

8-13-1999

Being Part of the Security Team: An Update on Cognitive Impediments

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Recommended Citation

Editor, IBPP (1999) "Being Part of the Security Team: An Update on Cognitive Impediments," *International Bulletin of Political Psychology*. Vol. 7 : Iss. 6 , Article 1.

Available at: <https://commons.erau.edu/ibpp/vol7/iss6/1>

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Title: Being Part of the Security Team: An Update on Cognitive Impediments

Author: Editor

Volume: 7

Issue: 6

Date: 1999-08-13

Keywords: Cognitions, Intelligence, Security

Abstract. This article describes cognitive impediments to team cohesion, morale, and--less strongly--to performance within a security environment.

Groups of people are often identified to confront and resolve an intelligence and/or security task. Encomiums and paeans abound concerning the virtues of turning these groups into an all-encompassing team. Why? As the team goes, so goes the task--success with success, failure with failure. Or so go the encomiums and paeans. Unfortunately, psychological research has found a host of cognitive impediments to team cohesion, morale, and--less strongly--to performance within many task-related environments bearing on intelligence and security.

For example, individuals often ascribe to themselves more responsibility for positive consequences and, often enough, even negative consequences than is actually the case. In other words, individuals seem to believe that they possess more effectance than is warranted. (Psychologists have not been significantly successful in delineating between acting like one believes and actually believing.)

In a world in which team members are competing for awards, decorations, promotions, perquisites, and prestige--even as they are supposed to cooperate on a task--inflated effectance would logically seem to increase competition and decrease cooperation.

How to deflate inflated effectance? A large body of psychological research suggests that inflated effectance is largely due to an individual having greater cognitive access to his/her own activities than those of another. Thus, decreasing availability to one's own activities or increasing such availability might attenuate this cognitive impediment.

However, there is another body of psychological research that suggests that individuals attribute inflated effectance in others not to an increased availability of others' activities, but to the motive to garner the fruits of team membership and task resolution. Debiasing this attribution is a more thorny enterprise, because the attribution might be a bias on the part of the individual making the attribution, might reflect a bias in the individual to whom attributions are being made, or might comprise both. Other cognitive phenomena--researched by psychologists--further add to the complexity of debiasing. These included inflated estimates of one's self-worth and of the responsibility of others for their behavior--often irrespective of the consequences of their behavior. Moreover, individuals often overestimate the extent to which others can discern their internal states.

Inferences that the above are detrimental to cohesion, morale, and performance can be made from psychological research suggesting they can result in disliking of others, shortfalls in relationship accord, increased bargaining impasse, and work dissatisfaction. Equity theorists posit that people desire some proportionality between social inputs and outcomes and that a violation of this proportionality leads to these team detriments.

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Team selectors, leaders, monitors, and evaluators need to be cognizant of when cognitive impediments to cohesion, morale, and performance are occurring, what trait and situation interactions bring them out, how to attenuate their noxious consequences, and even how to bring forth positive consequences--in the last case turning impediments in to facilitators. All those involved in intelligence and security teams must beware that--due to such cognitive phenomena--the enemy is often us. (See Gilovich, T., Kruger, J., & Savitsky, K. (1999). Everyday egocentrism and everyday interpersonal problems. In R.M. Kowalski & M.R. Leary (Eds.). *The social psychology of emotional and behavioral problems: Interfaces of social and clinical psychology* (pp. 69-95). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association; Kruger, J., & Gilovich, T. (1999). "Naive" cynicism" in everyday theories of responsibility assessment on biased assumptions of bias. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 76, 743-753; Schlenker, B.R., & Miller, R.S. (1977). Egocentrism in groups: Self-serving biases or logical information processing? *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 35, 755-764; Walster, E., Walster, G.W., & Berscheid, E. (1978). *Equity: Theory and research*. Boston: Allyn & Bacon.) (Keywords: Cognitions, Intelligence, Security.)