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Political Socialization's Primacy Principle: A Biosocial Critique

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ABSTRACT. The primacy principle of political socialization claims that those political orientations that are learned early persist and shape later political learning. A survey of literature produces little empirical support for the principle. Furthermore, both the Piagetian cognitive development framework and Kagan's developmental perspective raise questions about the theoretical underpinnings of the primacy principle.

Introduction

Since 'tis Nature's law to change
Constancy alone is strange.
(John Wilmot, Earl of Rochester)

The Primacy Principle

Several years ago (Peterson and Somit, 1982) we explored the validity of the primacy principle—the key theoretical linchpin used to justify the study of childhood political socialization. This principle asserts that what is learned early "carries over" and significantly shapes adult political orientations and participation. We then concluded that Piagetian cognitive development theory cast considerable doubt on the principle's adequacy. In this paper, we revise and expand that earlier analysis, reviewing the applicable data and applying a different theoretical stance.

Political scientists are concerned with the question of *when* the most important political learning takes place, so that we can better understand adult political orientations and behavior. Several answers have been advanced. First, there is the "recency model," which holds that the most recent political learning—because of its immediacy and freshness—has a greater bearing than that occurring earlier. Second, there is the position that learning takes place throughout the life cycle. Consequently, political orientations are labile over time, and people remain open to change as new situations develop or as they become aware of new information. A third position is that adolescence is the critical time. (For a summary of these various positions, see Dawson et al., 1977.)

Finally, there is the focus on the childhood learning model, based on the

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neo-Freudian position that what is learned early shapes later learning and behavior. As the literature evidences, this has been the dominant view in political socialization. Much of the research has been based on the premise that:

> . . . people acquire in early life standing predispositions which influence their adult perceptions and attitudes. In adulthood, then, they respond in highly affective ways to symbols which resemble the attitude objects to which similar emotional responses were conditioned or associated in earlier life. Whether or not the issue has some tangible consequences for the adult voter's personal life is irrelevant. One's personal "stake" in the issue is an emotional, symbolic one; it triggers long-held, habitual responses (Sears et al., 1979: 370–371).

Given this assumption, it is hardly surprising that so much of the early work on political socialization centered on children. The situation has now changed as scholars devote more attention to adult political learning. But, although the focus of research is shifting, the reasoning underlying the earlier emphasis on childhood political socialization seems to remain widely accepted.

Rationale for Preadult Focus

Two related principles underlie the interest in childhood learning: the primacy principle and the structuring principle.

The primacy principle is a set of three linked propositions: (1) that general political orientations (e.g., party identification, efficacy, and trust) are learned during childhood; (2) that childhood learning shapes later modifications; and (3) that any subsequent alterations are, in fact, minor.

The structuring principle states that those orientations which are acquired during childhood structure (i.e., significantly influence) later learning of specific issue beliefs. In essence, then, *the "early learning" model holds that general political orientations are learned early, persist, and that these views constrain the degree of subsequent change, shape adult beliefs, and influence adult actions.* These two principles are and must be at the very heart of the interest in childhood socialization.

To be sure, other reasons have also been advanced. For instance, Greenstein (1974, 1984) observes that societies invest a great deal in educational systems, whose function it is, in part, to transmit dominant cultural values to the young. Studying childhood political learning allows us to see how successful this investment has been. This argument, though, seems to beg the question: If what is learned early does not carry over, why study whether or not society transmits its values to children?

Another rationale, says Greenstein, is that of using children as "naive informants" about the political culture. Regrettably, it is unclear why treating children as if they were the proverbial "visitors from Mars" would provide a useful view of the system.

Greenstein insists that the primacy principle and its corollary do *not* underlie the study of childhood political learning and maintains, in fact, that the principle is a straw man. But this takes us back full circle, since, as we have seen, the alternative justifications for studying childhood political socialization are less than persuasive.

Furthermore, his disavowal notwithstanding, even a casual survey of the literature makes it evident that there is wider acceptance of the principle than Greenstein would have it (for a full listing, see Somit and Peterson, 1985). Three of six recent texts in political behavior explicitly accept the principle's validity, and three seem implicitly to accept it. Of five general introductions to political socialization, three endorse it, one is skeptical, and one is difficult to categorize. Of four landmark research reports

in the field, one accepts the principle and three go along with it, albeit with the proviso that more evidence is needed.

Two general surveys of political socialization also endorse the principle (Niemi, 1973; Sears, 1975). As Dennis has put it (1973: 13):

> A standard, general hypothesis in this connection is that the earlier the person adopts a given set of political orientations, the less likely it is that these orientations will be eroded later in his life.

He believes this proposition to be amply supported (and his statement sounds like the primacy principle to us). Hyman, in his pathbreaking *Political Socialization* (1959: 10), states that "*humans must learn their political behavior early and well and persist in it*" if there is to be political stability.

And, even more recently, we have already noted that Sears and his colleagues continue to assume the validity of the primacy principle in their own influential research (e.g., Sears et al., 1979). While the bull market in studies of childhood political learning has disappeared (e.g., Cook, 1985), some work is continuing nonetheless.

Admittedly, our survey of the foregoing literature is not exhaustive, but it strongly suggests that the primacy principle is accepted. Some 15 years ago, Easton and Dennis (1969) made the point that the primacy principle was not supported by hard data and expressed the hope that this lacuna would soon be rectified. To date, though, their hope has not been realized. (Easton and Dennis's challenge to test the principle—issued in 1969—still has not been met.)

The Assumptions Examined: Current Evidence

Introduction

A long-term longitudinal study is necessary to test the primacy principle (as well as the linked structuring principle). Unfortunately, after over two decades, there is still no research which follows respondents from early childhood through adulthood. The 1965, 1973, 1982 panel of Jennings–Niemi–Markus represents the most continuous longitudinal study focusing expressly on political orientations and behavior but, while these studies represent first cuts at meaningful long-term analysis, they cannot directly be brought to bear on the principle's validity because of the limited period covered. But, if we cannot conclusively judge the principle's validity, we now have enough data to warrant some reasonable inferences.

Party Identification

Political scientists generally consider party identification as probably the most stable of any political orientation learned in childhood. Nonetheless, a series of investigations based on both repeated cross-sectional surveys and short-term longitudinal studies suggests individual level change (see Niemi and Weisberg, 1984). While Converse's reports on two Center for Political Studies (CPS) panels (1956–1960 and 1972–1976) indicate considerable stability of partisanship (Converse, 1964; Converse and Markus, 1979; Markus and Converse, 1979), other findings have been more ambiguous.

Recent research suggests that the changes are not largely random and that party identification is neither internalized in childhood nor long-lasting and stable. For instance, Page and Jones (1979), utilizing a "non-recursive simultaneous equation"

model to disentangle the reciprocal effects of partisanship, policy preference, candidate evaluation, etc., on individuals' vote choices, report (based upon the 1972 and 1976 CPS data) that party affiliation is clearly affected by short-term political factors such as issues. Shively (1979, 1980) has noted that the long-standing view that party identification is rooted in childhood is beginning to weaken, with the data indicating that party identification is to a significant degree the function of political stimuli experienced during adulthood, and that "much of the formation of adult party identification may occur during the adult years" (1980: 224). Several other studies have recently come to similar conclusions.

Fiorina's (1981) assessment, based on data from two CPS panels, of the factors shaping party identification is implicitly critical of the primacy principle. He sees partisanship as a "running tally" of retrospective evaluations of party promises and performance. As an individual's evaluations of a party's performance become more negative, the likelihood of a change in party identification increases (see also Franklin and Jackson, 1983).

Jennings and Niemi found changes in party identification among both parents and—even more so—their offspring over an eight-year period (the younger respondents were high school seniors when first interviewed in 1965):

> . . . the change in the partisan distribution of the filial generation between 1965 and 1973 is startling . . . the proportion of Independents, already very high in 1965, rose another 12 percent, to include almost half the sample. At the same time, the proportion of strong identifiers was cut nearly in half (Jennings and Niemi, 1975: 1325).

There is also movement in children's party attachments. Vaillancourt and Niemi (1974) reported that 25 percent of their white, and 43 percent of their black, young respondents switched party preferences between December 1968 and January 1969.

If we consider the evidence from other countries, the primacy principle appears even more dubious. Even greater volatility in identification—compared with the United States—has been found in Canada, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the Federal Republic of Germany, among others (see, for example, Dalton et al., 1984).

Overall, then, we see considerable instability among children, young adults, and the adult population at large. While "primacy" should not completely prohibit change in party identification, the changes should be modest and the direction predictable. The data suggest otherwise. Furthermore, while we do not consider them here, similar findings obtain when we examine the literature on political trust, political efficacy, racial bias, and political participation (see Somit and Peterson, 1985; for two recent, important studies, based on the three-wave high school senior/parent study, which provide results generally consistent with our contentions, see: Jennings and Markus, 1985; Markus and Jennings, 1985).

Summary

Overall, we can say, the evidence available does not lend credence to the primacy principle (and its derivative, the structuring principle). To this point, the claim that these principles are valid remains just that—a claim. Furthermore, in addition to—and perhaps underlying—the serious problems posed by the existing data, there are also good theoretical reasons for doubting the primacy principle's validity. That is the next issue to which we turn.

Theoretical Questions about Primacy

Piagetian Theory

In an earlier essay, we stressed that Jean Piaget provides ample theoretical reason for questioning the validity of the primacy principle. Specifically, two key components of Piaget's theory (see, for example, Piaget, 1972) prompted our skepticism: (1) his stage sequence theory of development; and (2) his accommodation–assimilation model of adaptation.

With regard to the former, Piaget posits four stages of cognitive development, each of which builds upon but is qualitatively distinct from its predecessor. We previously called attention to Robert Connell's application of the stage concept to the development of political orientations among children:

> . . . Connell argues that the transformation in the child's construction of politics which occurs as the individual passes from stage to stage means that the individual lives in different cognitive worlds at different points in development. And the earliest worlds so inhabited are separated from the adult world by events yet to be experienced and cognitive transformations yet to come (Peterson and Somit, 1982: 325).

In short, the stage sequence and the primacy principle are hardly compatible.

The second relevant element of Piaget's theory is his accommodation–assimilation model of cognitive functioning. Assimilation refers to new information being acquired and being "fit" into already existing mental structures (schemata). Accommodation leads to change in schemata, as pre-existing cognitive structures are altered to take into account new information discordant with those structures. Translated into Piagetian terms, the primacy principle would require that adults assimilate new political information into existing cognitive structures constructed during childhood. This ignores, however, the accommodation of structures which also takes place. In sum, what actually happens is that:

> Cognitive development is not simply an additive process in which a person grafts new bits of information onto existing knowledge. Previous understandings are reorganized as the individual traverses the various stages in the developmental path (Peterson and Somit, 1982: 327).

Consequently, a key tenet of the primacy principle must be viewed as open to grave doubt.

To be sure, there is considerable debate over the validity of Piagetian theory. But the theoretical case against primacy does not rest on one body of theory. More recently, the work of another distinguished psychologist, Jerome Kagan (who is himself quite critical of Piaget), raises additional troublesome questions about the primacy principle.

Jerome Kagan's Framework

In the epilogue to his book, *The Nature of the Child*, Kagan writes that "the central theme hidden in and between the chapters of this book is that the person's interpretation of experience is simultaneously the most significant product of an encounter and the spur to the next" (1984: 279). These interpretations can be manifest as schemas (or schemata)—a schema is "a representation of experience that bears a relation to an original event" (1984: 35)—categories, propositions, etc. There

are major implications here for continuity and change in the understanding that people have of themselves and of their worlds. Kagan contends, as does Piaget, that biology (most centrally, maturation of the central nervous system) and experience shape the development of children's psychological qualities and cognition. As children move into adolescence, experience becomes the dominant factor. Consequently, "most of the time, new experience produces a change in frame," and a frame "determines the events that will be selected for accommodation [change in schemata due to discrepant information] and imposes biases on the conclusions drawn from experience" (Kagan, 1984: 9).

The interaction between biology and experience, Kagan argues, militates against the likelihood that the child's schemata and personal characteristics (e.g., aggressiveness) will have any necessary relationship to that child's adolescent and adult views and behavior. Put simply, early and middle childhood beliefs do not predict the views which an adult holds.

Biology provides an important part of the explanation here. In all cultures, children go through discernible stages of development. Unlike Piaget, though, Kagan claims that these different stages may not be meaningfully related to one another. Biologists find, for instance, that as one stage of development is left behind, its underlying structures may simply disappear and, hence, not be a part of new structures (e.g., certain sensory cells simply cease existence with the metamorphosis of the tadpole). Just so with psychological development.

To illustrate his point, Kagan takes "separation anxiety" among one-year-olds. Many psychologists treat this as a harbinger of probable later adult problems. In Kagan's view, this anxiety may be temporarily adaptive, but has no necessary future function or importance. In a survey of longitudinal studies, Kagan reports that "long-term preservation [of various psychological entities] is minimal until late childhood" (1984: 96).[1] Consequently, political orientations learned during early and middle childhood are simply not likely to survive until adulthood.

Admittedly, there does appear to be some continuity in psychological entities that appear in later childhood (6–10 years of age), and, by itself, this would seem to be compatible with the primacy principle. Kagan explains the carryover in situational or structural—but not psychological—terms. That is, if the situations in which people find themselves remain reasonably constant as they move through the different stages of development, there is likely to be continuity. On the other hand, "the evidence does imply that if the profiles created by early encounters are not supported by future and current environments, change is likely" (Kagan, 1984: 108).

As previously mentioned, Kagan uses schema theory to help explain human cognition. Briefly, this model states that much of what people comprehend and remember about their world is more closely tied to the internal schema than to external stimuli. But a schema is not an unchanging Platonic ideal. Discrepant information can produce change in a schema as nonconfirmatory data are taken into account. Continuity in schemata is not itself an inherent element of human cognition; it is a function of experience and the environment. Specifically, political schemas—such as party identification—would, by inference, be likewise open to change.

Kagan's Perspective: Empirical Status

Available data do seem to support Kagan's analysis. One of the most dramatic instances of this concerns individuals' personalities, normally assumed to be resistant

to alteration. Moss and Susman survey a series of longitudinal studies of personality development and, in line with Kagan's argument, find that "Consistency is most obvious for personality characteristics that are endowed with positive cultural and societal valences" (1980: 590). Supporting situations account better for stability than some unchanging internal mechanism standing alone. Glenn, after having surveyed a considerable literature, explains at greater length with respect to orientations and attitudes:

> The view, once implicit in much of the literature on child development, that development ceases with the attainment of adulthood, is no longer tenable; nevertheless, there are still some apparently sound reasons for expecting values and attitudes to tend to stabilize *after young adulthood* [our emphasis].
>
> One of the major reasons for this expectation is the dense spacing of significant life events in early adulthood and the wider spacing of those events thereafter. During a period of a few years, beginning in late adolescence, the person typically experiences important status changes, assumes important new roles, and changes many social relationships. Leaving home, completing formal education, choosing and entering an occupation, marriage, and becoming a parent all typically occur within a very small proportion of the total life span. Both geographic and social mobility characterize early adulthood in modern societies and are much less frequent in the later years. The status transitions and assumption of new roles by young adults entail a great deal of resocialization, including presumably the adoption of new values and attitudes and the modification of old ones. Furthermore, the rapid succession of changes in circumstances and social relationships is likely to produce much attitude change that is not an aspect of resocialization.
>
> This explanation does not posit a decline in the inherent changeability of the individual—only a decline in exposure to influences for change (Glenn, 1980: 603).

As Kagan contends, then, the situation in which people find themselves seems to be a key predictor of continuity and change in schemata, personality, and values. What are implications for the primacy principle? Continuity in political orientations is dependent upon one's situation and upon available information remaining consistent with those views. Once the situation changes, all bets are off.

Discussion

The primacy principle states that the political orientations learned during childhood endure and shape adult views and behavior. Our reading of Jerome Kagan's theoretical perspective, as well as convergent conclusions from Piaget, convinces us that the principle may well be wrong.

First, there is little empirical evidence of continuity in basic comprehension of the world and of psychological qualities from early childhood to adulthood. Furthermore, even where there is evidence of continuity in orientations from 6–10 years of age to adulthood, the carryover is less from the "internalization" of values than from their continuing environmental support. Our survey of works dealing with the stability of individuals' party identification likewise suggests considerable room for alteration in *political* orientations over time.

Kagan and Piaget, second, provide strong theoretical reasons, in our judgment, to be extremely cautious, if not dubious, about the primacy principle. Jean Piaget's accommodation–assimilation model of cognitive development clearly suggests that as

individuals receive information inconsistent with pre-existing cognitive structures, those structures can change. We noted Robert Connell's application of stage sequence to children's developing political perspectives; he concludes that political beliefs can change over time as a result of transformation in those stages. Jerome Kagan argues that schemata (pre-existing values or beliefs) change as the situation facing individuals shifts. In the end, he concludes that when the environment changes, so, too, may basic views—or even personality. Likewise, we argue, political values and beliefs can take new forms when people's situations change. There is nothing particularly special about those political beliefs which are learned early; they may be unlearned or changed if circumstances or situations vary.

There are, then, both theoretical and empirical grounds for challenging the primacy principle and/or questioning the extent to which studies of childhood political socialization cast any useful light on adult behavior. Political learning is a dynamic biosocial process; constancy and change both occur; and the theories we employ should account for both. To do otherwise is to misunderstand the very nature of *homo politicus*.

Notes

1. He observes that, in other animal species, the preservation of individual behavioral differences becomes obvious only near reproductive maturity.

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