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The Psychology of Behavioral Prediction and War

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Abstract. This article describes recent social cognition research bearing on the psychology of behavioral prediction that may have implications for wartime decision making.

One might arguably assert that behavioral prediction is the essence of wartime decision making. The go/no-go decision to engage in war is dependent on predictions of the war's consequences and other consequences if war is not engaged in. War-related strategic and tactical decisions likewise are dependent on predictions of their consequences. Permeating all of this are predictions about the behaviors of adversaries, allies, and neutrals about the go/no-go decision for war and about the actual prosecution of war.

During the current United States (US)-led military intervention against the Iraqi regime, there have been several egregious misattributions about predictive shortfalls. These misattributions embrace both truth and falsehood. For example, it is true that US authorities' predictions about the nature and degree of Iraqi military and paramilitary resistance to military force were inaccurate. It is not true that the inaccuracies had significant bearing on the outcome of the war or reflected fallacies in planning given subsequent events and given the history of the magnitude of warfare casualties among attackers and defenders. As another example, it is true that the US authorities' predictions about what it would take to elicit concurrence from the government of the Republic of Turkey and about the probability of such concurrence were inaccurate. It is not true that the inaccuracies mirrored an anti-Islamic bias or sheer incompetence.

The fact remains, however, that anything from the behavioral sciences facilitating accurate predictions or at least a better understanding about the nature or process of predictions would be welcome--especially if the research had applied potential.

As an example of promising research is that recently published concerning the work of Nussbaum et al. (2003). Their focus was on the hypothesis that temporal distance increases the weight of global dispositions in predicting and explaining future behavior. Simply, the hypothesis states that as the distance increases between the time at which a behavioral prediction is made and the time at which the predicted behavior is to occur, the individual or individuals making the prediction will be ever more likely to assume that the factors affecting the behavior will reflect characteristics--i.e., dispositions-- of who or whom is being predicted than situational, environmental, historical, and other contextual factors that may affect behavior.

In fact, the researchers carried out four studies supporting variants of the hypothesis. They found that the trend towards dispositional attribution was stronger for predictions of distant future behavior than for near future behavior. The also found that individuals predicted higher cross-situational consistency in distant future behavior than in near future behavior--one example of stronger attributional dispositionism. In addition, they found that individuals sought information about others' more global dispositions--i.e., that which would seemingly characterize more about who or whom was being

predicted--for distant future than near future behavior. And they found that individuals made more global causal attributions for distant future outcomes than for near future outcomes.

What are some implications of these findings? First, there seems to be a cognitive response set characterizing human predictors that may be robust and salient irrespective of what is to be predicted. In a perfect world, one might hope for a cognitive response set that is related to both unique and common parameters and values of what is to be predicted. Instead, the findings of Nussbaum et al. are compatible with an hypothesis of mind bearing on the mind's intrinsic properties that may be fairly resistant to huge changes induced through experience and that may largely induce and become experience. Second, the dispositional cognitive response set may facilitate accurate predictions in some situations--those that would, indeed, be compatible with dispositional attributions. In other situations wherein non-dispositionial attributions would be crucial to accuracy, human predictors would be faced with an impediment to adaptive decision making. Third, the applied social cognition research should be searched for examples of and hypotheses concerning training techniques and milieu modifications that might increase the accuracy of behavioral predictions.

Existential materialists, objectivists, and realists might be disconcerted to apperceive that matters of life and death are decided partially based on social cognition heuristics divorced from some assumed nature of the world divorced from the nature of the human mind. Would they then advocate an aversion to all war or an acceptance of psychogenic collateral damage? (See Johnston, L., Bristow, M., & Love, N. (2000). An investigation of the link between attributional judgments and stereotype-based judgments. European Journal of Social Psychology, 30, 551-568; Knowles, E. D., Morris, M. W., Chiu, C-y; & Hong, Y-y. (2001). Culture and the process of person perception: Evidence for automaticity among East Asians in correcting for situational influences on behavior. Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 27, 1344-1356; Norenzayan, A.; Choi, I.; & Nisbett, R. E. (2002). Cultural similarities and differences in social inference: Evidence from behavioral predictions and lay theories of behavior. Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin, 28, 109-120; Nussbaum, S., Trope, Y, & Liberman, N. (2003). Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 84, 485–497.)(Keywords: Decision Making, Prediction, Social Cognition, War.)