

# Political Psychology and International Conflict

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## Abstract

Political psychology takes an individual level of analysis approach to the study of international conflict. This study has traditionally investigated the psychological foundations of decision making among elite leaders in the area of war and peace. Psychological models that have been applied to the examination of this area include those taken from cognitive psychology and evolutionary models. Such approaches include the application of prospect theory to cases of decision making under conditions of risk. Similar work in this area further explores the nature of psychological biases in decision making, particularly in the area of risk assessment. More recent work has explored the biological underpinnings of aggression, and their contribution to the emergence of violent behavior. Past work has tended to neglect the role of emotion, but more recent work has investigated these forces more fully. Future work that seeks to incorporate both biological and environmental forces in precipitating violence appears challenging but worthwhile. In addition, experimental methods drawn from psychology have been applied to the study of international conflict. The use of field experiments to explore the psychological forces that both motivate and sustain conflict appears promising.

## INTRODUCTION

Traditionally, the study of international relations has focused on state-level actors and the interaction between them. Political psychology tends to focus on the individual level of analysis by examining the psychological forces and motivations that inform leaders as well as the mass public. Some of the most important theoretical perspectives that have been employed to analyze the effect of psychology on conflict include models from cognitive psychology, such as prospect theory, as well as theories drawn from evolutionary psychology and biology. These approaches are typically used to examine decision making, particularly in the realm of threat perception, risk taking, and the foundations of aggression. In addition, experimental methods have been imported from psychology and applied in both laboratory and field work

contexts to explore the psychological underpinnings of conflict, as well as understand some of the larger dynamics that both fuel and sustain real-world conflict.

This approach is important to the study of international conflict for at least a couple of reasons. First, political psychology puts the individual actor front and center, arguing that individuals matter and are not interchangeable. Standard models of conflict argue that the individual leader would not matter, for example, in influencing large state decisions such as whether or not to go to war. From that perspective, George Bush could be replaced by Adolph Hitler in 2001 and the outcome would have been the same. Yet history is replete with examples such as Hitler himself where it would be hard to argue that anyone else in this position at a particular time and place would have created the exact same result. Second, psychological approaches allow for the incorporation of factors such as emotion into models of decision making in a way that much more challenging from the perspective of other models. As emotions such as fear and hatred seem obviously to motivate many conflictual situations, the integration of such factors seems important in providing a comprehensive understanding of the reasons for conflict and possibilities for peace.

## FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Although earlier work provided unsystematic explorations of topics related to conflict from a psychological perspective, Robert Jervis provided the foundational work by really establishing the field that applied psychological methods and models to problems in international relations, including questions of conflict. He examined the ways in which cognitive biases could affect processes of judgment and decision making in leaders. He provided seminal contributions to an understanding of how beliefs and attitudes and values, including the images we hold in our head of our enemies, can affect the decisions we make and the actions we take. Although a great deal of work in political psychology has examined the role of public opinion, including attitudes toward war and peace, the majority of the work examining the sources of international conflict have focused on elite leaders. Jervis work, characteristic of its time, focused on those cognitive biases that were considered unmotivated, or which occurred under peoples' level of consciousness, and which they would eradicate if they became aware of them and were able to rid themselves of them. Jervis provided influential demonstrations of how decision makers learn from history and explicated the dynamics that help underlie the security dilemma and escalation spirals in conflict. He also noted the importance of the so-called motivated biases

as well by showing the ways in which wishful thinking can skew decision makers' expectations and evaluations.

Additional work done by others such as Irving Janis sought to explicate potential sources of error in judgment and decision making that could be located in more emotional and social processes; Janis' model of groupthink suggested that leaders were no different than others in their desire to be accepted by a group of similar others and thus proved susceptible to the social pressures that encouraged conformity in group decision making, often to the detriment of high quality choices.

Much of Jervis' foundational work rested on advances in cognitive psychology, which were pioneered by Amos Tversky and Daniel Kahneman. Their early work focused on biases in judgment, affecting the assessments that people make about how, for example, how likely future events such as a terrorist attack might be to occur. They documented at least three central judgmental biases: representativeness, availability, and anchoring and adjustment. They then went on to apply this work in the context of decision making, examining how cognitive biases might systematically affect the choices people make, particularly in situation that involve risk. Kahneman won the Nobel Prize in Economics, which he accepted in both their names, for their hugely influential prospect theory model, in 2002. Built on creative and parsimonious experimental demonstrations, Kahneman and Tversky developed an approach to decision making under conditions of risk that ran counter to the dominant models offered by subjective expected utility theories. They showed that people do not always act as economists say they should, but rather often prefer to take risks when confronting losses and remain cautious in the face of gains. In addition, people appeared particularly averse to losses, weighing them psychologically more heavily than they might weigh commensurate gains. They also showed that people tend to weigh information differently psychologically than they should from an economic perspective. Taken together, such insights helped illuminate the reasons why people buy lottery tickets or pay for insurance. A truly critical feature of this work concerned the so-called "framing effects," which showed that individuals make fundamentally different choices based on the order, wording, or method of presentation with which options are displayed irrespective of substantive changes in content. People fell prey to such biases even when very important real-life decisions were at stake, such as deciding on a treatment for cancer. Such effects prove concerning because they show how easily people can be manipulating in their thoughts, choices, and opinions based on the nature of the persuasive rhetoric to which they are exposed, suggesting that effective leadership can sway people even in the absence of substantive shifts in information. Many subsequent studies have revealed the robust nature of these

effects, and this literature has continued to flourish in the communications and media literature.

Additional unrelated work on risk taking in groups showed that groups often differ in their decision-making proclivities from those espoused by the individuals who make up those groups. In early incarnations, this was referred to as the “risky shift” phenomena, but this label does not accurately reflect the entirety of the research, which really shows increased polarization, whether toward risk or caution, as individuals join groups.

It is also worth noting that experimental research had gone on in psychology for well over a 100 years, the experimental method also began to make new forays into political science toward the end of the 1990s. Although early seminal work in field experiments had been originated and conducted by Goznell beginning in the 1920s, Don Green and Alan Gerber updated and applied these methods in the context of investigating American voting behavior. This method has proceeded to spark an interest among scholars looking at comparative politics as well as those studying international conflict as a mechanism by which to investigate the sources of conflict within and between groups in various field settings around the world, often in Africa and Central and South America.

#### CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Beginning in the late 1990s, as new technology in magnetic resonance imaging came to the fore, allowing for unprecedented investigation into the way that the human mind processes information, models draw from evolutionary biology provided the foundation for emerging models of evolutionary psychology that offered new theoretical avenues by which to examine conflict. Important among this emerging perspective was an increased fascination with emotion and a new appreciation for its central role in decision making. Models such as D’Amasio’s somatic marker hypotheses suggested that emotion proved absolutely central to what had previously been understood to be entirely distinct rational processes. Indeed, these new approaches provided neural evidence suggesting that not only are emotion and cognitive so intimately intertwined that it often remains nonsensical to discuss them as distinct processes, but that emotional processing is privileged by the brain in speed and automaticity, suggesting its critical function in potentiating the survival of the organism.

These methods and findings have been supported and driven by evolutionary models that interrogate the functional foundations of various behaviors, including aggression, violence, and conflict, as well as cooperative processes. Evolutionary hypotheses, for example, could be used to explore the foundations of demonstrable sex differences in aggression, often manifesting as

gender differences in support for public policies encouraging war. They have also been used to examine the selection pressures that may undergird motivations for war among out-groups as well as loyalty among in-groups. Evolutionary models have also been used to provide a theoretical foundation for the origins of prospect theory type preferences by showing that optimal foraging theory would predict that individuals faced with serious losses that might compromise their ability to survive manifest greater risk seeking behavior.

More recent work has sought to uncover some of the biological and genetic factors that may influence individual proclivity toward aggression. Although such factors are not predictive of how any given individual will behave, patterns across populations can help illuminate the ways in which various genotypic predispositions and environmental factors may interact to increase the likelihood of behaviors such as aggression. In addition, explorations of the interaction of genetic and environmental factors in generating and sustaining particular emotions such as fear and disgust can provide a window into the foundations of human psychological architecture and how it serves to support both conflict and cooperation, depending on goals and context.

#### KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There are several issues that arise from these foundational issues. One of the most potentially contentious ones has to do with the relative importance of environmental and biological factors in instigating and maintaining conflict. Over 50 years of research has privileged the importance of social and environmental factors in determining political outcomes of interest; such forces perhaps seem more amenable to institutional intervention and political changes. Clearly both factors play an important role in locating the sources of conflict, but the manner in which such factors are investigated pivots on scholars' beliefs about which factors are most important to uncover.

Given the amount of work going on in related fields in molecular biology, behavior genetics, evolutionary psychology, and cognitive neuroscience, a great deal of which often touches on topics of great interest to those who study international conflict, such as explorations of the processes underlying ethnocentrism and other forms of out-group prejudice, it seems that greater exploration of these issues from a biological perspective is warranted.

For example, a great deal of work shows that boys who experience traumatic events early in their life are more prone to manifesting physical aggression as adults, particularly if they possess certain kinds of genetic polymorphisms. If this is the case, then exploring the influence of environmental factors such as war, famine, drought, and poverty on populations might provide insight into some of the precursors of conflict and violence.

However, such work would require a great deal of time and money, as well as painstaking attention to detail on both biological and environmental measures. Such studies are aided if populations include family members, but locating such groups is not a trivial undertaking. In addition, such studies would benefit from large interdisciplinary teams that include people from both the social and life sciences. However, communication between such groups is not always straightforward, and challenges of translation can block the successful completion of such ambitious projects. This is not just a matter of overcoming disciplinary jargon, or trying to find overlapping areas of central issue. Rather, oftentimes, such individuals start with fundamentally different epistemological beliefs and assumptions. For example, most psychologists do not assume or believe that people necessarily act according to the precepts of rationality; however, most political scientists still adhere to the belief that people are, or should, act rationally. Such basic divides, even in the absence of enmity and in the presence of shared interests, can lead to serious, even insurmountable challenges in completing foundational work at the intersection of biological and environmental determinants of conflict.

Nonetheless, these difficulties are worth trying to overcome to achieve significant progress in these areas. Existing large data sets of twins, and other large populations, such as the Add Health data set, which include political questions, allow for the possibility of exploring some of the biological bases and physiological correlates of conflict in ways never before possible. Large teams devoted to such explorations may be willing to accept those interested in conflict studies and processes as part of the team if such individuals generate interesting hypotheses and ideas for investigation.

Going forward, some explorations at the intersection of political psychology and conflict processes appear particularly to garner increased interest, although it may be hard to tell in the short run how fruitful such examinations may be over time. First, there appears to be a great deal of increasing interest in undertaking field experiments in various parts of the world, which explore the influence of particular factors, including psychological factors such as attitudes toward equity. These studies strive for a combination of the control offered by laboratory experiments by administered clear treatment and control conditions to different subjects with the external validity provided by large population-based studies. How many of these kinds of studies will be able to fruitfully explore significant psychological processes in conflict areas remains unclear, and it may be that such studies are relegated to nonconflict or post-conflict zones, or restrict themselves to simple behavioral economic tasks while not specifically exploring psychological processes that encourage conflict. Another alternative is to take larger phenomena that appear endemic in the field, such as anger, and seek to explore them in more controlled conditions in the laboratory.

A second area of research that will inevitably progress revolves around the deeper exploration of the biological underpinnings, genetic contributions, and environmental factors that both precipitate and sustain violence and aggression. The real challenge is that this work may exclude those who have studied conflict processes most extensively because such individuals tend to focus on social factors, whereas those in the life sciences will be collecting data as part of other projects that they will explore using their own models and methods. These data collection efforts would constitute a true lost opportunity for scholars interested in exploring such factors if they are not able to climb on board. One of the institutional roadblocks to such efforts lies in the fact that those junior scholars most likely to be both able and interested to take on new tasks and approaches are also most susceptible to the norms of fields that have historically privileged sole authorship; such large-scale biological and genetic work is simply not feasible in a solitary context. As such norms change and increased opportunities for collaboration arise, political psychology can begin a whole new area of exploration that incorporates both the internal processes of human motivation with those external dynamics of provocation that serve to instigate violence, aggression, and conflict among and between individuals, groups, and nations.

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