



## Referendums: On the Relevance of Psychology

March 2024

Social policy, such as might be determined by the contents of the [Constitution of Ireland](#), 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 the morality of policy decisions. Insofar as psychological and mental health concepts will be discussed during a campaign, we must bear in mind the scientific limitations, reasoning pitfalls, and psychological biases that can undermine debate and impede understanding. While campaigners, commentators, or researchers might cite scientific studies as part of a referendum campaign, it is important that these not distract from the core value-related policy decisions that voters are being asked to consider.

### 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 debates 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 position.
- **False consensus:** In general, people hold their own opinions in unrealistically high regard. They overestimate 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 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 (e.g., pictures of children) or use emotionally charged words (e.g., '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 on Families and Caregiving

On 8 March 2024, Irish citizens will be asked to vote in a referendum on proposed changes to the current text of Article 41 of the Constitution. The two votes focus on the definition of the Family and Care provided by family members to each other. These themes raise several issues that have been the subject of extensive psychology research. Arising from this research, we consider the following points to be particularly relevant.

- **Recognising individual identity and identity as it is enacted in society is essential for the inclusion of families of all forms.**
  - Identity encapsulates people's perceptions of who they are. Research shows that the identities we have embody our sense of purpose, self-worth, self-efficacy, and

self-esteem. They are founded on our personal and demographic characteristics, the groups we belong to, our relationships, and the roles we play in society<sup>1</sup>.

- Individuals need a clear sense of 'who they are' in their own daily contexts. Our sense of belonging to society is foundational to our identity formation. Our personal and social identities are constructed through our interactions with others. Identity maintenance theories propose that people seek verification that their behaviour reflects the standards of that identity. Feedback from others, including society's feedback, is central to us evaluating ourselves and maintaining this identity. If we receive a negative evaluation, it threatens our identity<sup>2</sup>.
  - When identity is threatened it can impact at individual level (e.g., decline in wellbeing, increased experience of negative emotions (e.g., anger, guilt, or shame), as well as feelings of distress and inauthenticity. It also impacts perceived identity at group level (e.g., intergroup conflict) and at societal level (societal change). Identity threats can be perceived as a fear that the values and meanings an identity holds are being questioned or are at risk of attack<sup>3</sup>.
  - Individuals can experience marginalisation when their own identities are seen as being different from those in the majority or authority in a society. The experience of marginalisation has been clearly linked to poor wellbeing and mental health in different age groups and different minority groups.
  - A constitutional change may be interpreted as a trigger of threat, based on a change in society that individuals understand as having a lasting and harmful impact on who they are, and their value in a social context<sup>4</sup>. Recognising the potential impact of both pre and post-referendum public debates and outcome on individuals' wellbeing and perception of self and belonging should not be underestimated.
- **Support for family caregiving is essential to the wellbeing of caregivers, of those being cared for, and of wider society.**
    - Considerable research shows that caregiving within a family constitutes a substantial occupation that in many cases strains the long-term physical and mental wellbeing of carers. Caregiving burdens are chiefly carried by spouses, parents, or guardians (especially women) but are also shared by siblings and other family members.
    - Caregiving for family members who have disabilities or chronic illnesses is especially stressful. Such caregiving is an increasingly normative event; the majority of people will either provide or receive significant caregiving at some point in their lives. Research shows that these caregiving burdens are usually borne in isolation with carers experiencing a shrinking of their social network<sup>5</sup>.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ashforth, B.E. & Schinoff, B.S., (2016). Identity Under Construction: How Individuals Come to Define Themselves in Organizations. *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* 3, 111–137.

<sup>2</sup> Rurka, M., Jill Sutor, J., & Gilligan, M. (2021). The caregiver identity in context: Consequences of identity threat from siblings. *The Journals of Gerontology. Series B, Psychological Sciences and Social Sciences*, 76(8), 1593-1604.

<sup>3</sup> George, M. M., Strauss, K., Mell, J. N., & Vough, H. C. (2023). When "who I am" is under threat: Measures of threat to identity value, meanings, and enactment. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 108(12), 1952-1978.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Hajek, A., Kretzler, B., & König, H. H. (2021). Informal Caregiving, Loneliness and Social Isolation: A Systematic Review. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, 18(22), 12101.

- Members of caregiving families usually have much less time available with which to pursue educational or other life goals or to engage in exercise or recreation. Consequently, when compared to other families, family caregivers of persons with illness or disability are themselves at significantly exaggerated risk of negative outcomes attributable to economic instability and other social determinants of health<sup>6</sup>.
- The challenges families face when caring for a person with chronic needs are not just material and practical, but also emotional. Caregiving is widely understood to be a significant cause of emotional and psychological stress, with extensive research linking caregiving to physical illness, premature aging, and poor mental health. Family caregivers for persons with chronic health needs are typically burdened with diagnosis-related grief and the associated experience of 'living with loss'. Their caregiving stress can range from compassion fatigue to full-scale caregiver burnout<sup>7</sup>.
- Parents who care for children with complex health needs have been found to exhibit increased rates of physical and mental ill-health; and both spousal and parental caregiving are among the most stressful and damaging of all caring roles. Studies suggest that parental caregivers are more than twice as likely to experience mental health difficulties compared to their non-caregiving peers<sup>8</sup>, a risk that is proportional to the level of care required. The more complex a care recipient's medical conditions, the greater the intensity of mental and physical health problems experienced by their caregivers<sup>9</sup>.
- Caregiving benefits include feelings of being useful and needed, personal meaning, skill development as well as companionship with the person cared for. The vast majority of caregivers cited gratification as a positive aspect of caregiving<sup>10</sup>.

In sum, the societal impact of caregiving is immense in terms of overall population health and wellbeing. This impact is worsened by several social determinants, including the loss of social capital and social support. Policies relating to the rights of families with respect to caregiving should not underestimate the scale of the burden involved nor its impact on individuals and, by extension, on wider society. Caregiving is essential to national wellbeing; however, caregiving itself adversely affects the wellbeing of caregivers. In our view, support for caregiving should therefore be seen as an essential collective national duty that creates formal obligations on the state.

---

<sup>6</sup> Berry, J. G., Harris, D., Collier, R. J., Chung, P. J., Rodean, J., Macy, M., & Linares, D. E. (2020). The interwoven nature of medical and social complexity in US children. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 174(9), 891-893.

<sup>7</sup> Jijon, A. M., & Leonard, H. C. (2020). Parenting stress in parents of children with developmental coordination disorder. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 104, 103695.

<sup>8</sup> Bayer, N. D., Wang, H., Yu, J. A., Kuo, D. Z., Halterman, J. S., & Li, Y. (2021). A national mental health profile of parents of children with medical complexity. *Pediatrics*, 148(2), e2020023358.

<sup>9</sup> Hagerman, T. K., McKernan, G. P., Carle, A. C., Yu, J. A., Stover, A. D., & Houtrow, A. J. (2022). The mental and physical health of mothers of children with special health care needs in the United States. *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, 26(3), 500-510.

<sup>10</sup> Lawton et al. 1991; Beach et al., 2000; Baronet, 2003; Cohen, 2003

## Referendums and the Role of Psychology

**Referendums** are conducted in Ireland when the Government wishes to seek the citizens' views on possible changes to the country's Constitution. In many cases, a referendum will concern a controversial social issue that is perceived as affecting people's wellbeing 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 wellbeing.

- 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 scrutinised 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 (i.e., laboratory work), new technologies (i.e., 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 (e.g., physics, chemistry, or biology). Much of this research concerns psychological aspects of social issues (e.g., studies that examine the impact of social inequality on people's emotional wellbeing).

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 (assuming the quality of these studies is acceptable). It is **never advisable to consider a single study in isolation** as being definitive.

**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, assuming the research question affects the entire population and not a specific group.
- 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 (or are funded by entities with vested interests).
- 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 removal).
- Studies that employ statistical methods are generally superior at specifying quantitative outcomes (i.e., 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 (i.e., 'happiness' or 'sadness') than studies that employ non-qualitative methods.