

WWS 595
Spring 2005

Psychological Roots of Conflict

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Description

Psychological phenomena often spark or exacerbate conflict, over and above the rational necessities of state security. We examine cognitive biases, emotions, personality traits, and cultural variations that impact on recent and current international crises. We then explore methods of conflict resolution, from institutional design to the selection of leaders.

Political scientist, sociologists, and policymakers continue to fail to fully understand, predict, or avoid war. Recent scientific advances, however, are beginning to reveal novel biological and psychological explanations for why human conflict persists, over and above the vagaries of personality: All of us, as humans, show systematic biases in decision-making stemming from cognitive and motivated biases. Such factors are downplayed in realist theories of international relations, yet the evidence increasingly shows that our predictions are better if we account for them. For example, people tend to take greater risks when faced with a choice between two potential losses, compared with a choice between two potential gains. Such biases violate classical rational choice theory, so these findings have sparked major theoretical revisions in disciplines that rely on the rational choice paradigm (especially economics and political science). Psychological biases may cause errors in many issues in wider society, such as personal finance, the jury system, and business. But in certain contexts they can contribute to much more costly and dangerous disasters, for example, in international negotiations and war.

We will explore how contemporary research is beginning to understand the biological origins of cognitive biases, the conditions under which they will occur, and methods to control them. Students will conduct their own analyses of contemporary events in which psychological factors are implicated.

Main Readings

Week	Topics and readings
1	<p>Course Overview</p> <p>Simon, H. (1985) 'Human Nature in Politics: The Dialogue of Psychology with Political Science' <i>American Political Science Review</i> 79: 293-304</p> <p>McDermott, R. (2004) <i>Political Psychology in International Relations</i> The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor</p>
2	<p>Personality</p> <p>Post, J.M. (2003) <i>The Psychological Assessment of Political Leaders: With Profiles of Saddam Hussein and Bill Clinton</i> University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor</p> <p>Greenstein, F.I. (2000) <i>The Presidential Difference: Leadership Style from F.D.R. To Bill Clinton</i> Free Press, New York, N.Y.</p>
3	<p>Group psychology</p> <p>Sears, D.O., L. Huddy and R. Jervis (2003) <i>Oxford Handbook of Political Psychology</i> Oxford University Press, Oxford; New York</p> <p>LeShan, L. (2002) <i>The Psychology of War: Comprehending Its Mystique and Its Madness</i> Helios, New York</p>
4	<p>Cognitive and motivated biases</p> <p>Jervis, R. (1976) <i>Perception and Misperception in International Politics</i> Princeton University Press, Princeton</p> <p>Tetlock, P.E. (1998) 'Social Psychology and World Politics' In <i>Handbook of Social Psychology</i>, (Eds, Gilbert, D., S. Fiske and G. Lindzey) McGraw Hill, New York, pp. 868-912</p>
5	<p>Ethnic conflict</p>

	<p>Toft, M.D. (2003) <i>The Geography of Ethnic Conflict: Identity, Interests, and the Indivisibility of Territory</i> Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ</p> <p>Petersen, R.D. (2002) <i>Understanding Ethnic Violence: Fear, Hatred, and Resentment in Twentieth-Century Eastern Europe</i> Cambridge University Press, Cambridge</p>
6	<p>The public and media</p> <p>Johnson, D.D.P. and D.R. Tierney (Forthcoming) <i>Victory and Defeat in International Relations</i></p>
7	<p>Human nature</p> <p>Rosen, S.P. (2004) <i>War and Human Nature</i> Princeton University Press, Princeton</p> <p>Nicholson, M. (1992) <i>Rationality and the Analysis of International Conflict</i> Cambridge University Press, Cambridge</p>
8	<p>Biological origins?</p> <p>Wrangham, R. and D. Peterson (1996) <i>Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence</i> Bloomsbury, London</p> <p>Ludwig, A.M. (2002) <i>King of the Mountain: The Nature of Political Leadership</i> University Press of Kentucky, Lexington</p>
9	<p>Overconfidence and war</p> <p>Johnson, D.D.P. (2004) <i>Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions</i> Harvard University Press, Cambridge, M.A.</p> <p>Van Evera, S. (1999) <i>Causes of War</i> Cornell University Press, Ithaca</p>
10	<p>Psychology of terrorism</p> <p>To be announced</p>
11	<p>Class presentations and discussion</p>
12	<p>Class presentations and discussion</p>