

# Applications: Psychology and War

# Leadership, Psychology and IR

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Real individuals make decisions

**Key question:** Are individual decisions epiphenomenal? Would any individual make the same decision because of preferences induced by the international system?

# Psychology

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# Are individuals best modeled as rational or irrational?

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## Rational

- ▶ Respond to incentives
- ▶ Memories about what others do
- ▶ Ability to synthesize information

## Irrational

- ▶ Hold grudges, get angry/personally offended
- ▶ Lose sight of role
- ▶ Overconfidence

Focus on irrational because that's where predictions diverge.

# Two ways to think about psychology in international relations

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## Within individual

- ▶ Variations within a person in their cognitive capacity or emotional state
- ▶ Think about yourself with little sleep

## Between individual

- ▶ Some people are more aggressive, smarter, charismatic...
- ▶ More susceptible to biases
- ▶ Think about which friends you trust with consequential decisions

# Common themes in the literature

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## (Over)-Confidence

- ▶ Many of us have it. Often men are worse.

## Risk taking/aggression/hawkishness

- ▶ (Risk-acceptance can be modeled in rational framework)

## (Over)-Confidence

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“Recurring optimism is a vital prelude to war. Anything which increases that optimism is a cause of war. Anything which dampens that optimism is a cause of peace.” George Blainey, *The Causes of War*, 1973

“At least some false optimism about relative power preceded every major war since 1740, as well as many lesser and ancient wars.” Stephen Van Evera, *Causes of War*, 1999

“Boldness in war must be granted a certain power over and above successful calculations involving space, time, and magnitude of forces, for wherever it is superior, it will take advantage of its opponents weakness”, Clausewitz, *On War*

# (Over)-Confidence

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Typical studies: 67% to 96% of people rate their own qualities as better than others/base-rate

- ▶ 88% of Americans claim to be above average drivers  
(source)
- ▶ 90% of college professors say they are better than average teachers  
(source)



# Risk Taking

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## Components of risk

- ▶ Utility over outcomes
- ▶ Probabilities

Someone who is “risk acceptant” prefers taking a gamble over two outcomes, rather than accepting the expected value (which is between those two outcomes).

# Risk Taking

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A country faces the prospect of fighting a war:

- ▶ getting wealth  $W_{win}$  if they win
- ▶ getting wealth  $W_{lose}$  if they lose

$$EU(war) = Pr(win)u(W_{win}) + Pr(lose)u(W_{lose}).$$

A risk acceptant leader would prefer starting the war, whereas a risk averse leader would prefer getting  $EU(war)$  for sure.

## Risk and bargaining

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In the bargaining model, risk preferences can change the equilibrium predictions

In general, risk aversion makes the bargaining range wider.

- ▶ Risk averse leaders value the war lottery less (they don't like the variance)
- ▶ Risk acceptant leaders will have a narrower bargaining range, even none at all.

Most individuals are risk averse. And those who are risk acceptant tend not to be wildly so.

But of course there is variation and selection into leadership.

**Are the “types” of people that become world leaders more likely to be risk averse or risk acceptant?**

# Hawks vs. Doves

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Kahneman and Renshon argue that policymakers come to the debate predisposed to believe their hawkish advisers more than the doves.

A bias in favor of hawkish beliefs and preferences is associated with many of the cognitive biases psychologists have uncovered.

- ▶ Hawkish advisers are likely to be more persuasive than they deserve to be.

For example, in situations of potential conflict, an optimistic bias makes politicians and generals receptive to advisers who offer highly favorable estimates of the outcomes of war.

## Links to Optimism

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Optimistic bias and the illusion of control are particularly rampant when it comes to assessing one's own chances

- ▶ A hawk's preference for military action over diplomatic measures is often built upon the assumption that victory will come easily and swiftly.

Gloom usually prevails when evaluating another side's concessions: something is worth less when its offered by the other side.

- ▶ Psychologically, we are receptive not only to hawks' arguments for war but also to their case against negotiated solutions.

# Psychology and Partisanship

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There is some correlation of hawks and doves with partisanship:

- ▶ Association between conservative political preferences and the endorsement of the utility of force among physically stronger men with a history of fighting (Sell et al. 2009)
- ▶ Conservatives more confident about prospects of success in using force (Johnson et al. 2012)
- ▶ Individuals with greater startle response more likely to support conservative policies (Oxley et al. 2008)
- ▶ Republicans showed greater amygdala activation (associated with automatic perceptions of threat) in a risk taking task (Schreiber et al., 2013)

# Illness and Aging

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# Illness

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Leaders can suffer from a range of illnesses that non-leaders suffer from as well

- ▶ Pain, fatigue
- ▶ Alcoholism
- ▶ Depression
- ▶ Delusions

Illness especially likely when physical or mental resources overtaxed



# Illness

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## Effects of illness on leaders

- ▶ Lessened capacity
- ▶ Changes in priorities and value judgements
- ▶ Emotional shifts, sometimes unexpected

# Examples

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Paranoia? Hitler, Stalin

Narcissistic Personality Disorder? Kim Jong Un, Putin

Depression: Calvin Coolidge (source)

- ▶ Brought on by death of his 16-year-old son
- ▶ May have contributed to great depression (didn't regulate)
- ▶ May have contributed to debt burden on Germany leading to WWII (didn't restructure debt)

# Medications, addictions, and war?

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John F. Kennedy

“No president with his finger on the red button has any business taking stuff like that.” (Kennedy’s physician, Dec. 1962) (source)

During the Bay of Pigs fiasco in 1961, and the Cuban Missile Crisis in October 1962, Kennedy was taking steroids for his Addison’s disease, painkillers for his back, anti-spasmodics for his colitis, antibiotics for urinary tract infections, antihistamines for his allergies, and on at least one occasion, an anti-psychotic drug to treat a severe mood change that Jackie Kennedy believed was brought on by the antihistamines. (source)

“JFK Took Many Drugs for Secret Health Problems.” ABC News. November 17, 2002. © ABC News. All rights reserved. This content is excluded from our Creative Commons license. For more information, see <https://ocw.mit.edu/help/faq-fair-use/>.

# Aging

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Double-edged sword: experience and debility

- ▶ More experience, connections, respect from others
- ▶ Decreased energy and stamina
- ▶ Differential impact of stress
- ▶ Increased susceptibility to illness
- ▶ Shortened time horizons (legacy building)

How to fit into systematic theory?

# Aging

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One systematic effect is “bypass” :

A leader who betrays indicators of senility during face-to-face encounters will elicit harsh judgments by activating negative stereotypes about aging. Older leaders can also surprise their interlocutors: those long thought to be senile may show themselves as mentally and physically fit. Perceptions of age, in turn, shape how observers understand a leader's agency and shape decisions to engage or bypass the leader in the context of interstate cooperation. We draw on declassified primary documents to compare American views of three elderly leaders in Cold War Asia — Syngman Rhee, Mao Tse-tung, and Chou Enlai —and how such views informed Washington's approach to these leaders.

Byun, Joshua, and Austin Carson. "More than a Number: Aging Leaders in International Politics." *International Studies Quarterly* 67.1 (2023)

# Conclusion

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System-level and state-level theories ignore the role of individual-level psychological variables.

How do psychology, illness, and age affect theories of war we've discussed?

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