
Causal Argument

Theory: Decision-makers suffer from limiting cognitive psychology syndromes and the states they govern exhibit the same syndromes. As a result, State A underestimates its own role in causing hostility by State B. This occurs because State A engages in wishful thinking and believes that State B appreciates the defensive nature of State A’s actions. Psychological factors reinforce misunderstanding and limit rationality.

Application: Models commonly invoked to explain the Cold War competition — the Deterrence Model and Spiral Model — fail to adequately explain state behavior. Psychological mechanisms better explain state behavior in the situations examined. The psychological limitations of the individual decision-maker as an intervening variable both account for context and open the “black box” of the decision-making process.

Terms

Perception consists of *images, beliefs* and *intentions*. Decision-making is a process of inference in which actors interact based on expectations of what others will do in a given set of circumstances.

Jervis emphasizes that he uses the term “intentions” not as reflections of others’ means to achieve particular goals or interests, but rather as “the collection of actions that that state will or would take because that is what others are trying to predict.”(p.48) Therefore, estimating the intentions of others is subject to a probabilistic analysis that is grounded in two processes:

1) distinguishing external from internal sources of behavior (that is, how much of State B’s behavior do we relate to situational constraints and how much to the ambitions which we have learned from past behavior);

2) focusing not on how State B thinks it will act but rather on how State A thinks State B will end up acting.

Levels of Analysis

In order to establish the individual level of analysis, Jervis discusses three alternative levels of analysis: bureaucracy, the nature of the state and role of domestic politics, and the international environment.

At the bureaucratic level, preferences are determined by position within organizational structure. Foreign policy decisions are the output of bargain and routine within this structure. On the level of domestic determinants (nature of the state and the role of domestic politics), variations in decision making may reflect variations in social and economic structure and domestic politics. On the level of the international environment, states react similarly to the same objective external situation (constraints).

According to Jervis, these levels assert the importance of various aspects of the objective situation or the actor’s role, that is, the setting as the independent variable to predict the actor’s
behavior - the dependent variable. This kind of analysis ignores beliefs, values, and intentions since the context determines action. Focusing on the individual level of analysis – top decision makers and their perception as an intervening variable – not only sheds light on external stimuli, but also takes the internal setting of the decision-making process into account, not leaving the content as a “black box”.

**Theoretical Context**

Jervis argues that the theories that are most commonly marshaled to explain the dynamic of the Cold War fail to give a full explanation. Both Deterrence and Spiral models posit that states adopt war-causing policies in the false expectation that these policies will elicit compliance from the other state. However, the misperceptions these models posit are different. Jervis argues that these differing psychological factors often reinforce misunderstanding and impose limitations on the rationality of actors and their decision-making process.

*The Spiral Model* – ‘The prisoners’/security dilemma’: Security-seeking states are motivated by fear and mistrust and therefore assume the worst of their neighbors. States seek the ability to defend themselves by acquiring the means for insuring marginal security, thus threatening the security of other states. These other actors, being threatened, will act similarly for the sake of their own security, often resulting in an arms race, policies that weaken potential rivals, war, etc. “These symmetrical beliefs produce incompatible policies with results that are in neither side’s interests.”

(p.65) **Misperception:** punishment will elicit better behavior; **Prescription:** Carrots safer than sticks.

⇒ As evidence against the Spiral Model, Jervis cites cases in which concessions and conciliation were interpreted as evidence for other side’s weakness and thus led to exploitation and expansion rather than to further concessions. (Memories of Munich)

**Deterrence** – ‘The chicken game’: Conflict arises from acts of appeasement made in the false expectation that appeasement will elicit better behavior from other state. In fact, appeasement results in more demands from other state. Revisionist state may believe that the status quo power is weak, and challenges to test the status quo. To avoid this, a status quo state must display the ability and willingness to wage war. **Misperception:** appeasement will elicit better behavior; target of appeasement then does not believe later threats. **Prescription:** sticks better than carrots.

⇒ As evidence against Deterrence, Jervis cites cases in which threats fail and lead to increased hostility, moreover, where the conflict develops in a manner and scope that are far from the original conflict of interests. (e.g. Anglo-German relations in the pre-WW1 era)

**Processes of Perception**

Jervis posits *psychological dynamics* as an alternative to the prevailing models. He argues that psychological determinants can reinforce misunderstandings and limit decision-makers’ rationality, and therefore steps must be taken to minimize the effects of such cognitive limitations/pathologies.

**Cognitive Consistency and the Interaction between Theory and Data**

Jervis argues that individuals tend to see what they expect to see and to assimilate incoming information to pre-existing images. Such filtering is done in both rational and irrational ways.

Rational consistency is a process in which permanence of patterns of behavior is assumed in order to decrease the complexity of the environment. Decision-makers hold theories (i.e. have
Irrational consistency refers to the tendency to avoid conflict of interest and value trade-off - decision-makers therefore force their internal drive for consistency on to the environment. Furthermore, Jervis points out that this drive for coherence may well lead to premature cognitive closure. That is, once assuming a stimulus is understood, later evidence is assimilated according to the initial understanding. In decision-making processes this may lead to limited images about other’s intentions, which are later the grounds for mistaken responses towards these presumed intentions.

**Potential Criticism**

What are the conditions under which any of these propositions will most likely shape international outcomes? Would issue-oriented approach prove viable?

As Barry Posen argues, with so many active processes of perception and misperception working simultaneously, one would not expect to find regularities in international politics. If this is the case, why are we pursuing the study of political science? Doesn’t the study of IR reveal that we can argue for some degree of predictability in states’ actions?

Jervis seems to blur the behavior of organizations and individuals, assuming that learning patterns, SOPs, etc. are replicated in both individual and group levels of analysis.

Does Jervis pay short shrift to the institutional constraints under which these decision-makers are operating?

How viable are the implied policy recommendations that would supposedly decrease misperception in organizations? For example, institutionalizing sources of dissent to increase awareness of cognitive mechanisms/limitations seems to reinforce such limitations (LBJ administration and Vietnam, etc.). The “Devil’s advocate” is usually allowed to speak but then marginalized.