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CRITICAL PERSPECTIVES ARTICLE

Why Theorizing and Measuring Shared Experience in Descriptive Representation Is “A Mess Worth Making”

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Jane Mansbridge’s (1999) “contingent ‘yes’” amplified a chorus of voices discussing the substantive and symbolic functions of historically marginalized groups’ presence in political office. In her essay, Mansbridge points to contexts of mistrust and uncrystallized interests as domains where presence enhances “adequate communication” and “innovative thinking” for these social groups (628). In this and many other accounts, the linchpin between descriptive and substantive representation for these functions is group members’ shared experiences, alternatively framed as the perspectives informed by those experiences. Shared experiences cannot and do not produce identical effects (they are filtered through many lenses), but they are widely understood to inform and indeed often to authenticate political representation.

Although the phenomenon of shared experiences is central to this line of research, which experiences matter and whether they are in fact shared by purported group members are typically only indirectly observed. When studies show that legislators received as women¹ are more likely to support legislation expanding the availability of childcare, for example, this finding is typically interpreted in terms of aggregate data on gendered domestic labor. For individual public figures, whether they share salient experiences with a given social group is often imputed based upon those individuals’ apparent membership in that group. This move represents two interrelated assumptions: which policy maker counts as a descriptive representative (who is viewed as a group member), and, in turn, when and why a policy maker advocates for substantive issues (which interests are shared and prioritized). Mansbridge (1999, 637–39) points in these directions in her discussion of “‘essentialism’ as a cost of selection,” but this discussion does not address the matter of shared experiences. The research

program that Mansbridge inspired largely follows suit in its greater attention to widely accepted markers of shared experiences (e.g., apparent sex-gender).

Recent research suggests that concerns about conceptualizing identity and interests are widely held, though direct measurement of shared experiences, specifically, remains very limited. A recent sampling: Lemi (2020) and Montoya et al. (2022) show that perceptions of group membership and representation are inflected both by available cues and by apparent intersectional identities. Leung (2021) shows that Asian American voters distinguish among candidates based upon country of origin. Barnes, Beall, and Holman (2021) show that pink-collar occupational background—a proxy for gendered experiences—matters for legislative behavior. Medeiros, Forest, and Öhberg (2020) argue for surveys' inclusion of nonbinary gender measures. Allen (2021) makes a case for incorporating policy makers' subjective experiences into models of political representation, and Burden (2007) and Washington (2008) study the role of legislators' personal and family experiences in shaping their policy priorities. This excellent work steps in the right direction.

Here I make a case against imputing information about shared experiences. Instead, I argue that we must theorize and measure more precisely which shared experiences matter, in which contexts, for which descriptive representatives. I start by justifying this need, and then I discuss two existing approaches to emulate.

Why Theorize and Measure Shared Experiences?

These shifts in theorizing and in research design are necessary for at least two reasons. First, regarding the symbolic importance of descriptive representation: it will help us be more inclusive. Focusing more precisely on the content and extent of shared experiences works to avoid misrecognition, to reduce essentialism, and to incorporate what we know about the complexities of sex-gender and race-ethnicity. Finer-grained analysis may be especially important, because “shared experiences”—such as the experiences in common of negative stereotyping or of specific forms of violence—are often implicitly or explicitly part of defining group membership. Further, the political relevance of shared experience and, in turn, groupness is context dependent and likely to vary by issue area. Left-handedness, as Mansbridge (1999, 635) argues, merits descriptive representation when left-handers' “perspectives are relevant to the decision.” Not all markers of experiences are as straightforward as left-handedness, however. And even when they appear straightforward, the assumption risks both moral injury and empirical error. Who is a descriptive representative, and on what basis, therefore deserves closer attention. In an example of work in this spirit, Dovi (2002) argues that dispossessed subgroups of historically marginalized groups, specifically, require inclusion in public decision-making. However, this instruction still risks sidestepping the problem of misrecognition.

Second, regarding substantive dimensions of descriptive representatives' inclusion in policy-making roles: directly observing this key intermediary

variable will help us understand it better. Studies of political representation regularly invoke “shared experiences” in their accounts of the extent to which a descriptive representative (a) sees and recognizes the urgency of group interests and needs and (b) advocates for policies that address them. In an early articulation of this argument, Diamond and Hartsock (1981, 720) write, “only women can ‘act for’ women in identifying ‘invisible’ problems” relevant to women—that is, only women can give accurate information about the problems that they experience directly. At the same time, someone received as a woman who has not experienced motherhood, for example, may lack information that is crucial for the advocacy that descriptive representation may otherwise inspire. Acknowledging that social groups are heterogeneous in their experiences but that group knowledge might nonetheless exist, Phillips (1998, 68) asserts, “That some women do not bear children does not make pregnancy a gender-neutral event.” Wylie (2003, 37) similarly observes that any individual social group member’s “epistemic advantage” may be distinctive yet “neither automatic nor all encompassing.” These questions of whether and how specific experiences mediate knowledge and attention are simultaneously central to empirical accounts of descriptive and substantive representation yet often omitted from analysis.

Tools for Making the Study of Inclusion More Inclusive

I have argued that research designs should tackle more directly the challenges of characterizing and measuring intragroup diversity by theorizing and observing, not imputing, causal mechanisms. What would this look like?

Over the last three decades, political scientists have accumulated a rich trove of concepts and empirical evidence showing the significance of inclusion. The existing research to which this essay’s introduction refers has significantly improved our understanding of political representation, more broadly, highlighting ways for historically marginalized groups and their allies to pursue positive change.² Over this same time frame, other complementary approaches have come into standard use. Here, I discuss two approaches in particular that can inform research designs that accomplish the goals for which I am advocating.

First, the concept of group membership has evolved, with greater attention to trans and non-binary genders and sexes and to multi-ethnicity. This conceptual evolution offers a framework for rethinking which groups, when, and how. Empirically, it justifies measurement of people’s self-presentation and self-identification rather than widely accepted categories, and it argues for asking interview and survey subjects to describe their social identities rather than offering a discrete list of options.³

Second, the lens of intersectionality unfocuses group perspectives.⁴ Intersectionality is widely applied in political science, but less frequently with the goal of parsing and testing causal mechanisms behind political representation. If group members “should be represented in deliberation when their perspectives are relevant to a decision” (Mansbridge 1999, 635), then both the relevance of interests and the extent to which they are shared must be shown empirically.

Intersectional research practices offer a roadmap for inspecting the content and salience of shared experiences for descriptive and substantive representation. For example, Weldon (2008) proposes the concept of “intersectionality-plus,” which involves theorizing and showing which intersectional identities are operative in which contexts.⁵

These shifts in the conceptualization of group identity and interests point toward both the urgency and the empirical possibilities of directly measuring the extent to which experiences are in fact shared, which may vary by issue. For example, paying more for sanitary products is an experience shared by persons who menstruate, who include some trans persons. Similarly, parents of any gender, as well as caregivers for both the young and the old, may share experiences related to care labor.⁶ Research in the medical sciences clearly shows that care is significantly worse for bodies who are misrecognized.⁷ Fundamentally, research in political science that is attentive to bodies beyond assumptions about sex-gender or race-ethnicity can contribute both to more equitable policy and to our understanding of the dynamics of policy making on related issues.

Conclusion

I have argued that we must shift toward theorizing and measuring which shared experiences and perspectives underlie the symbolic and substantive potential of descriptive representation. This shift will reduce misrecognition of individuals' group membership, it will more precisely identify the mechanisms behind advocacy for historically marginalized groups, and it will make good on Mansbridge's (1999, 636) original call for “getting the relevant facts, insights, and perspectives into the deliberation.” The empirical question of whether facts, insights, and perspectives are shared among the group that “is” embodied by a policy maker is not tangential but rather central to the problem. As Smooth (2006) writes, this is a “mess worth making.”

Notes

1. See Butler (1988) and Schilt (2006) on how people's gendered interactions with one another are a product of self-presentation and performance of gender.
2. A global sampling: Chattopaddhay and Duflo (2003) about sex-gender in India, Piscopo (2011) about sex-gender in Argentina, Swers (2002) about sex-gender in the United States, Tate (2001) about race-ethnicity in the United States, and Xydias (2014) about sex-gender in Germany.
3. For a critique of prevailing approaches to studying multiracialism in U.S. politics, for example, see Hochschild and Weaver (2010). On designing surveys that more effectively measure respondents' gender, see Bittner and Goodyear-Grant (2017).
4. Crenshaw (1989) launched this research program in political science and legal studies.
5. See, for example, Van der Haar and Verloo (2013), an empirical analysis that uses Weldon's framework of intersectionality-plus.
6. For example, Stensöta (2020) shows that men legislators in Sweden who have taken parental leave are more interested in social policy than men who have not.
7. See, for example, Sherer and Hanks (2021) and Stroumsa (2014).

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