The Investigation of Emotion in Leadership

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Recent debates over President Assad's use of chemical weapons in Syria and the appropriate response by the United States have focused in large parts, implicitly and otherwise, on the motivations of the central leaders. While it may be impossible to ascertain the exact motivation of a given leader at any particular time or in any particular conflict, it is possible to examine the role of emotion in decision making in general, and to place its influence in a theoretical context when analyzing leadership by applying insights from psychology to international relations. This kind of investigation presents one of the many areas in which research in psychology can usefully inform our understanding of international relations.

The examination of emotion in decision making can enhance our understanding of the roles and functions of leadership in society, and this provides merely one illustration of the myriad ways in which findings from psychology can provide insight into important topics and issues in international relations. There are several ways in which such work might be leveraged to help improve our understanding of political dynamics. One of these interdisciplinary approaches is the use of experimental methods and models to explore the microfoundational processes involved in various processes of interest, including decision making or aggression. Another stems from the application of various theoretical models drawn from psychology to novel areas of substantive interest in the political domain.

Leadership provides an interesting case for examination because very little work has been done on this within the realm of traditional international relations scholarship. This is beginning to change as the irrefutable influence of individual leaders and significant non-state actors such as terrorist groups continually emerges on the international scene. The denigration of individual impact in international relations scholarship mostly results because prominent models such as realism and liberalism downplay the causal role of individuals in explaining outcomes in the international environment. However, models drawn from clinical and developmental psychology point to clear and obvious ways in which individual leadership can be profitably examined in systematic ways.

Several theoretical lenses have historically been used to examine leadership from a psychological perspective. Early psychodynamic models explored leaders as both examples to follow as well as illustrations of the ways in which various neuroses might restrict an individual's ability to manifest the full extent of their potential. Such a perspective might focus on the early family background and dynamics which contribute to a leader's world-view and their respective role. Jerrold Post[1] had recently presented such an analysis with regard to Bashar al-Assad, the President of Syria, claiming he represents a clear continuation of his father's brutal rule, suggesting that "the family that slays together, stays together." Post's insightful analysis locates the central lodestone of Bashar's life in his father's preference for his older son Bassel, who was killed in a car crash in 1994. Upon his death, Bashar was forced to give up his incipient medical career as an ophthalmologist in order to take over this father's family business in politics, a career to which he was poorly suited and was not well inclined for. However, given his weakness of character, Bashar proved unable to stand up to his father and refuse the legacy, which might have then gone to his younger brother, Maher, who was temperamentally better suited to the task at hand. Such an analysis, which focuses both on specific details of family history and developmental dynamics, can provide deep insight into the character of particular leaders. However, as can be seen even in this brief example, such an analysis requires a great deal of specific information about the relevant players, and also does not travel well to other cases, making it virtually impossible to generalize from one case to the next. Such a lack of parsimony provides the reason why many scholars in international relations find such individual levels of analysis anathema to large scale models of prediction

dependent on recognizable patterns of behavior.

Other cognitive models which did not draw clear distinctions between leaders and any other kind of decision maker provided more traction by exploring the ways in which systematic psychological biases can affect particular patterns of decision making, especially in the area of risk taking. Some of the more recent work on the role of emotion has highlighted the role of specific emotions such as fear[2] anger[3] and disgust[4] on decision making. While this perspective contrasts with those who present a more simplified approach to the role of emotion, typically concentrated on the role of anxiety and enthusiasm, and sometimes aversion, other models advocate a more discrete examination of specific emotions on particular outcomes. For example, recent work using twin studies showed that individuals with higher social fear demonstrate more antipathy toward out-groups, including holding more anti-immigration attitudes. Recent work in neuroscience has provided strong support for this kind of specific approach to the examination of emotion. Models such as D'Amasio's somatic marker hypothesis[5] demonstrate how the human body privileges emotional information received from the physical body, including the sense, in speed and significance. This suggests that such information held critical importance throughout human evolutionary history in helping people survive and thrive in the face of threats and opportunities.

From this perspective, those who decry the role of emotion in international relations fail to understand its critical role in communication. While some may suggest that anger can make people do things they might not otherwise do, institutionalists would be quick to point out that constraints exist which might prevent quick action based on transient emotion, at least in a democracy. However, as recent neuroscientific evidence shows, the old childhood adage that "sticks and stones may break my bones, but names can never hurt me" is exactly wrong: social exclusion causes activation in the same part of the brain as physical pain, and analgesics like Advil that work on physical pain appear to buffer the effects of social isolation and exclusion in a similar manner. This suggests that words do matter, and forms of communication which include emotional content may exert an influence far beyond the content of the words themselves precisely because the human brain privileges such information as providing particularly important and significant input. In experimental work my colleagues and I have conducted, we found that hostile communication indeed increases the risk of conflict as opposed to friendly communication[6].

The role of emotion in communication serves a critical role in signaling. Just as rational choice theorists such as James Fearon have discussed the role of tying hands versus sunk costs in signaling foreign policy interests[7], and examined the role of signaling versus balance of power and interest in crisis bargaining[8], it is possible to conceptualize the role and strategic use of emotion as providing similarly significant signaling capacity. Emotion can communicate the importance that an issue holds for a leader, as well as demonstrate his degree of personal commitment to a given cause or plan of action. Genuine facial expression of emotion is hard to fake; most people can tell the difference between a performative smile and a genuine Duchenne smile which crinkles the corners of the eye as well as the sides of the mouth. Emotion can also work to rally the troops by encouraging followers, including fence sitters, of the importance of a given campaign or strategy, and thus strengthen the coalition of support for a leader's goals. In this way, emotion can serve both an individual communicative function as well as social facilitation one simultaneously. From this perspective, John Kerry or Barack Obama showing anger in the face of Assad's actions communicates both their outrage at his usage of chemical weapons against his own people just as it signals their determination to take action in order to stop it. The horror and sadness which certain other observers – including members of congress – have displayed also serves to communicate the motivation for their desire to respond as well as it shows empathy for the victims and their families. This latter device has the double purpose of also separating the intention for any military action against the regime from any desire to further harm civilians whose violation spurs the impetus for action.

Models from psychology can usefully inform our theoretical understanding of some of the potential sources of motivation for leaders' actions, as well as help decipher some of the mechanisms for their communication and manifestation, which can be located, in part, in specific emotions such as anger or fear. Further detailed exploration of such hypotheses can be undertaken in experimental work designed to test the central mechanisms posited. However, such tests almost never employ real leaders as subjects, for obvious reasons. Nonetheless, if one assumes that experiences such as emotion represent universal human properties, such a limitation should not necessarily restrict the application of findings derived from normal subject to leaders. However, leaders will likely

experience institutional constraints which may limit the influence of their psychological dispositions on state action depending on regime type. Nonetheless, the impact of such factors as emotion, embodied in such features as facial expression, still expresses important information signaling commitment and intention, and helps facilitate critical social consensus. Scholars of international relations may deny the importance of this function theoretically because it is hard to conceptualize and even harder to measure, but politicians and their handlers recognize its importance, as attested by the tremendous weight given to public speeches by presidents which are designed to sway public opinion through just such implicit mechanisms of communication and facilitation. Some important work has been conducted in this area[9] regarding the influence of physical appearance and expression on public opinion, but much more remains to be done.

If we seek to understand the nature of motivation in leadership, emotion provides one critical avenue that demands the integration of psychological methods and models into our extant theories in international relations. In an era of endemic social networking such as Facebook, the opportunities to explore such dynamics empirically have expanded exponentially and simply await sophisticated exploitation.

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