11-7-1997

The Psychology of Reactance and Causal Attributions: Implications for Public Diplomacy

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Abstract. This article describes several psychological phenomena that can impede resolutions of political conflict.

Two sides to a political dispute have begun to see their way towards resolution. Rationally and logically the sides purport tolerance of some compromise affecting economic, military, or other assets. However, the deal in the making may suddenly be derailed. Side 1 suddenly professes to be appalled by the loss of degrees of freedom that the compromise entails. To Side 1, this loss seems to be coerced by Side 2. Moreover, Side 1 professes that if the compromise is implemented as it now stands, observers to the dispute and its resolution will perceive that Side 1 was unduly influenced by Side 2. This appearance must not occur, and as long as the impending resolution seems to ineluctably induce it, the deal is off. Moreover, to Side 1 an acceptable deal may now look almost like the opposite of what it appeared to be only moments before.

Reactance is the term scientific psychology attributes to clusters of thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviors that share in common (1) a reaction against a direction of others and (2) a resultant prime to desire or act in accordance with something vary different than what seems to be directed. A combination of freedom of choice, nonconformity, behavioral freedom, and aversiveness to advice--especially in public environments--seems to constitute reactance psychology. Causal attributions are clusters of thoughts, feelings, motives, and behaviors that make up explanations of why various events occur.

Once reactance occurs in a public diplomatic process, it’s almost as if the other side has to restart not only back at the beginning but even further back. (However, the more astute “other side” may plan on inducing reactance after that side has championed a resolution opposite to what was is really desired. Here, reactance may be a positive development.)

The spatial and temporal contiguity of relevant variables can be modified to develop causal attributions in observers consonant with one’s desires. For example, the closer in location and time two variables are, the more likely they may be perceived to be causally related. (More recent research has identified spatial and temporal differences that may imply causality as well as similarities both of context and variable characteristics.)

The abstractness of the above quickly becomes concrete in the world of public diplomacy. Officials of the People’s Republic of China do not want it to appear that freeing prisoners is being dictated by the United States of America (USA) and various human rights organizations. Neither do officials of Israel or the Palestinian National Authority--although either side may profess attributions of being forced by others into taking an action, when that action would otherwise be unthinkable if free will was perceived by others as the causal factor. During the Cuban missile crisis, officials of the USA needed to avoid the appearance that removal of Soviet missiles would require a quid pro quo--the removal of US missiles from Turkey. Purported violations or threats to violate one’s sovereignty are high probability inducers of reactance and heightened sensitivity concerning causal attributions.