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Trends. Intelligence, Iraqi Weapons of Mass Destruction, and Anchoring Effects

IBPP Editor
bloomr@erau.edu

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Author: Editor

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Abstract: The anchoring effect involves the biasing of estimates based on previous beliefs. The author discusses the presence or absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD) given this anchoring effect.

This week's IBPP contains an article analyzing the controversial public discourse on the presence or absence of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction (WMD). One interesting psychological phenomenon that is not a part of the analysis is that of the cognitive anchoring effect.

At its simplest, anchoring denotes the assimilation of estimates towards a previously considered estimate. An example would be how new information about the likelihood of an aspect of reality is cognitively processed based on a previous estimate of that likelihood. Often, newer estimates are pulled in the direction of previous estimate so that the newer are more like the previous than they would be if the previous had not already been attended to by the individual or group in question.

How could this phenomenon be applied to the question of the presence or absence of Iraqi WMD? Initial biases, predilections, heuristics, and attitudes supporting the hypothesis of the extensive presence of Iraqi WMD would lead to later hypotheses or information supporting other hypotheses being construed as somehow closer in meaning to the initial ones.

Thus, the controversy concerning the presence or absence of Iraqi WMD takes several pathways. The more common concern whether intelligence was accurate or inaccurate, whether the books were intentionally cooked, and whether the decision to invade Iraq by an United States-led force was preordained regardless of intelligence. Another concern, however, is the psychology of anchoring and how difficult it might be to remove oneself from first impressions, beliefs, and so on. In other words, individuals or groups believing in the presence of WMD first might well find it more difficult to accept WMD absence—the converse applying to initial beliefs in WMD absence.

On the matter of cognitive anchoring, Mussweiler & Strack (2001) have found that even implausible anchors can significant effects on later estimates (cf. Canter et al., 2003). Wegener et al. (2001) have found that moderate anchors have more significant effects on judgment than extreme anchors. Mussweiler (2001) has found that anchoring effects can be "remarkably durable." Yet Mussweiler et al. (2000) also found that anchoring effects can be overcome by applying a "consider-the-opposite strategy."

A conclusion might be that above and beyond the politics of the presence or absence of Iraqi WMD is the concern that True Believers of different stripes may too easily be hoisted on their respective petards. (See Canter, D. V., Grieve, N., Nicol, C., & Benneworth, K. (2003). Narrative plausibility: The impact of sequence and anchoring. *Behavioral Sciences & the Law*, 1-267; Mussweiler, T. (2001). The durability of anchoring effects. *European Journal of Social Psychology*, 31, 431-442; Mussweiler, T., & Strack, F. (2001). Considering the impossible: Explaining the effects of implausible anchors. *Social Cognition*, 19, 145-160; Mussweiler, T., Strack, F., & Pfeiffer, T. (2000). Overcoming the inevitable

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anchoring effect: Considering the opposite compensates for selective accessibility. *Personality & Social Psychology Bulletin*, 26, 1142-1150; Wegener, D. T., Petty, R. E., Detweiler-Bedell, B. T., & Jarvis, W. B. G. (2001). Implications of attitude change theories for numerical anchoring: Anchor plausibility and the limits of anchor effectiveness. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 62-69.) (Keywords: Anchoring Effect, Iraq, Weapons of Mass Destruction.)