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# The United Nations Review the Psychology of Sanctions

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**Abstract.** This article describes psychological issues in assessing the viability of sanctions before they are affected and then evaluating the consequences of these sanctions.

The United Nations (UN) Security Council has recently been debating the viability of sanctions in achieving objectives desired by the UN. One common concern is that leaders of governments of countries experiencing sanctions are the ones who most often can change behavior in a manner desired by the UN, but masses of people within these countries with little or no effect on target behavior bear the noxious brunt of sanctions. Another common concern is that sanctions can very easily be construed as violations of national sovereignty perpetrated by a Western controlled, globally hegemonic Security Council led by the United States as superpower or hyperpower.

However, there are more specific and psychological issues bearing on the value of sanctions. One issue is how the sanction is functionally perceived by the target. Here functional perception denotes how the sanction is construed as some combination of positive reinforcement, negative reinforcement, omission training, or punishment yielding some cumulative consequence that is either desired or undesired by the target. Due to mirror imaging and just plain misperception by the Security Council about the character of the target, expected (by the Council) noxiousness of sanctions may be experienced as anything but by the target. For example, sanctions lowering the health status of a people may buy a targeted government very significant political support as to the matter eliciting Council sanctions or as to the legitimacy of Council sanctions in this matter or in any matter.

Another issue is the uncertainty in behavioral consequence stemming from punishment. Although punishment is almost always applied as a vehicle to decrease the frequency and intensity of undesired behavior, the consequence may yield no change or even an increase in behavioral frequency and intensity.

A more abstruse but very germane issue is that the very behaviorist jargon that has permeated common parlance and--ironically--cognition is imbued with circular associations. For example, positive reinforcement is what increases the intensity and/or frequency of behavior. But how can one choose what constitutes positive reinforcement until after the consequences of what one chooses? Unfortunately, one must choose a priori. One might counter that one chooses from a history of prior linkages between what seems to have qualified as positive reinforcement and specific consequences. However, each social situation within which behavior and consequences occur surely is unique in many ways. Whether this uniqueness suggests relevance for expected consequences is again a problematic call. And the same sort of analysis can be developed for negative reinforcement and omission training.

As to consequences, the Security Council debate on sanctions will most likely be inconsequential. This is because the debate focuses too closely on political issues and too rarely--if at all--on the philosophical and conceptual underpinnings of a political tool. Perhaps the Council should face sanctions for their debating shortfalls? (See Crossette, B. (April 18, 2000). U.N. Council to review its policy on sanctions. *The New York Times*, p. A10; Feeley, T. H., & deTurck, M. A. (1998). *The behavioral correlates of sanctioned*

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and unsanctioned deceptive communication. *Journal of Nonverbal Behavior*, 22, 189-204; Kaplan, H. B., & Damphousse, K. R. (1997). Negative social sanctions, self-derogation, and deviant behavior: Main and interactive effects in longitudinal perspective. *Deviant Behavior*, 18, 1-26; Richardson, D.R., & Green, L. R. (1999). Social sanction and threat explanations of gender effects on direct and indirect aggression. *Aggressive Behavior*, 25, 425-434; Tenbrunsel, A. E., & Messick, D. M. (1999). Sanctioning systems, decision frames, and cooperation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44, 684-707.) (Keywords: Sanction, Security Council, United Nations.)