

5. PSYCHOLOGY AND DECISION-MAKING IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: INDIVIDUAL-GROUP/SOCIAL DEBATE

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5.1. INTRODUCTION

Among the many debates in psychology is that of individual-group/social. This focuses upon the origin of behaviour as within the individual (eg cognitive processes, personality) or outside the individual in the group or society. Different approaches and explanations of behaviour can be placed on different sides of this argument.

In applying this debate to decision-making in international relations, the focus is upon how politicians/leaders make decisions, including about others (nations), in relation to conflict. The individual side of the debate concentrates on the individual everyday psychological processes (like social cognition), while the group/social side is exemplified in "groupthink". Here it is the group pressure that influences the individual's decision.

5.2. INDIVIDUAL SIDE OF DEBATE

Social cognition is the process by which individuals make sense of the social world. It includes processes like stereotyping, and attribution, but also cognitive distortions or biases. The process of how we decide upon the behaviour and intention of other individuals in everyday life is exactly the same in international relations.

Robert Jervis (1976) explained decision-making by governments through the "general ways in which people draw inferences from ambiguous evidence".

So impressions are formed of others (individuals or nations) based on certain assumptions, these impressions are difficult to change, and all behaviour by the others is interpreted in relation to the impressions.

Jervis was most interested in how misperception of others can lead to conflict.

Holsti (1979) concentrated upon three factors in

crisis decision-making: cognitive rigidity, time pressures, and stress. These combine to reduce the rationality of decisions made. Time pressures and stress together reinforce cognitive rigidity, and reduce creativity.

Cognitive rigidity is the tendency to focus upon a specific aspect of the situation and base all decision-making around that. Holsti talked of the decision-maker having "a dominant percept through which to interpret information, and to maintain it tenaciously in the face of information that might seem to call for a reappraisal". The dominant percept is characterised by stereotypes, and may even be inappropriate to the current situation.

Cognitive rigidity limits cognitive performance and thus decision-making in a number of ways:

- Reliance on past experience (eg "lessons from history") which reduces the search for alternatives;
- Dominance of "cognitive set" ie noticing only information that fits with existing views;
- Reduced tolerance of ambiguity which encourages the rigidity because it feels certain;
- Stereotyping;
- Reduced sensitivity to others' perspective.

All the elements combine to produce decision-making that is not necessarily rational by the individual leaders.

5.3. GROUP/SOCIAL SIDE OF DEBATE

Irving Janis (1972) used the principles from the social psychology of groups to explain the actual decision-making process of the leader's group. These principles produced a "mode of thinking that people engage in when they are deeply involved in a cohesive ingroup, when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p9). He called this "groupthink".

The characteristics of such situations are limited discussion of alternatives, failure to re-examine rejected ideas, and little information from outside the group (particular challenging information). Overall, groupthink produces a conformity to the norms of the group of a cohesive group, possibly at the expense of

rational thinking.

The upshot is that "brilliant, conscientious men" sometimes make very bad decisions. Even leaders of nations are subjected to the same group pressures as everyone else.

Building on the ideas about conformity to majority group pressure established by Solomon Asch (eg 1955), Janis used examples from everyday life, and historical cases of foreign policy decisions by political leaders to show groupthink in action. In terms of foreign policy decisions, Janis distinguished six "defects":

- i) Limited discussion of alternatives;
- ii) Failure to re-examine courses of action initially preferred by the majority;
- iii) Neglect of options initially assumed unsatisfactory;
- iv) Little use of experts "who can supply sound estimates of losses and gains to be expected from alternative courses of actions";
- v) Selective response to information ie more interest in information that supports their initially preferred policy;
- vi) Failure to work out contingency plans to deal with foreseeable problems with their preferred policy.

Even when problems arise with the preferred policy, group loyalty encourages members to stick with their decision. The cohesion of the group produces "the concurrence-seeking tendency, which fosters overoptimism, lack of vigilance, and sloganistic thinking about the weakness and immorality of out-groups".

Groupthink will occur if added to cohesiveness, there is insulation of the group from the outside world, and a strong opinioned leader of the group. Putting all the ideas together, Janis argued that the group members feel invulnerable, they negatively rationalise warnings, stereotype the enemy, and make the group pressure so strong that dissent is not permitted.

Kramer (1998) reanalysed two of Janis's US foreign policy examples from the 1960s. Using now declassified documents, he felt that group cohesiveness was overstated, and political considerations were more important.

5.4. CONCLUSIONS

The "Dialoguing Across Divisions in UK Social Psychology" group set up by the British Psychological Society in 2005 was an attempt to overcome divisions within (social) psychology (Langridge 2007). This is part of a move to break down the traditional divisions within psychology.

One of these divisions is individual or group/social. In reality, behaviour like international relations decision-making is a combination of both. The individual processes of social cognition and the group pressures of conformity combine to produce bad decisions not either/or (as well as to produce good decisions).

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