

Identity challenges

Facing the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences

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Founded in 1980, the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences (APLS) sought to establish biopolitics as a recognized field and to integrate biologically based research methods into mainstream political science. The association's founders established these goals to encourage a generation of scholars and promote the spread of biopolitical knowledge. There was early success when the American Political Science Association (APSA) recognized biopolitics as an organized section. However, this development did not leave an appreciable imprint on the political science profession and the experiment conjoining the two did not last long. The other goal of the founders, to integrate biologically based research methods into mainstream political science, faced more formidable obstacles and still faces challenges, though not without some progress.

Strands of biopolitical knowledge

Of course, the biology and politics interface yields a diversity of knowledge types. Scholars working at this intersection share an evolutionary framework and use it to develop broad scale understandings of political behaviors. Many political scientists who adopted an evolutionary framework found an organizational home with the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, and perhaps even encouragement from like-minded scholars. John Orbell, a political science professor, is a case in point. Orbell and his colleagues examined the evolution of cooperation through a computer-based simulation. Both the *American Political Science*

*Review*¹ and *Politics and the Life Sciences*,^{2,3} the flagship journal of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, published their results. Books by political scientists that adopt an evolutionary perspective receive important attention in both circles: Roger Masters⁴ on evolution and collective action; Tatu Vanhanen⁵ as well as Al Somit and Steven Peterson⁶ on evolution and democracy; and Brad Thayer⁷ on evolution and international relations.

Representing a second strand of biopolitical knowledge is research on the physiological antecedents of political behaviors. Initially, this research focused on measurements of externally observable states like sleeplessness, fatigue, and stress but matured into assessments of psychophysiological signals, internal levels of hormones, and, with the increasing availability of magnetic resonance imaging equipment, neurological activity. Several review articles by Somit, Peterson, and colleagues documented a shift in the quantity of such research, with a mushrooming in the 1980s and 1990s.^{8,9,10,11} However, they also pointed out that while this research frequently graced the pages of *Politics and the Life Sciences* throughout this period, it appeared nowhere in the pages of the *American Political Science Review*—a situation that has since changed. Somit and Peterson attribute the dearth of biobehavioral research articles in *APSR* to a regrettable and nearly exclusive commitment among political scientists to “nurture” explanations of political behaviors—the ongoing belief that socialization and learning are the only sources of behavioral variation. They also note that the high cost of conducting physiological research,

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including investments in methodological training and equipment, impedes expansion of this work.

Current identity

Over the years, the focal point of the association expanded and reached beyond traditional biopolitics to include *policy* with biological or environmental connections. Biopolicy emerged as a third strand of biopolitical knowledge. Health policy, environmental policy, bioterrorism, and bioethics all became emphasis areas at APLS annual meetings. The official purpose of the association was reformulated to reflect this change. The current mission statement emphasizes an organizational concern “with evolutionary, genetic, and ecological knowledge and its bearing on political behavior, public policy, and ethics.” By the late 1990s, policy studies with a biological connection was the largest subfield of Biopolitics.¹¹

A second reflection of this change in orientation was the official separation of the Association for the Politics and Life Sciences from the American Political Science Association in the mid-1990s, when the latter began holding independent meetings. With members increasingly from outside political science, moving away from APSA was only natural. The early freestanding conferences, typically held in large eastern cities, were awash in health policy, environmental policy, and bioethics panels.

While all this happened, scholars developed, refined, and applied biopolitics methods to traditional political science questions. This time, the focus was on the *genetic* antecedents of political behaviors. Alford and colleagues examined political attitudes from genetic profiles of subjects and found that it was possible to predict political orientations from those profiles.¹² A research team led by James Fowler utilized twin studies to examine the effect of genes on political participation and found that *nature* contributed to voting participation as well as other forms of political participation.¹³ Ironically, the expressed purpose of the founders to integrate biopolitics methods into mainstream political science has indeed gained ground, just not under the auspices of the association. The *American Political Science Review* published both the Alford and Fowler studies. In some circles of mainstream political science, at least, beliefs in nurture as the sole source of political behaviors have started to break down.

Institutions and biopolitical content

Within the politics and life sciences community, debate continues about whether the association should attempt to reenter the tent of the American Political Science Association. The journal, for instance, is recognized as an APSA-affiliated publication at each year’s national meeting. Likewise, debate continues about the scope of the association’s activities. As early as 1998, Somit and Peterson noted that the “biopolitical movement” might be better served with a more focused agenda rather than setting off in “multiple directions” (p. 569).¹¹

The original impetus to expand and separate from political science was that traditional disciplinary boundaries could not confine the study of biology, political, and social behaviors.^{14,15} As a practical matter, this position motivated the organization of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences conferences that encouraged participation from scholars in a wide variety of disciplines and an assortment of policy areas—biology, behavioral genetics, ethology, economics, sociology, psychology, anthropology, primatology, ethics, as well as political science.

E.O. Wilson’s 1999 publication of *Consilience: The Unity of Knowledge* reinforced the attractiveness of the all-inclusive option.¹⁶ Wilson’s book made a powerful argument for the shelving of traditional disciplinary barriers. But was the net cast too wide? Did the association and its conferences lose their unique identity? Did they become amorphous in an effort to be all-encompassing? In practice, the issue remains: should the association continue to sponsor health policy, environmental policy, and bioterrorism panels or should it return more closely to the evolutionary and biobehavioral focus of earlier generations?

Understandably, the emphasis both of the association’s members, the pages of *Politics and the Life Sciences*, and the biobehavioral field is on political behavior. Does consilience call for a broadening of that political emphasis? Various subfields of biobehavior are the specialties of other associations. The Human Behavior and Evolution Society staked out the biology and psychology nexus. The pages of their journal, *Evolution and Human Behavior*, offer a cornucopia of articles on evolution and individual behavior. Likewise, the online journal *Evolutionary Psychology* places a clear, *de facto* emphasis on biology and

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individual behavior. The journal *Bioeconomics* moves beyond individual behavior. Like *Politics and the Life Sciences*, it isolates a subfield of social behavior, in this case, economic behavior. While these journals invite submissions from the broader arena of biology and social behavior, none of them seem to consistently attract or succeed in publishing articles beyond their disciplinary specialty. Ironically, no association seems poised to occupy the broader niche of biology and social behavior despite, or perhaps because of, Wilson's classic tome on sociobiology.¹⁷

A final divide in the content of biopolitical knowledge pertains to work that is mostly or purely theoretical versus work that is mostly or purely empirical. John Hibbing argues that biopolitics will not advance very far unless there is a solid foundation of empirical work. To advance as a science, biopolitics undoubtedly needs an edifice of empirical research. For the first time in the history of the biology and behavior fields, multiple and numerous methodologies exist for accumulating empirical knowledge. These include ethological methods, laboratory experiments, computer simulations, physiological measures, brain scans, and genetic profiles. For the Association to thrive into the future, it must find ways of encouraging and incorporating cutting edge empirical work in biology and politics and find ways to incorporate practitioners into its ranks.

Note

David Goetze served as Executive Director of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences from 2002–2010. This article is based on a presentation given at the annual meeting of the Association for Politics and the Life Sciences, October 14–16, 2010 on the campus of Indiana University, Bloomington, IN.

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