



Referendums: On the Relevance of Psychology

Referendums are conducted in Ireland when the government wishes to seek the citizens' view on possible changes to our country's constitution. In many cases, a referendum will concern a controversial social issue that is perceived as affecting people's well-being or rights.

Psychology is an area of formal research that uses scientific methods to study different aspects of people's lives and experiences. Psychology research focuses on people's *thoughts, feelings, behaviours, personalities, abilities, and well-being*.

- *Referendums often deal with sensitive social issues, and address many topics that have been the subject of much psychology research.*
- *Referendums are akin to large-scale opinion surveys, and so use similar methods to much psychology research.*

For these reasons, psychology research is often scrutinized and discussed during referendum campaigns. Research is frequently highlighted by campaigners, and reported on or critiqued by media commentators. Likewise, professional psychologists – be they researchers, educators, therapists, or consultants – are often called upon to provide views on the issues involved in a referendum, as well as on the procedures of the referendum itself.

Psychology Research and Social Issues

Modern psychology research benefits from a century of development of surveying techniques, structured investigation methods (such as laboratory work), new technologies (such as brain imaging and genetics), statistical analysis, and accumulated datasets produced by studies conducted around the world.

Each year, over 150,000 psychology research studies are published in 'peer-reviewed' research journals, the same production system that accounts for standard research in all modern sciences (for example, physics, chemistry, or biology). Much of this research concerns psychological aspects of social issues (for example, studies that examine the impact of social inequality on people's emotional well-being).

All scientific research has an error rate. Therefore, not every finding can be relied upon. As such, it is important to consider the quality of methods used in research. The quality of psychology research depends on several factors:

- Studies with large samples are generally superior to studies with small samples (all other things being equal).
- Studies that look at a wide range of different types of people are generally superior to studies that look at a narrow range of people.
- Studies that try to account for a wide range of relevant factors are generally superior to studies that fail to account for such factors.
- Studies that have been replicated (i.e., have been conducted several times and have produced consistent results each time) are generally superior to studies that have been conducted only once.
- Studies conducted by impartial researchers (or, at least, researchers who are unattached to a partisan interest group) are generally superior to studies conducted by researchers who hold strong views about the topic concerned.
- Studies conducted in a relevant social or cultural context are generally superior to studies that have been conducted in some other context (e.g., in a distinctly different society or at a significant historical remove).
- Studies that employ statistical methods are generally superior at specifying quantitative outcomes (such as the 'rate' or 'extent' of something, or an 'improvement' or 'deterioration') than studies that employ non-statistical methods.
- Studies that employ interview or qualitative methods are generally superior at describing individual experiential outcomes (such as 'happiness' or 'sadness') than studies that employ non-qualitative methods.

Overall, when reviewing a field of research, it is useful to bear the following principles in mind:

- *Scientific research is best evaluated by looking at patterns of findings across studies.*
- *Scientific research is best evaluated when high-quality research is 'weighted' more heavily than low-quality research.*

For these reasons, scientific research is always best considered in terms of an overview of the accumulated studies that have been conducted on a given topic. It is never sound to consider a single study in isolation as being definitive.

The Psychology of Referendum Debates

Given the human aspect of referendum campaigns, it can be difficult for psychologists, position-advocates, or media commentators to give comprehensive, balanced, and reasonable summaries of the implications of research on a sensitive issue. The available research is typically complex, multi-dimensional, and nuanced.

Most importantly, people analyse political debate emotionally as well as intellectually. It is very difficult for campaigners, commentators -- or even researchers -- to overcome their personal biases when discussing such research. Some typical problems that can be seen during referendum campaigns are as follows:

- **Confirmation bias:** When not concentrating, most people pay more attention to information that supports their preferred view, and less attention to information that is contrary to their

view. This leads them to form a false impression of the weight of evidence that exists for their own position.

- **False consensus:** In general, people hold their own opinions in unrealistically high regard. They over-estimate the extent to which others agree with them. This can discourage them from analysing contrary views fairly.
- **Primacy bias:** Human beings tend to be reluctant to change their views. Therefore, early points encountered in a debate often have a greater impact on opinion than later points, even when they are not logically any stronger.
- **False cause:** Sometimes events happen in a sequence by coincidence alone. Therefore, if statistics from another country show that a situation changed (e.g., deteriorated/improved) after a certain policy or law was introduced there, it does not mean that the same sequence of events would be seen in Ireland. Correlation is not causation.
- **Straw man:** When political debate becomes heated, campaigners sometimes become focused on rebutting an argument that their opponents have not actually made. This can be because the debate has become so 'noisy' that people have stopped listening to one another; or it can be a deliberate strategy to distract attention from an uncomfortable point.
- **Slippery slope:** Human beings are naturally cautious, even though some of their fears about possible future outcomes may be unwarranted. Often campaigners will argue that making a particular decision now will raise the likelihood that a further unwanted action will be taken later as a direct consequence. By definition, this type of argument involves hypothetical scenarios about the future, and so cannot be resolved by reference to research. However, it can be noted that *any* scenario can be argued to be *possible*; thus, when people become alarmed by a 'slippery slope' argument, their reaction can result more from precautionary fear than available evidence.
- **Appeals to emotion:** Human beings often calibrate their social interactions in relation to how other people respond emotionally. As such, we often seek to win an argument not by presenting superior evidence, but by getting the other person to *feel* a particular way. Likewise, when observing political debates, we are susceptible to being influenced by emotional content more than informational content. This is why political campaign materials often feature emotional content (for example, pictures of children) or use emotionally charged words (for example, 'freedom'). To the extent that emotional content prevents us from thinking clearly about information, it can impede our ability to absorb the implications of substantive points made in a political debate.

Psychology Research and Abortion

The government has undertaken to hold a referendum on the Eighth Amendment to the Constitution during 2018. In previous referendums relating to abortion, psychology research has been raised in various ways. Understandably, past campaigns have been fraught, and many of the above points regarding the psychology of referendums have been apparent.

On research relating to psychology and abortion, some relevant points are as follows:

- **Psychological health is as important as physical health:** Political debate about abortion law frequently includes reference to the mental health of women (such as when discussing issues relating to suicidality). Often arguments about 'risk-to-life' regard such risk as more important when it arises from physical disease rather than from mental health problems. Psychologists argue that this tendency to consider mental health risk to be 'less serious' reflects a regressive social prejudice. Mental health and physical health should be seen as equally important.

- **According to the research overall, terminating a pregnancy does not appear to damage a woman's mental health:** Whether abortion leads to emotional trauma or lasting negative psychological consequences has been the subject of extensive research. The American Psychological Association reviewed this work in 2009. They observed that some studies were strong while others were weak. They evaluated the findings, prioritizing strong research over weak research. According to their conclusion, the overall research evidence suggests that a single elective first-trimester abortion does not affect a woman's mental health negatively. Rather, when women feel grief or depression following an abortion, it is likely to be due to extraneous factors, such as prior mental ill-health or the extent to which women feel stigmatized or judged for their decisions. According to the APA review, which is the largest review of its kind, the rate of mental health challenges seen in women who have single elective first-trimester abortions appears no greater than that seen in women in the general population.

Conclusion

Social policy, such as might be determined by the contents of the Constitution, is ultimately a matter of the values held by citizens. While scientific research can help inform discussion of the issues concerned, it does not aim to adjudicate on moral issues. When campaigners, commentators, or researchers cite scientific studies as part of a referendum campaign, it can often serve to distract from the core value-related decisions that voters are being asked to consider. Nonetheless, insofar as research will be discussed during a campaign, it is important that all concerned bear in mind the scientific limitations, reasoning pitfalls, and psychological biases that can undermine debate and impede understanding.

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