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Food for Thought on Fungibility: An Example Concerning North Korea

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Title: Food for Thought on Fungibility: An Example Concerning North Korea

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Abstract. This article analyzes a statement ascribed to the United Nations aid coordinator for North Korea to suggest research pursuits in the area of political cognition.

There has been considerable controversy concerning various food aid programs to North Korea. Opponents of food cite the North Korean launching of a rocket over Japan, involvement in the proliferation of technology that can be used for weapons of mass destruction, aggressive designs on South Korea, very hostile propaganda against the United States and its allies throughout the world, engagement in espionage operations primarily throughout Asia, and implementation of terrorist operations as rationales for minimizing or preventing aid. They posit that aid should not be given to such a political actor and that the possibility of aid should be used as an incentive--something to be delivered only when the above behaviors cease.

On the other hand, supporters of aid to North Korea advocate that such aid will create "good will" or otherwise induce North Korea to temper its behavior and change its character. While opponents of aid seem to be (often unknowingly) basing their rationale on common principles of operant conditioning--viz., that a positive reinforcer following a desired (from the conditioner's perspective) behavior is most likely to increase the probability that such a behavior will occur again--supporters seem to be banking on a less common principle such as "backward conditioning" or, perhaps, the same principle as opponents with the proviso that some other behavior--e.g., an inferred intrapsychic cognitive or emotional process--antecedes the positive reinforcer.

The above is just an illustration of the complexity and mystery of delineating the psychological substrate(s) of an individual's arrival at and evaluation of a specific policy. As another illustration, consider a statement ascribed to the United Nations aid coordinator for North Korea. This individual has taken Issue with opponents who contend that much of the food aid to North Korea is being diverted from the people who seem to be in the direst nutritional need to members of the political and military elites. His stated rationale is that the elites prefer rice to the corn and wheat from the aid program and that national supplies meet their needs. However the fungibility of food in conditions of dire necessity suggest that (1) even rice lovers will eat corn and wheat if there is little rice and (2) corn and wheat aid increases the probability that rice will be available more of the time to the elite. Neither of these two suggestions is necessarily an effective counter to the views of aid opponents.

The seeming logic of policy rationale often suffers upon close scrutiny. That is why the area of political cognition--especially approaches bearing on complexes and sequences of cognition, motivation, emotion, and behavior--is such a potentially fruitful one for political psychologists who seek to inform the political world. (See Denniston, J. C., Miller, R. R., & Matute, H. (1996). Biological significance as determinant of cue competition. *Psychological Science*, 7, 325-331; Durrheim, K. (1997). Theoretical conundrum: The politics and science of theorizing authoritarian cognition. *Political Psychology*, 18, 625-647; Eckholm, E. (April 3, 1999). North Korea's food near end, aid workers say. *The New York Times*, p. A3; Miller, R. R., & Matute, H. Biological significance in forward and backward blocking: Resolution of a discrepancy between animal conditioning and human causal judgment. *Journal of Experimental*

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