followed them were complicit in terrorism directed at African slaves to maintain White political (and economic) power.

What is more, most of the original 13 colonies (which became the original 13 states in the wake of the successful Revolutionary War) had their own insurgent conflicts (involving *terrorist* attacks) in the decades before the independence movement triumphed. This situation accounted in large measure for whether or not individuals and communities were loyalists supporting the British Crown during the Revolutionary War and subsequently fled after they and the Crown were defeated in 1783 and the new nation came into being. An awareness of the history of political terrorism should leave no one smug, self-satisfied, and free to judge other societies and movements blindly.

The Politics of Fear

What does it mean to grow up in a political environment in which the politics are driven by war and terrorism? One way to address this question is to examine how the fears expressed by children relate to the larger social and political environment in which they are growing up. Surveys of children's fears reveal that from the 1930s to the 1950s (in the period preceding and immediate aftermath of World War II), the most common fears of children were matters of personal safety in the *old-fashioned* sense of the term, namely, thunder and lightning, animals, the dark, and supernatural beings. Fears of war rarely appeared spontaneously when children were asked about their fears. But this pattern had shifted by the 1960s, when the most common fears became tied to political issues, most notably the Cold War and the prospect of nuclear war. This change may well be linked to the fact that advent of the television era enabled children to have access to images of violence in the larger world beyond their family and neighborhood in unprecedented ways, thus directly linking their consciousness to *macro* events that had previously been mediated almost completely by parents. By the mid-1960s about one in five sixth graders mentioned international conflicts when asked to generate a list of things they feared. Not surprisingly, children who tended to worry a lot (daily) about jobs/career/unemployment were also most likely to worry a great deal about nuclear war; 7% said they felt fearful and anxious every day.

By the 1980s, about half the children, 10 years and older, reported that they believed a nuclear war in their lifetime was probable. In 2005, the figure was 60% for the entire adult population. That is not surprising, given that everyone under the age of 60 at that time was a veteran of growing up in the nuclear age. First, this circumstance meant the Soviet threat during the Cold War. Then, after a brief period of *safety* after the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, came the era of nuclear proliferation to rogue nation states and the increasingly realistic possibility that terrorist groups would acquire nuclear weapons.

Perhaps, we can see the accumulation of this shift in the finding that in 1976, 23% of high school seniors agreed with the terrifying statement "Nuclear or biological annihilation will probably be the future of all mankind within my lifetime," but that by 1982 the figure had grown to 35%. Some psychiatric observers see evidence of this growing awareness of the specter of nuclear annihilation in the upward trend in youth suicide and depression in the decades of the nuclear age. Indeed, a study including both American and Soviet youth in the 1980s reported that the children who were most likely to think that a nuclear war was likely to

occur were most likely to express increased pessimism about the future. Again, this observation does suggest that children who are temperamentally predisposed to high levels of anxiety will *attach* to environmental threats.

Action Helps People Cope With Political Fears

It is important to note that realistic awareness of the threat that became the basis for action on behalf of peace was not linked to pessimism. The worst situation for political socialization seems to be when people are given information about the threat in such a way that both their fears *and* their impotence increase. Awareness coupled with constructive action may be empowering, particularly for young people (who, research reveals, may be especially prone to be influenced by political movements and trends in late adolescence and early adulthood). Thus, for example, *coming of age* at a time of political instability (be it China during the Cultural Revolution or in the United States during the Vietnam War) can mark a generation in ways that can extend across the life course.

See also [Culture](#); [Fear](#); [Socialization](#)

- political socialization
- nuclear war
- terrorism
- politics
- socialization
- authoritarianism
- children

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Further Readings

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