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Attributions and International Political Conflict

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Abstract. This article highlights the relevance of some recent research on psychological attribution processes to the prevention, development, maintenance, exacerbation, and attenuation of international political conflict.

Contemporary international conflict is imbued with questions of attribution. Has the government of India engaged in nuclear testing because of intrinsic aggressive and expansionist tendencies or because of provocations from the People's Republic of China and Pakistan? Is the Israeli government seeking to permanently evade the Oslo Accords or is it being prevented from complying with the Accords by security threats from terrorist groups? Are the "Yes" and "No" sides to the coming referendum in Ireland motivated more by internal fears, memories, and desires or external promises and threats. In fact, virtually all examples of political conflict can be characterized by internal and external attributions that are ultimately linked to causality--mechanical, proximal, distal, efficient, sufficient, necessary, explanatory, intentional, and so on.

The prevention, development, maintenance, exacerbation, and attenuation of political conflict may lie, then, through control of attribution processes. This control, in turn, may best occur through vehicles as diverse as negotiations, propaganda, foreign aid, trade and investment, exchange--cultural, scientific, educational--and even covert action. Guidance for the control of attributions resides in pertinent social psychological research.

As one example, Carr (1998) has studied attributions for third world poverty and has found that there are significant attributional differences between Australians and Malawians. The former blame third world poverty more on situational (external) factors, the latter more on dispositional (internal) factors. Moreover, Carr's findings reflect that there are contextual qualifications in the time-honored fundamental attribution error--i.e., the observer will not always attribute the actor's plight to the latter's internal features. The attributional findings in Carr's study have consequences for influencing support and lack thereof for overseas aid among real and potential recipients and donors.

As another example, Lee and colleagues (1996) have found that attributions from Hong Kong (HK) are more situational (external) and less dispositional (internal) than those from the United States (US)--suggesting that culture can affect the direction of an initial automatic attribution. Interestingly, the Hong Kong-US differences seem to be less significant for political editorials--refugee repatriation, environmental Issues, and international conflict--than for articles on soccer matches.

In yet another example, Blanchard-Fields (1996) has shown that there are both age and content-specificity differences in making attributions. Older adults within the US attribute causality to interactive factors more than younger age groups and also attribute the cause of certain events to dispositions (internal) of the primary protagonist more than younger age groups. These findings are of potentially great significance given that older age groups are more often represented in national and international decisionmaking concerning political conflict than younger age groups.

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Finally, Carlyon (1997) has specified a research agenda for developing attributional retraining. Of great interest is the findings that aggressive subjects are likely to possess maladaptive attributional patterns that may be modified through modeling and reframing techniques. In the international arena of political conflict, the potential generalization of these findings from the clinical world is an intriguing notion. This would most likely be done through indirect interventions.

IBPP attributes great value to attributional research and suggests that familiarization with it should be a component of the educational and training of intelligence officers, foreign service officers, representatives of nongovernmental organizations, and others who work in the fields of international political conflict. (See Blanchard-Fields, F. (1996). Causal attributions across the adult life span: The influence of social schemas, life context, and domain specificity. Applied Cognitive Psychology, 10, S137-S146; Carr, S.C. (1998). Actors, observers, and attributions for third world poverty: Contrasting perspectives from Malawi and Australia. Journal of Social Psychology, 138, 189-202; Carlyon, W.D. (1997). Attribution retraining: Implications for its integration into prescriptive social skills training. School Psychology Review, 26, 61-73; Lee, F., Hallahan, M., & Herzog, T. (1996). Explaining real-life events: How culture and domain shape attributions. Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 22, 732-741.) (Keywords: Attributions, Conflict.)