Riassunto dell'elaborato finale Andrea Conti 070122

L'obiettivo di questa tesi è offrire una panoramica generale sulla psicologia politica e valutare l'applicabilità di alcune sue nozioni in casi attuali di politica internazionale. Il campo di ricerca in cui si situa questo lavoro è chiamato appunto psicologia politica, si incentra sull'utilizzo di scoperte psicologiche per studiare con luce nuova diversi argomenti tradizionalmente legati alla scienza politica. Questa ispirazione garantisce alla disciplina una notevole dinamicità e un approccio spiccatamente versatile. Alla sua base vi è difatti un continuo dialogo tra contenuti e metodi della scienza politica e della psicologia.

Nel primo capitolo si indicano le caratteristiche distintive della psicologia politica, il suo sviluppo storico, e i principali metodi di cui si serve. Tra le caratteristiche salienti, in primo luogo, questa branca di ricerca predilige un livello di analisi individuale, nella persuasione che i singoli attori siano determinanti per gli esiti politici in ambito internazionale. Da qui l'esigenza di dedicare un'attenzione speciale alle proprietà e alle dinamiche interne di individui responsabili per la formulazione e l'implementazione della politica estera. I valori, gli obbiettivi, le opinioni che distinguono una persona sono considerati elementi cruciali per una piena comprensione di una data azione o comportamento. Tale branca in questo senso si distanzia dalle teorie convenzionali delle relazioni internazionali, che solitamente adottano un approccio sistemico e deterministico.

Un'altra caratteristica della psicologia politica è l'interesse per i processi. Scopo dell'investigazione è infatti non tanto dedurre semplici relazioni causa-effetto tra due

variabili, quanto piuttosto mettere in luce le concatenazioni e i meccanismi intermedi che da un insieme di premesse portano a un risultato.

Altro elemento caratteristico di questo settore è la sua peculiare attenzione al contesto che delimita l'oggetto dell'indagine. Scelte significative nella sfera politica sono anche e soprattutto frutto dell'ambito - sia interno che esterno - in cui l'individuo si trova a dovere agire. Quest'enfasi sull'importanza della situazione si deve soprattutto alla psicologia.

La psicologia politica è inoltre per natura un indirizzo multidisciplinare che si serve di una moltitudine di metodologie diverse. Ciò consente una ricchezza notevole in termini di flessibilità analitica e opportunità d'indagine. Diversi metodi si attagliano infatti a specifiche domande di ricerca, a beneficio della varietà di interessi e tematiche propri della disciplina. La combinazione di diverse tecniche di studio consente inoltre una maggior fiducia nella validità dei risultati, come evidenziato da Tetlock (1982).

Quanto alle fasi storiche, la genesi della branca è comunemente individuata negli anni '30, seppur con un maggior consolidamento nei decenni successivi: in queste fasi il tema prevalente era l'impatto di tratti stabili delle personalità dei leader sulle loro successive preferenze politiche. Un altro concetto ricorrente era la proiezione di frustrazioni interne irrisolte nel mondo esterno e nell'interazione con gli altri. L'influenza pervasiva della psicoanalisi Freudiana non dava i crismi del rigore scientifico a questi i studi, che tuttavia ebbero il merito di rimarcare per primi le importanti e complesse connessioni tra la psicologia e la politica.

Negli anni ’70, la ricerca fu rinvigorita da un crescente interesse per il comportamento elettorale, che fu studiato tramite concetti ricavati principalmente dalla sociologia e la teoria dell’apprendimento sociale. L’osservazione dell’altro e l’internalizzazione di norme durante l’infanzia venivano sottolineati quali elementi decisivi per lo sviluppo e il mantenimento di attitudini e disposizioni successive, anche in ambito politico.

Tra gli anni ’70 e ’80 la letteratura più fertile riguardava l’applicazione di nuovi convincenti risultati dalla psicologia cognitiva e l’economia comportale, in particolar modo sulla scia delle scoperte degli psicologi Amos Tversky e Daniel Kahneman sulle violazioni degli assiomi di razionalità. Un concetto enormemente influente in questa fase fu anche la “razionalità limitata” introdotta da Herbert Simon (1982).

Più di recente, la psicologia politica ha sondato il ruolo dell’emozione nell’elaborazione individuale di informazioni e stimoli esterni, con specifico riguardo a fenomeni sociopolitici di grande portata. Problemi attuali quali il terrorismo internazionale, la crisi finanziaria, o il cambiamento climatico si prestano facilmente a questo tipo di indagini.

Come accennato sopra, la psicologia politica si serve di una vasta gamma di metodologie di ricerca. L’esperimento è il metodo maggiormente adottato in psicologia, e quello che permette di formulare asserzioni di causalità con maggiore sicurezza. Il confronto tra un gruppo di intervento e un gruppo di controllo composti in maniera randomizzata consente di isolare l’effetto della variabile indipendente sotto osservazione. La validità interna – ossia la presenza effettiva della relazione causale ipotizzata – è dunque particolarmente elevata, mentre diversi limiti

riguardano la possibilità di generalizzazione dei risultati al di fuori del contesto dell'esperimento, ossia la validità esterna.

I sondaggi sono un altro procedimento assai diffuso in questo indirizzo di ricerca, soprattutto negli studi sull'opinione pubblica. I maggiori vantaggi risiedono nella robusta validità esterna e nella possibilità di raccogliere informazioni relative a un gran numero di persone. Di contro, non vi è certezza che i dati raccolti riflettano davvero le opinioni e disposizioni interne dei soggetti. Un'altra serie di problemi consiste nella possibilità che le domande non vengano comprese o siano interpretate in modi disparati.

Nella tavolozza metodologica della psicologia politica figurano poi tecniche qualitative tra cui i test di autovalutazione (che portarono Adorno et al. a individuare la cosiddetta "personalità autoritaria" nel 1950), analisi del contenuto, interviste, giudizi sulla personalità da parte di osservatori esterni, e i case study (particolarmente popolari in scienza politica).

Data l'ampia scelta di metodi di ricerca a disposizione, sta allo studioso selezionare il procedimento che meglio si addice al contesto del fenomeno sotto osservazione, tenendo anche a mente pro e contro di ciascuna tecnica. Questa libertà di scelta non implica tuttavia un'assoluta "uguaglianza scientifica", dal momento che il livello di rigore e precisione d'indagine varia di metodo in metodo.

A seguito della panoramica sui principali aspetti dell'approccio di ricerca in cui si innesta questa tesi, nei successivi capitoli vengono affrontati in maggiore dettaglio due dimensioni specifiche della psicologia delle relazioni internazionali.

Il primo tema fa riferimento al ruolo che le dinamiche percettive e cognitive giocano nei rapporti tra stati. Attingendo ampiamente al fondamentale lavoro del politologo Robert Jervis (1976), si sottolinea l'importanza di un'analisi delle rappresentazioni interne che gli statisti formano per interpretare la condotta altrui in contesto internazionale.

Due visioni contrapposte circa la natura dell'ambiente internazionale e le intenzioni degli stati sono note rispettivamente come "deterrenza" e "modello a spirale". La prima – di carattere più normativo - trasmette l'idea che nelle interazioni tra stati non vi è spazio per gratuite concessioni o atteggiamenti conciliatori, in quanto gli stati dediti a sovvertire lo *status quo* non perdono occasione di perseguire i loro interessi sfruttando manifestazioni di debolezza o scarsa risolutezza. La strategia ottimale è dunque rispondere a ogni pressione con determinazione e fermezza, al fine di scoraggiare continue aggressioni e garantire la stabilità.

Il modello a spirale – di natura maggiormente descrittiva - sostiene invece che le guerre scaturiscano per lo più da una percezione cronica di insicurezza unita a sequela di reciproche incomprensioni: spesso gli stati non auspicano la guerra, ma nel tentativo di accrescere la propria sicurezza trasmettono inavvertitamente all'altro una sensazione di minaccia e ostilità. Un'azione che appare naturalmente pacifica o volta all'autodifesa dal punto di vista di chi la compie può spesso essere interpretata come ostile da un osservatore esterno. Se chi compie detta azione non coglie questa dinamica, la reazione dura dell'osservatore sembrerà inoltre totalmente immotivata. Gli attori statali danno spesso per scontato che le loro intenzioni sono chiare anche agli altri, una convinzione perlopiù infondata.

Altre importanti considerazioni nel capitolo sulle percezioni derivano da intuizioni psicologiche circa le modalità con cui decifriamo la realtà esterna. Il concetto di coerenza cognitiva descrive il processo per cui tendiamo a mantenere una struttura ordinata ed equilibrata tra le nostre diverse opinioni e attitudini. Tale fenomeno psicologico è anche all'origine del cosiddetto "bias di conferma" o percezione selettiva: convinzioni e aspettative preesistenti ci inducono a carpire quelle informazioni che con esse collimano e al contempo a trascurare o screditare dati avvertiti come discrepanti. Questa sorta di rigidità cognitiva può anche in parte spiegare la natura incrementale e gradualistica della politica. Spesso informazioni che dovrebbero indurre ad un cambio radicale di strategia vengono infatti ignorate o piegate alle convinzioni preesistenti e alla struttura dogmatica su cui si fonda la politica in vigore. Per di più, forme irrazionali di consistenza cognitiva portano molte persone a difendere la loro politica preferita sulla base di un insieme di ragioni indipendenti. Ne consegue l'incapacità di riconoscere che una politica spesso implica dei compromessi tra diversi valori, o tra il perseguimento del proprio interesse e il danneggiamento di quello altrui.

Nel capitolo ci si sofferma poi su alcune idee sbagliate assai diffuse anche a livello di politica estera: la percezione che la realtà esterna sia molto più ordinata, unificata, e pianificata di quanto non sia; la visione che si è estremamente influenti nel pensiero e nel comportamento altrui; e similmente che ogni azione che abbia l'effetto di nuocerci sia stata anche volutamente diretta a danneggiarci.

Nell'ultima parte del capitolo si prova infine a ricavare da queste interessanti teorie psicologiche una chiave di lettura per l'attuale situazione del conflitto israelo-

palestinese. A livello di élite, è radicata una fiducia incrollabile nell'efficacia della deterrenza. A ciò si accompagna una scarsa attenzione sul come determinati comportamenti - che dal punta di vista israeliano sono volti all'autodifesa o puramente pacifici – possano essere interpretati dall'esterno come segnali di ostilità e provocazione. Le dinamiche psicologiche appena discusse possono aiutare a comprendere perché - nonostante i suoi insuccessi a lungo termine resi eclatanti dalle ultime escalation - la politica estera israeliana rimanga pressoché inalterata.

Il capitolo successivo verte invece sui processi decisionali e sulle scelte in condizioni di incertezza e rischio. Una prima parte contiene una descrizione delle principali scoperte relative ai giudizi probabilistici, ossia alle stime soggettive che formiamo circa la probabilità di eventi futuri. Questi giudizi contribuiscono a comporre il "frame", o il quadro entro cui si vagliano le decisioni finali tra diverse alternative. Numerosi studi psicologici hanno mostrato che tali giudizi sono afflitti da una serie di fallacie ed errori sistematici derivanti dall'utilizzo di scorciatoie cognitive - note come euristiche - le quali normalmente semplificano l'arduo compito di formulare stime sulle probabilità.

La seconda parte del capitolo si focalizza invece su un convincente e autorevole modello descrittivo di scelta in condizioni di incertezza, elaborato dagli psicologi Amos Tversky e Daniel Kahneman nel 1979: la "teoria del prospetto". Uno dei princìpi cardine di questo modello è che le persone assegnano valore soggettivo non tanto agli stati finali di ricchezza, quanto a variazioni negative e positive (perdite e guadagni) dal loro punto di riferimento. Altro pilastro di questa teoria è la cosiddetta "avversione alle perdite", indicante il fatto che la sofferenza psicologica provocata da

una perdita è superiore al piacere causato da una vincita dello stesso ammontare. Ciò si traduce anche in un diverso atteggiamento nei confronti del rischio, a seconda del "dominio d'azione" in cui ci si trova: quando un prospetto è presentato in termini di perdite, siamo indotti a preferire un'alternativa più rischiosa all'esito certo (propensione al rischio); quando invece i premi di un prospetto sono positivi, ossia guadagni, tendiamo a preferire l'esito certo alla scelta rischiosa (avversione al rischio).

Queste teorie sul modo in cui interagiamo con il rischio possono offrire preziosi strumenti interpretativi per scelte delicate in ambito di politica estera. In questa tesi in particolare, si è analizzato il caso dell'annessione della Crimea alla Russia avvenuta nel marzo del 2014. Focalizzando l'attenzione sulla figura chiave di Vladimir Putin, si è definito il contesto della sua decisione di intervenire in Crimea in seguito alla rivoluzione ucraina dell'Euromaidan. Putin ha sofferto perdite su vari fronti con la caduta del suo alleato Yanukovich. Il suo punto di riferimento è rimasto legato alla situazione immediatamente antecedente la rivoluzione, il che lo ha portato a considerare una strategia cauta o di non-intervento come la perpetuazione di uno *status quo* a lui avverso, o in altre parole, una perdita sicura.

Trovandosi nel dominio delle perdite, in linea con quanto previsto dalla teoria del prospetto, Putin ha optato per una soluzione più rischiosa (l'intervento in Crimea) per evitare la certezza di una perdita e tentare al contempo di rientrare dei danni subiti. Dall'esempio emerge come il punto di riferimento soggettivo del decisore sia determinante per la scelta finale: se Putin avesse metabolizzato la rivoluzione di Kiev e dunque assorbito la perdita, avrebbe percepito il non-intervento come mancato

guadagno più che perdita sicura, il che avrebbe con molta probabilità invertito il suo atteggiamento nei confronti del rischio.

Nella conclusione dell'elaborato, infine, vengono menzionati potenziali limiti di questo tipo di studio – come ad esempio la difficoltà di operazionalizzare le variabili d'interesse in uno scenario complesso come quello della politica internazionale - e possibili orizzonti di ulteriore ricerca in psicologia politica.

LUISS Guido Carli
LIBERA UNIVERSITÀ INTERNAZIONALE DEGLI STUDI SOCIALI

Dipartimento di Scienze Politiche
Politics, Philosophy and Economics

The Psychology of International Relations:

A focus on perceptions and choices in foreign policy

Relatore
Giacomo Sillari

Candidato
Andrea Conti (070122)

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Introduction

The aim of this paper is to point out the main characteristics of political psychology and evaluate the usefulness of some of its insights in practical cases of contemporary international politics. The locus of analysis is thus the international context and the theoretical tools adopted are derived from the interdisciplinary field that connects political science and psychology. Two major topics of political psychology (perceptions and choices) will be explored in more detail and their respective implications for international relations will be tested in two case studies. As for the structure of the paper, in the first chapter an overview of political psychology - the theoretical platform of this study - will be provided, consisting of a brief history of its development and a summary of its main methodological and conceptual aspects. The two following chapters will be devoted to the substantive part of this study: one will concern statesmen's **perceptions and images** and the other will deal with **choices**, and more specifically decision-making under conditions of risk. At the end of each substantive chapter a pertinent case study will be analyzed in order to verify the main assumptions. A conclusive section will then sum up the main points of this paper, mention new opportunities for further research in this area, and point out some of the possible weaknesses of this and similar studies.

I - Overview of political psychology

In this introductory chapter we will present in a more general way the theoretical approach of this paper, namely political psychology. This research area is located in the midway between political science on one side, and psychology on the other. It employs concepts

derived from political science and tries to shed fresh light on them by means of compelling psychological theories. This field of study is particularly dynamic and lively, promising to advance theorizing and knowledge-gathering in a number of areas. Political psychology is also particularly ramified for it has developed out of each of the many subfields composing political science. Wherever psychology can benefit investigation with its theoretical repertoire, there is room for such a discipline: leadership, voting, social movements, conflict, globalization are some of the several subjects in which political psychology has thrived. Having said that, the locus of this study is in a particular domain of political science, namely international relations. In this first chapter, the defining characteristics of political psychology, its main historical trends, and its research methods will be outlined in turn.

DEFINING CHARACTERISTICS OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

As one can deduce from the name of the field itself, political psychology is particularly concerned with the internal realm and the psychological dynamics of actors in charge of important policy decisions. Political psychology's standpoint is chiefly at the **individual level of analysis** (Jervis, 1976). The beliefs and attitudes of individual decision-makers are seen to shape political conduct and hence worth analyzing. This point marks a clear difference from mainstream international relations doctrines like neorealism: to Kenneth Waltz, for instance, the international system of anarchy - rather than particular idiosyncrasies at national or decision-maker levels – is the only (macro) variable which explains most outcomes of international politics (Waltz, 1979). Nonetheless we should note that Waltz time and again made it clear that his theory was not aimed at understanding specific foreign policy events, but rather offered an explanation of more general, recurring

patterns in the international arena. With regard to this last clarification, we argue that an approach which shifts its focus to the individual level of analysis is better equipped to analyze and understand *specific* foreign policy behaviors and outcomes, and this paper is basically grounded on such a conviction.

Related to this interest in the individual level of the phenomenon under observation, we also find a peculiar leaning towards a **process-centered explanation**. Rather than prediction, as it is the case in those traditional IR theories which rely on economic models of rational choice, political psychology aims at interpretation and understanding. The art of *verstehen* (understanding) as invoked in the 19th century by Max Weber is of utmost importance in social science and is deemed particularly valuable by political psychologists. Researchers in this field in fact try to devise more fine-grained hypotheses than a simple input-output theoretical pathway. They want to find out what is inside the black-box representing the event under observation. Mechanisms are usually preferred to models. The inside process and the intervening variables at play have thus a great deal of importance in the research *ethos* of political psychology. Furthermore, as the range of interests in international relations broadens to span new appealing topics - such as transnational civil society organizations or international terrorism - this centrality of the process becomes increasingly crucial, since deep understanding of psychological and emotional proximate causes is the main purpose of delving into such complex socio-political phenomena.

Another defining characteristic of this discipline is the relevance of the **context** for explaining human behavior (McDermott, 2004; Jervis, 1989). In order to grasp the motives the lead an individual to behave in a certain way - either a young unemployed to join a terrorist group or a president to enter war - analysts want to know the particular history of the actor: his major experiences, beliefs, attitudes etc. The context which is seen as relevant

for explaining political phenomena is then both external and internal, and the two sub-dimensions mutually interact.

Another peculiarity of political psychology lies in its intrinsic **multi-disciplinary and multi-method character**, which guarantees an added value for inquiry of political events. Political psychology is a dynamic discipline which draws on a number of cogent ideas from both psychology and political science. A new outlook is thus introduced in the many subfields of political science, helping to see under new lenses those questions which have not been adequately addressed by conventional approaches. Looking at the same phenomena from other standpoints (in this case a psychological one) can lead to new, unexpected deductions that enrich our knowledge of what surrounds us.

As observed by Deutsch (1983) and McDermott (2004), the flow of such an intense interdisciplinary dialogue is not exactly symmetric, since practitioners mainly adopt psychological theories in order to explain political phenomena rather than exploring how political events affect psychological states in individuals and groups. The latter relationship has not attracted much scholarly attention yet, and has the promise to become an interesting route for future inquiry.

Stemming directly from the multi-disciplinary vein of this research approach, is the wide range of methodologies at its service. A careful combination of different methods of inquiry, both quantitative and qualitative, has the merit of increasing confidence in the external validity of findings, or a certain degree of matching between theory and reality. Moreover, political and ideological biases often lurking behind and threatening to affect results are more easily staved off when different methods are adopted together, as pointed out by Tetlock (1982).

Finally, political psychology is particularly concerned with **applied questions**, in that it usually attempts to address practical and current topics of interest in the political and societal realm. While this is apparently a strength of the discipline, some scholars have warned on the peril that such political engagement may reduce neutrality and lead to ideologically biased findings. It is up to each scholar to ward off this possibility, making sure that methodological validity and rigor overshadow personal leanings and preexistent beliefs (Tetlock, 1994). Then, to sum up, the individual level of analysis, the centrality of the process and the context, the multi-disciplinary and multi-method nature, and the prominence of applied questions are the major characteristics of political psychology.

HISTORY OF POLITICAL PSYCHOLOGY

The first studies concerned with the relationship between psychological and political variables were carried out during the 1930s and mainly dealt with the impact of personality traits on conduct of political leaders. Harold Lasswell, considered by many as the father of political psychology, was a leading scholar in this research trend. In *Psychopathology and Politics* (1930) he claimed that leaders often project their inner conflicts and frustrations out to the external political world. He thus implicitly recognized the importance of analyzing the internal milieu of individuals in order to better explain political behavior and outcomes - a conceptual pillar underlying political psychology.

This first stage of inquiry was deeply influenced by Freud's psychoanalytic theory, as revealed by other similar studies on leaders' personalities. In-depth psychological histories were elaborated of Woodrow Wilson (George & George, 1964), Martin Luther (Erikson, 1958) and other leading historical characters.

While these preliminary studies were fundamental in paving the way for future investigation of the linkages between psychological and political dimensions, they overall fell short of scientific rigor, due to almost exclusive reliance upon quantitative methods such as content analysis, and the use of variables difficult to operationalize. In this literature, in short, the central theoretical question was the influence of stable personality features over behavior, while the main explanatory tools were drawn from psychoanalysis. A recurring theme in these works, for instance, is the impact of in-family relationships and childhood experiences on future discerning and understanding of the external world, and in turn on behavioral predispositions during adulthood.

In a second historical stage, which started in the 1970s, the focus of scholarly interest was shifted in particular towards voting behavior at domestic level. These studies largely dismissed psychoanalytic theories and instead adopted concepts from sociology and learning theory. Hence, an initial strand of this literature emphasized the importance, for explaining voting habits, of the long-lasting political attitudes that are internalized by individuals through social learning and observation of others in their familiar and proximate social contexts (Erişen, 2012). The effect of political communication was seen at best as marginal and reinforcing of such preexisting attitudinal inclinations. A seminal work advancing similar claims – with an emphasis on inherited party identification - is *The American Voter* by Campbell et al. (1960).

At a later stage, the bulk of research focused on processes of cognition and their implications for political phenomena, a literature stimulated by new compelling findings on judgmental processes and decision under uncertainty. The existence of cognitive biases and framing effects (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974), plus new appealing concepts such as bounded rationality (Simon, 1982) inspired research both at mass and elite level.

More recently many studies have dealt with the role of affect and emotion in processing of politically-relevant information and commitment to political strategies. Particular efforts have been made to integrate emotion in the broader picture of cognition, contrary to the old paradigm which marked a sharp distinction between affect and rationality. Several present-day topics (e.g. military response to terrorist attacks or policy preferences during harsh financial crises) seem especially suitable for analysis and study of these emotional variables.

As a final remark, it is worth stressing that the historical overview drawn so far is not to be considered as a rigid succession of discrete research trends, since in today's political psychology we can still find the abovementioned approaches coexisting together, albeit in revised and evolved forms.

METHODOLOGIES

As already pointed out, a key aspect of political psychology is the wide variety of research methods adopted. This heterogeneity stems from the multi-disciplinary nature of the approach itself, which combines political science and psychology. From the two fields, different designs are borrowed, each particularly suitable for the kind of question or explanation to be unraveled and the contextual properties of the inquiry. Connecting to the main historical trends outlined above, we find that the scientific standard of political psychology research has considerably improved since the ubiquitous reliance on psychoanalysis in the initial personality studies. Over time quantitative methods, mainly derived from psychology, came to be adopted instead of or side by side with qualitative ones.

First, the most frequent method we find in psychology is **laboratory experiment**, which aims at disentangling the relationship between an independent and a dependent variable. The goal is drawing causal inferences on how a certain factor affects another one, and this is accomplished through the use of an intervention group and a control group across which the only difference is the independent variable (also known as *explanans*) under scrutiny. Causal claims can only be produced with high degree of confidence following such experimental designs, given that the procedural rules on the composition of the control and the intervention groups are followed thoroughly.

While the internal validity - that is the genuine presence of the hypothesized causal relationship - is usually high in laboratory experiments, possible pitfalls lie on the opportunity of generalization, namely external validity. In other words, the observer must make sure that there is as much degree of correspondence as possible between the highly controlled conditions of the experiment and the real-world phenomenon which has to be simulated. Experimental realism is indeed a prerequisite for an optimal fruition of the advantages of experimental designs (McDermott, 2004).

In this regard, problems arise as the subjects most frequently used in experiments are undergraduate students, who hardly represent adequate proxies for, say, political leaders or senior officials. Furthermore, it is hard to replicate in a laboratory setting the number of incentives, constraints, pressures which characterize the political context surrounding the studied phenomena. Hence experimental designs, while enabling to formulate quite robust causal inferences, display some limits in generalizability or external validity. With this in mind, it is up to the researcher to be aware of such tradeoffs and see whether the ideal prerequisites are met for a prolific use of the experimental method.

In spite of these potential weaknesses, experiments have proved crucial to major findings in the field of behavioral economics, among which prospect theory and cognitive biases in judgment.

Another common methodology adopted in political psychology is the **survey research**. This design guarantees high external validity and is particularly suitable for studies dealing with mass political attitudes and behavior. Moreover, this method has proved especially apt for public opinion studies, whose increased popularity in the last decades has at the same time given momentum to large-scale surveys. While in surveys the already mentioned problem of correspondence between the experimental subjects and the population is averted, potential weaknesses lie in the existence of framing effects which might drastically affect subjects' answers depending on how the questions are formulated (Krosnick, 1999). Krosnick (1999) also claims that less educated subjects tend to agree on certain questions regardless of its content, and considerations of political correctness when answering more socially delicate questions (like judgements on blacks or women) might conceal the actual attitudes of subjects. Zaller and Friedman (1992) dealt with the impact of salience, accessibility and memory on the answers given, in addition to the influence of race, gender, and ethnic-religious affiliation on how a question is interpreted and answered.

Therefore, in surveys high external validity is earned at the expense of potentially lower internal validity, due to the problems of response instability just cited. Nonetheless, along with the increased awareness of the possibility that framing mechanisms crucially distort results, so has considerably improved the technical skill in the preparation of the survey questions. In recent political psychology research, a new hybrid methodology has been also adopted, namely the **survey experiment**. This design promises to bind together the

strengths of both experiments and surveys, thus enabling deep insight on both *how* and *what* people think about political matters like foreign policy (Erişen, 2012).

Another type of research methodology is represented by **self-report questionnaires**, through which the researcher wants to gauge personality traits or aspects of the respondents. While experiments chiefly attempt to demonstrate the explanatory power of the situation, self-report questionnaires focus more on individual and idiosyncratic differences, and how these differences correlate with diverging behaviors in many political contexts. The fame of this method is due to the popular study by Adorno et al. (1950) which allegedly found a so-called authoritarian personality - encompassing a set of traits among which anti-Semitism, ethnocentrism, and political and economic conservatism - out of self-report questionnaires.

Critics of such method argue that the said threats to external validity are still looming, whereas the robust internal validity of experiments is no longer feasible. In addition, two further drawbacks have been observed (Cook & Campbell, 1979). First, a possible response bias is observed, meaning that subjects are unduly influenced by the act of figuring out what the experimenter wants to read in the answers. Secondly, related to the external-validity problematic, it is argued that the alleged relationship between personality and policy preferences may exist only in the artificial experimental setting, while becoming insignificant vis-à-vis many other variables – contextual constraints, incentives etc. – that play out in the real world.

A widely adopted quantitative method throughout the history of political psychology (especially in leadership studies) is **content analysis**, consisting in the "technique for making psychological inferences about politically relevant aspects of the personality of political actors from the systematic, objective study of written and transcribed oral

material" (Winter & Stewart, 1977). By looking at written or oral sources attributed to a particular individual, the researcher tries to single out traits or patterns of his personality, which are then employed as explanatory factors when accounting for policy preferences or choices in the course of his life. This approach is of special importance since it would be extremely difficult if not impossible to get political leaders to participate in quantitative studies. A famous study by Winter et al. (1988) scored Richard Nixon's personality dimensions such as need for achievement, affiliation and power, by examining his inaugural speech in 1969. Such scores were then used as independent variables to explain political strategies and conduct in his mandate.

While such a method has the potential of providing useful cues regarding the policy proclivities of leaders, it is at the same time rife with limitations. First and foremost, the researcher must make sure that the source really belongs to the observed individual. Another problem may originate in the selection of the sources to be studied: this operation should be carried out as much randomly as possible, to permit any generalization of the findings to the political persona of the leader (Erişen, 2012). In addition, as the danger of circular reasoning is very concrete, extreme diligence should be devoted to *a-priori* enlisting and operationalization of relevant personality traits, so to be safe that found traits exist independently and not merely as a by-product of the preexisting observer's expectations. Coding manuals constitute a very useful tool in this regard.

Another drawback of content analysis lies in the fact that a speech, besides being written by someone other than the studied leader, might also – as it is often the case - have strategic and propagandistic purposes that make any inference from the interpretation of the source extremely problematic (McDermott, 2004). Since a number of strategic and motivational calculations intervene in the process of producing a political message, the latter can hardly

represent a reliable mirror of the actor's actual temper or personality. We all know how strong is the will to convey a positive image of ourselves when communicating with others, and this drive can apply to political leaders as well.

Content analysis may allow greater external validity, due to the particularly naturalistic character of the data employed, and hence more confidence in generalizing results, yet it strives to achieve the same internal validity as more rigorous and systematic approaches like experiments. Indeed much more room is left to the observer's interpretation, no controlled comparisons are possible, and as hinted above, further problems arise when the material is not even directly produced by the studied leader. Other less popular qualitative approaches include focus groups and open-ended interviews, which can be useful in collecting preliminary data despite suffering from methodological limitations similar to ones cited above.

Observer ratings consist in the assessment or ranking of particular personality traits of political actors on the part of external observers. In the so-called *Q-sort* designs, subjects make their own ranking of predetermined character traits (e.g. friendly, aggressive, smart) from the most to the least descriptive, usually after watching a speech by the leader(s) under analysis. The found traits are later used in hypotheses about policy strategies and preferences. A promising research area for observer ratings lies in how different demographic or ethnic groups react to the same candidate, a topic that is particularly popular in voting behavior studies.

Several flaws can reduce the validity of findings obtained through observer ratings, especially the fundamental attribution error, which defines the tendency of people to overestimate the impact of personality or attitudes on behavior while underestimating the impact of the situation (Ross, 1977). Another problem with this methodological approach

lies in the fact that political figures often want to deliver particular impressions that do not reflect their genuine personality or mindset, an issue similar to the one related to content analysis. Keeping in mind these shortcomings, the most fruitful use of observer ratings can be obtained in multi-method studies – like the one made by Tetlock et al (1992) on groupthink - which reduce the impact of each method's limitations and help to corroborate evidence.

A very popular methodology - especially in political science and much less in psychology - is that of **case studies**, through which researchers delve into a particular historical event or period, or the life of a political actor (in this case the study is labeled psychobiography), in order to elucidate phenomena of interest and formulate hypotheses about them. The main advantage of this approach is the depth of inquiry that it ensures, but this obviously comes at the expense of analytical parsimony. If one wants to test the causal relationship between two variables as a general rule, a single case study is not sufficient as it does not allow controlled comparison. For the same reason, confident prediction can hardly stem from a case study. Nonetheless, in the early stage of the inquiry, preliminary case studies may help formulating hypotheses and realizing what kind of evidence one should look for. As for other qualitative methodologies, case studies can fall prey to the same inferential biases said above. The practitioner should make sure that the interpretation of the findings is not bended to his intuitions, expectations and beliefs: tautological and circular reasoning must be averted if scientific rigor has to inform the study (McDermott, 2004).

Having outlined all these method approaches that are used in the political psychology literature, we realize that each methodology displays its own pros and cons, and by virtue of them, each is most suitable for a particular kind of research project. If we are interested in the influence of public opinion on foreign policy outcomes or vice-versa, we may want

to engage in a survey research; if we want to find out what causes people to undertake risky strategies under certain conditions - and possibly come up with a general law-like statement that enable prediction - a laboratory experiment is the appropriate design; if our goal is to spell out the factors which led to the end of the Cold War, cross-case comparisons are impossible and an in-depth case study may best suit our purpose.

So the choice regarding the method is entirely up to the researcher depending on his research needs and goals, but it should be noted that a hierarchy does exist concerning the method's capacity to produce scientifically sound knowledge. The fact that a certain method can be freely preferred to another does not mean that findings derived from – say – an open-ended interview on one hand and a laboratory experiment on the other have the same scientific standing. A strong plea is made by several scholars advocating the huge potential of approaches that combine various methods within political psychology research (Sears, 1987; Tetlock, 1982; McDermott, 2004). McDermott also stresses the prominence of experiment as the golden standard of any truly scientific study, and argues that a more widespread use of it can enormously benefit the progress of political psychology theorizing, and ultimately its ability to provide cogent explanations (McDermott, 2002).

Limiting the discourse to this work in particular, given that its analytical setting is international politics, we will adopt the quantitative method of case studies, since we do not aim much at drawing robust causal inferences for prediction, but rather at achieving a better, in-depth understanding of the psychological dimensions playing out in the international arena. Having said that, many of the psychological theories composing the general framework are the result of more scientifically meticulous methods such as laboratory experiments, especially in the fields of behavioral economics and social psychology.

II – Perceptions and Images

The first of the two substantive chapters of this paper concerns a core dimension of the realm bridging human psychology and international politics: how statesmen perceive behaviors of others and unravel their intentions. A key point is that one's image about the other deeply affects the interpretation of his actions, and hence the response to them which is deemed proper. Accordingly, analyzing patterns of human cognition and assimilation of external stimuli is vital to a fuller comprehension of several international outcomes. By virtue of that, a basic premise underlying this dissertation - and the whole of political psychology in general - is that an individual level of analysis focused on the decision-maker's attitudes and beliefs is indispensable to grasp some proximate causes of behavior on the international scene (Jervis, 1976, p. 28).

This work then is at odds with mainstream international relations theories (e.g. neorealism) which adopt a systemic or structural approach and operate mainly at the macro-level of the international arena. Such approaches do not adequately emphasize the agency of individual decision makers – and their internal psychology - in shaping foreign policy. They rather make extensive usage of pseudo-economic models centered on the assumption that actors always behave in a rational way as utility-maximizers: a claim which basically rules out any differences and idiosyncrasies across individuals. Conversely, a decision-making level of analysis allows insight into the individual's motives, attitudes and feelings which are important factors in explaining policy strategies and choices. Rational choice theory

simplifies the reality we want to address and enables more polished and rigorous accounts, but often falls short of addressing extreme cases or very complex phenomena.

The chapter will develop as follows: first we will briefly outline the ideological milieu of international politics, presenting the two opposite models of deterrence and spiral; in the second part we will touch upon the concept of cognitive consistency; in the third part we will cover attitude change; in the fourth part the focus will shift to some major cognitive biases; in the final part we will develop a brief case study regarding contemporary international politics in which it is possible to appraise the importance of perceptions and images.

DETERRENCE AND THE SPIRAL MODEL

Both political actors and analysts often hold opposing views on the nature of the international environment: outlining them is important if we are to demonstrate how one's perception of the other's intentions matters for policy output. A lucid elaboration of these two worldviews – deterrence and the spiral model - was offered by Robert Jervis (1976, pp. 58-113).

Deterrence theory describes the interaction between an aggressor – who seeks some political or territorial gains – and another power willing to defend the *status quo*. The basic claim of this view is that the aggressor will always seize any occasion to test the willingness and ability of the *status quo* power to resist its pressures. Even a concession on an apparently minor issue – the argument goes – can reveal the state's weakness and thus incite more and more demands on the part of the aggressor. In order to curb unlimited ambition, a *status quo* power must respond to any demand with resolve and decision,

showing to the aggressor that it is willing and capable of opposing the latter's challenge to the *status quo*.

Deterrence assumes that states' aims and ambitions are unlimited and can only be tamed through a firm stance. This strategy, according to the paradigm, eventually leads to stability since a revisionist state will judge the costs of an attack as much higher; and will rather try to maximize its gains though cooperative means. As for decision-making, if conciliation and appeasement are interpreted as signs of weakness or lack of resolve, we can explain why states reasoning within this outlook often refrain from taking steps that have the potential to resolve a dispute (Jervis 1976, p. 59). So, in a few words, deterrence theory opts for a strategy that warns against gratuitous concessions and mildness, grounded on the belief that firmness does check aggression, and that displaying resolve is vital to stability in the international arena.

The so-called **spiral model**, rather than a strategy meant to ward off instability and continuous aggressions, is a descriptive model aimed at explaining the causes of most conflicts in international relations. It incorporates psychological variables, and implicitly stresses that a focus on perceptions is needed if we are to account for patterns of international relations. The main conclusions of the spiral models directly arise from the nature of the international scene: one of inherent or structural anarchy (Waltz, 1959, 1979). Since there is no supreme authority in the international scene which can insure stability and peace, states must rely exclusively on their own means. Self-help is indeed a defining feature of interstate relations. In spite of that, the constant effort to seek security often turns into a double-edged sword, for when a state increases its own security, it can unintentionally impair that of other states too.

A sort of vicious circle is set in motion, whereby states - certain that their security is threatened by others - inadvertently instill the same fear on other states and end up making what they originally thought come true. The security dilemma is then a salient underpinning of the spiral model. A set of subtle psychological dynamics also unfold according to this theorem: states do know their own intentions but usually not those of other states; this is why, for example, arming for defense appears totally legitimate to state A which performs it, but might be interpreted by state B as evidence of offensive motives. And since state A fails to realize that state B cannot be safe about state A's peaceful intentions, any opposition of state B to state A's arming will be read by state A as unwarranted and unprovoked hostility.

If the propositions of the spiral model are true, we realize that the deep-rooted causes of most conflicts lie in the security dilemma (an intrinsic aspect of the international setting), and are enhanced by a mix of misunderstandings and misperceptions concerning the other states' intentions. The difference from deterrence theory here is evident: while advocates of deterrence identify the state's drive of power as the foremost seed of war (see Morgenthau, 1948), spiral theorists consider the system of insecurity and anarchy, combined with the cited psychological dynamics, as the main explanatory factors. In summary, the spiral model makes it clear that psychology is surely an important factor to take into account when studying world politics: a notion which is the common denominator of this work. Besides, the spiral model argues that prophecies of hostility and insecurity are largely self-fulfilling and that a real incompatibility or clash of interests can easily stem from a perceived or illusory incompatibility. Acting as though the other is an enemy can eventually make him an enemy. These remarks resound the famous quotation by the leading constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt (1992) : "anarchy is what states make of it".

Another important consideration is that these two theories, as we will see later, can have important implications for policy preferences, and whether a decision-maker is leaning towards one view rather than the other clearly depends on his particular values, codes of morality, beliefs and experiences.

COGNITIVE CONSISTENCY

The tendency to seek and maintain a balanced system of attitudes, beliefs and values is one of the most peculiar features of the human mind (Festinger, 1957; Heider, 1958; Abelson, 1968). We are also predisposed to assimilate incoming information to our preexisting beliefs or attitudes, or we unintentionally reject data that cannot be easily conciliated with what we already think. Cognitive consistency has thus great bearing on our discussion, if we take the assumption that the internal state of decision-makers is a factor able to explain many phenomena in international relations - and thus worth analyzing.

The role of this consistency is to keep a balanced cognitive structure, where all relations among "good" elements are positive, all relations among "bad" elements are positive, and all relations among "good" and "bad" elements are negative (Abelson & Rosenberg, 1958). In other words, we are apt to think that our friends like each other, like things we like, and dislike things we dislike. As pointed out by Jervis (1976, p. 125), there is nothing inherently irrational about this predisposition insofar as many of the structures in the world are balanced, and consistency is a useful shortcut to better interpret and filter the complex array of stimuli we acquire every instant. Furthermore, people may behave differently from what predicted by this tendency in those cases where discrepant evidence is particularly evident. Plus in many cases, when processing incoming information, we select a cognitive

schema other than consistency which is most appropriate to that particular context (Jervis, 1976, p. 127).

A key criterion to distinguish between rational and irrational types of consistency is whether or not the consistency-driven behavior is justified by logic and experience, and if such mechanism is successful most of the times. Instances of irrational consistency instead include the tendency to avoid value payoffs by thinking that a favored policy is always better than another in all of many separate dimensions (rather than in just some of them); the propensity to assume that a preferred plan has necessarily also a much lower cost than an opposed strategy; or the tendency to see morality as always compatible with the preferred policy. Moreover actors tend to be unduly confident that their advocated strategy is a dominant one – i.e. one which makes you better off no matter what option the other choses. Oftentimes this confidence is overly optimistic if not baseless. Scholars like Robert Osgood (1953) have suggested how the avoidance of value tradeoffs is particularly rooted in the American foreign policy rhetoric and praxis, as exemplified by the frequent claim that American policies abroad serve both the national interest and the international good.

Many bad consequences for decision making can arise from these kinds of irrational consistency. For example, if an actor wrongly believes that a policy is better than others in all relevant (and often independent) dimensions, he will be recalcitrant to replace it if it turns out to be negative in one respect, since he still thinks that it is better in all the others (Jervis, 1976, p. 140).

Furthermore, if actors fail to see that a tradeoff might exist between the pursuit of their own interests and a damage to others' interests, they will deem any grievance or resistance from the other party as unreasonable or more likely as evidence of offensive intentions, in a process similar to the one discussed above for the spiral model. Coming to realize that

policies not entailing any sacrifice are mostly chimerical would surely benefit the quality of decision-making, beside ensuring that a set of predetermined values is coherently pursued.

Cognitive consistency also implies that we assimilate incoming information to our preexisting set of beliefs and hypotheses, a process also labelled "confirmation bias". We are endowed with a sort of perceptual readiness which assists us in the task of discerning the puzzling flow of stimuli we receive. By the same token, expectations mediate the process of data acquisition, since we are quicker to see what we are expecting or what we already think to know. (Bruner, 1957).

This is extremely relevant to many cases of international relations, where the same given behavior on the part of state A can lend itself to multiple interpretations; and if we assume that we are inclined to read reality in light of our expectations and beliefs, the prior image state B has of state A affects how state A's conduct is read and what reaction state B will exert accordingly.

As pointed out for similar manifestations of cognitive consistency, the assimilation of facts to previous beliefs is nothing intrinsically irrational: far from that, it constitutes the logic of any inquiry (Kaplan, 1964). Indeed if we are to make sense of what we observe every day, we need some blueprints or interpretative keys that render ambiguous facts meaningful to us. Jervis, in the same vein, argues that this process is also at the basis of scientific advancement, whose history is marked by successive stages characterized by prevalent paradigms (1976, p. 156). Without a framework that teaches us what evidence to look for we would be lost in an ocean of uncertainty and confusion, and we could hardly make any step forward in the elaboration of a set of coherent propositions - that is the core of theorizing. The progress of knowledge is indeed incremental, and discordant observations are usually attributed to methodological errors or temporarily set aside, in the confidence

that the paradigm will be able to explain them at a later stage. Likewise perception is a much more theoretical task than commonly thought, and how objective data are decoded greatly depends on what framework or paradigm the observer has previously embraced. A reverse of the famous quote by Saint Thomas that would read "I'll see it when I believe" describes these dynamics in a nutshell.

Concerning the implications for decision-making, the above perceptual continuity also contributes to the incremental nature of policy-making (Jervis, 1976, p.191). If the initial image of an actor happens to match reality (it is correct) and the environment in which it was formed does not change, this constitutes an advantage, since incoming evidence will tend to reinforce such image anyhow. But if one or both of these conditions are not met, decision-makers can take too a long time before revising a policy based on their original image, with potentially ruinous consequences. These considerations also weaken the belief that incrementalism is good as it allows to amend one's policy easily at any stage, a claim grounded on the assumption that the perception process is exempted from any of the consistency biases depicted above.

In addition, applying Simon's concept of satisficing (1982) to these perceptual mechanisms, we infer that people usually do not scrupulously compare all the available images regarding others, but rather pick one that seems fairly acceptable given the bits of information acquired until then. And these initial images (first meant to be only tentative) do influence later perceptions, bringing about a sort of perceptual "path dependence". On top of that, Jervis (1976) points out three main determinants of the degree with which incoming information is modeled around preexisting images: ambiguity of the information, confidence on the validity of the image, and commitment to it (p. 195).

ATTITUDE CHANGE

While in the previous part we have analyzed the mechanisms through which people preserve their views and images despite incongruous information, here we will discuss how and under what circumstances internal structures change. A starting point of this digression on attitude change is that people change as little of their preexisting belief order as possible, and that more marginal beliefs are altered before and more frequently than central ones (Osgood, 1960; Rosenberg et al., 1960; Jervis, 1976).

When receiving discrepant information, first we engage in a mechanism of assimilation of the stimulus, and only if this mechanism does not succeed we change a slight or peripheral aspect of our belief structure. If the contradictions are still there, other mechanisms of more substantial change are called into play, and so on so forth until we attain compatibility between the information and our earlier images and beliefs.

According to Jervis (1976), when the first mechanism of defense of our preexisting image is under way, people might avoid any psychological strain by claiming not to understand the information, deny that the discrepant information goes against their view (even when this is obviously the case), or discredit the source of the message which contains the contradicting information. Other two frequent mechanisms which help us preserving our attitudes are bolstering and undermining. The former describes the process whereby, once realized that a bit of information does contradict their belief, people search for new (and sometimes extravagant) rationales and arguments that support their view or reevaluate some aspects of a theory (earlier neglected) to offset the impact of discrepant information. Undermining instead refers to the mechanism whereby people search for elements that weaken the contradicting information, like for example when they claim that the person who put forth evidence against their views is totally unreliable.

As hinted at before, a compelling hypothesis about attitude change states that more central beliefs are more resistant to alteration than more peripheral ones. It follows that with respect to images of other states as enemies, the belief of hostility is very central and hence hard to be dismissed. Other marginal aspects of such image will be sacrificed first in the face of discrepant information. As long as a central belief in the attitude hierarchy has a more solid and robust basis of evidence than a peripheral one, there is nothing irrational in this sequence of attitude change. Yet time and again, the central belief is not altered only because by doing otherwise many other beliefs which rest on it should be changed accordingly. When this is the reason for sparing more central beliefs, psychological harmony is achieved at the expense of logical conduct.

Another significant factor that helps explaining why we change our entrenched beliefs is the rate at which we receive discordant information (Jervis, 1976, p. 308). This means that there is a positive relationship between the flow's size of the incoming data and the ease with which our attitudes are modified in light of them. In other words, if information is split in successive bits, it is easier to assimilate each of them into our preexisting hypotheses, but when the information arrives in a bigger bunch, its adaptation with our extant beliefs is clearly harder.

Besides the rate factor, another important aspect is the nature itself of the belief that is contradicted by antithetic information. Some beliefs in fact are extraordinarily immune to change because of their content, like for example the "inherent bad faith model", which takes the other's hostility as granted and under whose logic a wide range of actions can be explained. Reasoning this way, a conciliatory approach would be labeled as deceptive or as an ill-concealed bluff, while a behavior more easily interpretable as aggressive will be judged self-explanatory (Jervis, 1976, p. 310).

Finally, it is worth mentioning the belief that other parties' signals are useless for predicting their future behavior (Jervis, 1976, p. 314). This occurs most frequently in long-lasting conflicts where both parties believe to know already everything about their adversary's goals and strategies, to the extent that any signal of the contrary is automatically classified as deception and trickery. It seems evident how such erroneous conviction can result in the premature failure of détente policies and negotiations.

TYPES OF MISPERCEPTIONS

So far we have focused on how images are preserved despite discordant information and how they are changed under certain circumstances. Here we are going to present some of the most common misperceptions that influence decision-makers on the international stage. These biases can be considered as recurring and sometimes endemic deficiencies in elaborating information, and they are the by-product of perceptual schemas that characterize human cognition.

One of the most distinctive misperceptions is that things around us are more ordered and coherent than they actually are. We have problems in accepting that a great deal of what we encounter is accidental or a plain coincidence. A parallel mechanism in neuropsychology is captured by the term "apophenia", defined as the general tendency to see coherent patterns in meaningless stimuli (Conrad, 1958). This perception of order results in the belief that **others' behavior is more centralized and planned** than it is the case (Jervis, 1976, p. 319-342). When trying to explain a particular action from another person we give too much weight to his intentions and goals, and we are less prone to attribute causality to a combination of factors. This tendency is somewhat similar to the "fundamental attribution error", according to which people overestimate the influence of others' internal state on a

given action while underestimating the impact of situational and contingent variables (Ross, 1977). The role of chance is mostly neglected, and the fact that two events occur one right after the other is rarely judged as fortuitous. The expression "it can't be just a coincidence" can be heard quite often and veils this deeper psychological dynamic.

Furthermore, the effects of this way of discerning reality are particularly reinforced by the nature of the international system of anarchy: actors will see ingenious plans and conspiracies more often than justified by objective analysis. Some scholars have pointed out that one of the main causes for this inclination towards underemphasizing the impact of chance might be that thinking this way reduces psychological tension: a world which is just and where we get what we deserve – where we retain control over our lives - is more psychologically comfortable than one in which significant aspects of our life depend on mere accident (Lerner, 1977). An associated bias consists in judging others' personality as more unitary and stable over time than it is. The impact of third actors and other constraints over the other's conduct is oftentimes overlooked. It is worth noting that vulnerability to such and alike misperceptions can vary across individuals, depending on particular psychological traits.

Another related tendency is ignoring that the other's action might not necessarily reflect his true attitudes and values (that are far from immutable), and that intra-government bargaining or ill-implementation of orders on the part of agents and officials also contribute to determine a given policy output. As far as the effects on decision-making are concerned, these coherence and planning misperceptions may lead actors to draw general inferences out of isolated cases, failing to realize that the primary cause of a given action may be a contingent element rather than a permanent characteristic of the other's internal structure.

For instance, a state's behavior on one issue may be seen by others as useful for predicting future behaviors on another issue, even when the main actors engaged in policy formulation and governmental bargaining do vary across the two issues. But most remarkably, any truly erratic and inconsistent behavior will tend to be misinterpreted as a part of a consistent plan, and the observer will conceive of the most Machiavellian strategies behind what is nothing more than an uncoordinated conduct. Adequate responses to behavior of others are bound to fail if the representation of other's hostility is so deep-rooted that duplicity and deception are spotted behind any conciliatory move. As suggested above, beliefs that seem able to explain both phenomena at the two extremes of a continuum (say hostile/conciliatory attitude) can be particularly detrimental for decision-making quality, as they are basically unfalsifiable.

Besides the centrality and planning bias, a second type of common misperception consists in **overestimating one's importance** either as determinant or as target of others' actions (Jervis 1976, pp. 343-355). How this mechanism plays out often depends on the content of the other's behavior: if it is something we were expecting or desiring, we tend to overvalue the positive impact of our intervention. When the other's behavior is instead disappointing or detrimental to us, we are apt to think that we had no role in bringing it about or that such behavior was aimed at harming us. Successes are mostly attributed to our conscious efforts while failures are more likely seen as the result of bad luck, others' will, or situational elements that elude our sphere of control.

The effect of this bias can be reinforced by that of the planning misperception, for example when states think that their action was decisive to prevent an aggressive plot by another state while no such plot had ever existed in reality. So we see that, as many other context, decision-making in international relations can fall prey to the *post hoc ergo propter hoc*

fallacy in several cases (If the other's action B occurred right after the observer's action A, then A must have caused B). Unconditional faith in deterrence can be fueled by such reasoning, as absence of the other's hostile action will be attributed by the defender to his own successful, dissuasive measures rather than external factors or the other's will.

So this systematic overestimation of one's importance in others' conduct leads the perceiver to think that an harmful action was primarily intended to hurt him and was exclusively the product of the other's internal motives. The possibility that the harmful action may be caused by miscalculation, influence of third factors, or may be a reaction to the perceiver's earlier behavior (that can be interpreted differently from the outside) is rarely taken into account. In addition, the perceiver tends to attribute exclusive causality of the other's behavior to the other's fixed motives or aspirations that do not depend on the perceiver's actions. The result of this misconception is that the perceiver will hardly try to revise his own behavior and wonder if it can at least partially explain the other's conduct. This consequence in turn has the potential to hinder negotiations or conciliatory policies. The negative effects of this psychological dynamics are further magnified by the failure to recognize them: when this occurs, state A's strong reaction to state B's injurious action that is deemed intentional by A (when it was actually involuntary) will be perceived by B as evidence of state A's unfriendly temper. All this fuels the spiral of hostility described at the beginning of this chapter.

Finally, another frequent source of misperception is the reduction of cognitive dissonance. This mechanism defines the process through which we unconsciously try to resolve our internal conflicts among different cognitions, attitudes and beliefs (Festinger, 1957). Accordingly, once acted in a given way, we are apt to look for strong justifications of our past conduct, or we tend to downplay information suggesting that we would have been

better off by selecting a different strategy. Dissonance reduction can also account for decision-making incrementalism, due to the so-called "spreading apart of the alternatives", namely the overestimation of the relative attractiveness of two alternatives *after* a decision has been made. So, according to this hypothesis, the selected option will be evaluated as much more desirable than the discarded option after the decision than before it. Similarly, past choices will often seem much easier in hindsight than they actually were. When this spreading apart is under way, incrementalism will be favored since the amount of discordant information needed to question the current policy will be much bigger.

Dissonance reduction also implies that the costs of a specific policy will affect later evaluation of its outcome. The more resources are devoted to a certain strategy (be it a war or a peacemaking effort), the more likely any trivial gain will be exaggerated or failure mistaken as success. Realization that a considerable sacrifice was fruitless creates acute internal conflict, and people will be motivated to reduce such conflict by altering their evaluation of the results obtained.

A PRACTICAL CASE: ISRAELI FOREIGN POLICY IN GAZA

In this chapter we anticipated that a focus on perceptions and attitudes at the decision-making level facilitates a deeper understanding of some foreign policy outcomes. Now we will try to apply some of the mentioned theories to a specific case of international relations, namely the recent developments in the **Israeli–Palestinian conflict**. Relations between Israel and Palestine are clearly permeated by a rhetoric of mutual hostility, which has long-lasting historical roots. Thus a focus on how representations and perceptions of the "other" may affect their interaction is particularly useful.

The spiral model depicted at the beginning of this chapter seems suitable to shed light on the escalations between Gaza and Israel that occurred periodically over the last years, and culminated with the Israeli military operation dubbed "Protective Edge" in summer 2014.

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyhau was of course a key actor in those circumstances, and trying to analyze his inner features can serve the purposes of our inquiry. I find that Netanyahu's outlook in foreign policy leans towards a deterrence view as the one discussed earlier. In many past records he made it clear that he would never bet on Israel security and that enemies such as Iran and most of the Palestinians harbor a boundless desire to destroy Israel.

The spiral model argues that conflict is most of times the result of illusory incompatibility, while Netanyahu would contend that incompatibility in this specific context is concrete and a mild stance by Israel would encourage its enemies to get even more aggressive. Drawing on the spiral model, we notice that Netanyahu does not seem especially concerned with how Israeli policies may be interpreted from the other side. The construction of new settlements in the West Bank, for instance, is not expression of aggressive motives from the Israeli point of view, but may be interpreted as a provoking action by the Palestinian side and third parties. More significantly for the 2014 escalation, one can see how the 7-years long blockade against the Gaza Strip proved largely unsuccessful on security grounds but rather brought about dire socio-economic consequences for its inhabitants. The Israeli government justified such embargo as a self-defensive measure to hinder Hamas terrorist operations, whereas - as suggested by the spiral model - this attempt to enhance its security actually backfired by reinforcing Hamas legitimacy and societal appeal in the Strip.

That being said, one may be tempted to engage in counterfactual thinking by asking how would have Hamas acted if Israel had not set up the 2007 blockade. Deterrence is grounded

on the assumption that the enemy is by nature an aggressor, and thus opts for a resolute approach that is also deemed a dominant strategy. Conversely, the spiral theory argues that prophecies of insecurity are generally self-fulfilling, thus implying that acting out of the conviction that the other is an enemy produces the same perception of threat in the other. It should also be noted that if Hamas was truly an insatiable aggressor, a strategy inspired by the spiral model – one of appeasement and conciliation - would be deleterious, and this can be said to be the Likud Party's view with respect to the Palestinian issue. These examples reveal that which general view on the international environment the key decision-makers hold has significant impact on the foreign policy performed by a state.

As for the application of the psychological findings on cognitive consistency and attitude change discussed above, a few considerations can be made. First, the fact that people tend to preserve their prior convictions in the face of discrepant information may explain why foreign policy is hardly revised. Despite evidence that a deterrence strategy actually failed to improve Israeli security in the long run, the Likud cabinet maintained the same approach. Such policy inertia may also be reinforced by the aforesaid avoidance of value tradeoffs when advocating favored strategies. In this regard, failure to see that the current policy might clash with the other's interests can exacerbate the tensions. In other words, if state A (Israel) believes that its blockade has only defensive purposes and does not hurt much state B (Gaza), state B's grievances and reactions will be read as unjustified provocations that demand retaliation. These reactions included in this case firing of rockets against Israeli civilian targets, something no state would reasonably tolerate. Yet Israeli foreign policy actors proved particularly reluctant to re-assess their own past actions and try to see where these could be more detrimental than beneficial from a long-term perspective. Cognitive rigidity, perceptual readiness, and biased information processing may contribute to explain

such dynamics. The belief that the other is neither willing nor able to achieve and honor a peaceful, abiding agreement can also become a prevalent paradigm or framework, to which contradicting evidence is bent or assimilated. This will make it even harder to break the stalemate and reach a stable peace.

As far as attitude change is concerned, we already saw that the representation of the other as inherently a bad-faith actor (a belief notably widespread both at societal and governmental level in both factions) is particularly immune to revision, or at least requires a much bigger amount of discordant information before undergoing significant change.

Faith in the effectiveness of deterrence and reluctance to compromise on "protected values" (see Tetlock, 1999) are other especially rigid attitudes. As for the former, any bit of information seems unable to undermine it, since for example the statement that the blockade on Gaza paradoxically helped Hamas while mainly damaging the civilian population could be rejected by saying that without such measure Israel would have been even worse off. Regarding the protected values, if for instance national security is held the one and only priority by the Israeli government, no objection on the huge human costs linked to the last air strikes over Gaza (50-70% of civilian casualties, about 500,000 displaced) will deserve due consideration. The value of national security will be deemed accomplished and will overshadow other possible values as the proportionality principle and unintended consequences for the local population.

Finally, the above discussion on common misperceptions is relevant to this topic. The view that the other side is always devising the most cunning and devious plans of aggression is manifested on a regular basis from both sides. We can also observe a widespread rhetoric of victimhood and a "siege mentality" across the cleavage, as revealed by large-scale surveys at societal level in Israel (Bar-Tal & Sharvit, 2008). These beliefs are largely self-

reinforcing and are likely to thwart peace efforts. Exclusive attribution of the other's conduct to its immutable internal motives and attitudes - while ignoring the possible influence of one's past behavior - is also quite common, as suggested above with respect to the firing of rockets from Gaza.

The discourse on dissonance reduction is fruitful too, as for example the top security advisors and Prime Minister Netanyahu may well have manifested "spreading of alternatives" after the decision was made to preserve the blockade and other restrictions, and respond with firmness against any offense (in spite of discordant information showing that no substantial success was achieved this way). In order to avoid dissonance between the behavior on one side, and the positive attitude toward what turns out to be a better alternative on the other, the option taken seems more attractive after than before the choice. Strong justifications for past decisions are looked for and information processing gets for the most part selective, through a motivational mechanism that parallels (and corroborates) the cognitive one described for cognitive consistency.

Findings in cognitive dissonance literature also suggest, as said, that the more resources (both material and in terms of commitment) are devoted to a given policy, the more difficult it is to amend it or to think of alternatives, the reason being preservation of behavior-attitudes balance. The effective enforcement of the blockade is remarkably costly, as well as the reprisal strategy adopted by the government: this can partly explain why the prevailing policy approach has never been seriously questioned at elite level.

III – Choices

In the previous chapter we focused on some perception processes that are held useful for a comprehension of international outcomes. We saw how relevant is for decision-making an analysis of images and attitudes that actors form to represent others and construe their behavior accordingly.

That dimension can be said to constitute an internal background within which any kind of decision is made, since how we act clearly depends on how we perceive and make sense of the external reality. Hence the perceptual milieu outlined above has significant implications for the very core of decision-making: choice. That said, the goal of the present chapter is to investigate the main psychological variables underlying choices under conditions of risk. Analyzing this context is especially valuable for it is the one in which most international phenomena do actually occur. Many choices in foreign policy are indeed characterized by important values at stake and are usually made under extreme pressures and constraints.

As for the theoretical foundation, I will mainly draw on findings from cognitive psychology and behavioral economics. The chapter is made up of two parts in which as many aspects will be explored in greater detail: judgment processes and prospect theory. The final part will be instead devoted to a practical case of international relations aimed at revealing some correspondence between theory and reality.

HEURISTICS AND BIASES IN JUDGMENT

The term judgment in this context refers to the process whereby we assess the probability that a certain event or outcome will occur. If we are to investigate foreign policy decision-making under conditions of uncertainty, this theme deserves special consideration since what choices people make also depends on their prior evaluation of probabilities. In the political realm, most decisions are based on uncertain judgments concerning the likelihood of valued outcomes to take place. For this reason, decision-makers need to rely on their subjective estimates since statistical frequencies are unhelpful for predicting events that never happened before, as it is the case in many foreign policy situations.

As we will see further below, prospect theory assumes that framing – how the available alternatives are presented or expressed – is a key determinant of choice, contrary to the principle of invariance postulated by normative theories of rational choice. With this in mind, it is exactly by shaping the frame that preliminary judgements influence later decision-making. It should also be remarked that the judgment process often falls prey to a number of biases deriving from corresponding heuristics. This last term indicates those efficient shortcuts or 'rules of thumb' which greatly simplify the complex task of forming subjective estimates of unknown probabilities (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

Yet despite working quite well in most cases, these same heuristics are also responsible for systematic errors or biases under specific circumstances. Let us now specify what these heuristics are and how they work, along with their corresponding biases.

Representativeness operates in those judgment where the likelihood estimate that one element or event belongs to a particular category is based on their similarity. The same heuristic is also used when we figure out the probability that A was caused by B, or that A might be an example of B. A valid demonstration of this kind of heuristic is provided by an

experiment in which subjects, after hearing a detailed description of a fictional character, gave a higher probability that she was a bank teller *and* a feminist activist than simply a bank teller. The two attributes together appeared more representative of the stereotyped image generated by the prior description. Nonetheless this response revealed a violation of rational thinking, in that the probability of a conjunction of events (in this case "bank teller" and "feminist") is always lower than either event alone ("bank teller"). This phenomenon is known as "conjunction fallacy" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1982). Events that are described in a more detailed fashion tend to be judged as more likely than less specific ones as they resemble more what kind of *a-priori* image we have of the event, although a more specific outcome is always less likely than a more general one (Plous, 1993).

The representativeness heuristics is also responsible for the so-called "law of the small numbers", defined as the tendency to expect even a small random sample of a sequence of outcomes (e.g. a series of coin tosses) to resemble the entire population. By virtue of that, more alternations between Heads and Tails than the norm are expected in short sequences representing coin tosses, since such distribution seems more representative of the population's average. As found by Tversky and Kahneman (1972), people are prone to expect "local representatives", a bias which also explains the so-called "gambler's fallacy", when people believe that after a long run of Heads, a coin toss will have more chances to yield Tails (while the probability of either outcome is 50% no matter the history of previous tosses).

In sports, the same heuristic induces many basketball practitioners and fans to believe that players are more likely to make a basket after one or more successful shots (a phenomenon known as "hot hand") than players who missed the previous attempts. Ironically, this bias is basically the opposite of the gambler's fallacy while being based on the same erroneous

thinking ("the next outcome is influenced by previous ones even if they are statistically independent") - showing that we are not even coherent in our biases. This myth was debunked through statistical analysis by Gilovich, Vallone and Tversky (1985), who also interestingly found that series of X and O (representing hits and misses) with alternation rates of 0.7 and 0.8 were incorrectly chosen by subjects as more realistic examples of a chance series rather than series with a 0.5 alternation rate. Therefore, the faith in the "hot hand" stemmed from the failure of people to realize that a series with some consecutive runs of X and O in fact better represents randomness than one with continuous alternations of X and O. When people see clusters, they struggle to attribute them to mere chance.

Another unfortunate consequence of the representativeness heuristic is neglecting information related to a "base rate", that is to say the relative frequency with which a certain event occurs or an object belongs to a group. When this happens, people form their judgments on the basis of the representativeness heuristic rather than the information containing the statistical probability of a given outcome. The impact of such heuristic is hence so potent that it overshadows any knowledge about the factual probability. In doing so, people think that an individual whose description resembles their archetypal image of an engineer is more likely an engineer than a lawyer, even when the base rate is known to be 0.7 for lawyers and 0.3 for engineers, as demonstrated in an experiment by Tversky and Kahneman (1973). Even more surprisingly, in that experiment, the base rate was neglected even when the description contained no relevant clues that could fit any of the two stereotypes. With such neutral descriptions, subjects tended to predict a 0.5 chance for either profession, again forgetting the base rates of 0.7 and 0.3.

Besides, representativeness could also explain why foreign policy actors give so much weight to historical analogies when assessing probabilities of future outcomes. This effect

might also be amplified by the availability heuristic we will see below, if for instance actors hold a particularly vivid memory of a past, dramatic event, which ends up inflating their probability gauging.

A second kind of heuristic, called **availability** or sometimes retrievability, refers to the process of basing one's assessment of the odds of an event on the ease with which it can be brought to mind – i.e. how available it is. For example, people are apt to think that being killed by a shark is much more likely than being killed by falling airplane parts, while the latter cause of death is 30 times more probable than the former (Death Odds, 1990, September 24). It is also common to enormously overestimate the odds of dying in an airplane crash. More sensational events - like tornadoes, shark attacks, and murders - normally receive wider media coverage and are easier to be recalled, thus they are usually assigned higher estimates of frequency than less striking facts.

Events or classes that provide examples easier to visualize and remember tend to be perceived as more probable than they are. This is why respondents guessed that there are more English words starting with a K than words with a K as third letter, while the latter kind of words is twice as frequent as the former (Tversky & Kahneman, 1973). Carroll (1978) observed that it is the act itself of imagining a certain event that renders it more available and hence more subjectively probable.

Moreover, other psychologists have hypothesized a mechanism of "denial", which may neutralize the inflating effect of imagination over perceived likelihood when the event at issue appears extremely negative or appalling, such as a nuclear catastrophe (Rothbart, 1970; Plous, 1989).

One of the causes of availability is vividness, which refers to the extent to which a certain object is concrete, appealing, and easily imaginable. The impact of such dimension of the

availability heuristic was tested in an experiment by Borgida and Nisbett (1977) where subjects had to choose a college course basing either on a written, quantitative report of the courses evaluations (in one condition), or on an oral presentation from three or four students who had attended the same courses (in the other condition). The results revealed that subjects, in making their choice, gave much more credit to the few students' account than the written report, the assumed reason being that something heard from a human being is far more vivid and impressive than more pallid and abstract statistical data.

The power of vividness was also tested in an experiment where mock jury members were found to be strongly influenced in giving a 48 hours-delayed verdict by whether the same written arguments for and against the accused had been presented in a vivid or in a pallid form (Reyes, Thompson, & Bower, 1980).

Aside from the availability biases, another source of error when assessing probabilities is the so-called "confusion of the inverse" (Eddy, 1982; Hastie & Dawes, 2001), according to which people are apt to confuse a conditional probability p(A/B) with its inverse p(B/A). This fallacy has important implications for medical decision-making, as revealed by a survey in which ninety-five percent of the respondent physicians greatly overestimated the odds of the presence of a malign cancer (with known probability of 0.01) once told that a mammogram test with a 80% reliability had resulted positive (Eddy, 1982). The magnitude of this judgmental fallacy becomes clear if we consider that the most frequent answer to the aforementioned question was 75% while the correct one should have been between 7% and 8%.

Further problems arise from the tendency of people to be influenced in their probability estimates by their evaluation of the outcome at issue (Plous, 1993). This means that positive events are commonly perceived as more probable than negative events, as

demonstrated among the others in an experiment with cards showing smiling and frowning faces (Rosenhan & Messick, 1966), and in a questionnaires where college students had to indicate their likelihood relative to others to incur in positive or negative events (Weinstein, 1980).

On top of that, judgment becomes even more vulnerable to systematic errors when compound events, either conjunctive or disjunctive, are considered. Some experiments have for instance shown that people tend to overestimate the odds of conjunctive events to take place. To provide a telling example, subjects predicted the chances of winning an eight-alternative, eight-stage lottery as 1/20 whereas the correct probability is almost one million smaller (Cohen, Chesnick, & Haran, 1971). More significantly for risk prevention, this bias may lead people to be overly optimistic about the performance of a device whose success requires the functioning of all of its 500 independent parts, each with a 99 percent chance of success. Surprisingly the actual probability of the device's success would be less than 1 percent in this case (Plous, 1993). At the same time, people are inclined to underestimate the likelihood of disjunctive events.

Another important aspect of the process by which people arrive at their probability appraisals is the perception of risk. This element was explored by Slovic, who pointed out three main dimensions of subjective risk: the "dread risk", characterized by catastrophic consequences and perceived lack of control, which is the most influential for public perception; those risks deemed "unknown", unobservable and whose harmful effects are delayed in time; and finally the actual number of fatalities linked to a given risk. People on average were found to give much more weight to the first two dimensions, while paying less attention to the relative frequency of victims of a given risk (Slovic, 1987). This would explain why smoking is not generally perceived as so dangerous, or as dangerous as other

risks like nuclear power, despite the high rate of deaths it causes. The already cited availability bias can of course partially explain such effect on judgment.

Finally, in our analysis of the main processes of judgment, it is worth mentioning an heuristic called **anchoring**, which describes the mechanism whereby people get affected in their assessments by prior "anchor" values. Even implausible, random numbers or percentages that are provided before a judgment are found to attract as a magnet later estimates. To test this, Plous (1989) asked respondents to cast their guesses on the probability of a nuclear war, right after a question on whether the chances of such war were higher or lower than a given percentage, 99 percent in one group and 1 percent in the other. The survey revealed that respondents who were given the 99 percentage wrote on average higher final estimates than the subjects who were given the 1 percentage. What happened was that the respondents failed to adjust from the extreme percentage values which acted as anchors for later judgment. This same heuristic is also responsible for the problems with compound events we touched upon above, as a low probability of simple outcomes taken alone works as an anchor value in later probability estimates for the same outcomes occurring together.

This part dealt with the ways in which our probability judgments are affected by systematic biases. Representativeness, availability, anchoring are common cognitive processes that in some cases make judgment under uncertainty particularly unsound or faulty. After focusing on how people forecast probabilities of given outcomes, we will now turn to how they assign value to them, that is at the core of any choice involving risk.

PROSPECT THEORY

Prospect theory is a theory of choice whose aim is to provide a descriptive and empirically sound model of decision-making under uncertainty. Normative models like the expected utility theory created by Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1947) indeed proved unable to account for behaviors that violated the axioms of rationality on which they were grounded. Prospect theory was first elaborated by Kahneman and Tversky (1979) as an attempt to demonstrate that people engage in behaviors that contradict the main axioms posited by rational choice models, such as transitivity, dominance, and above all invariance.

Prospect theory focuses on two phases of decision-making: editing, which mainly deals with framing effects, and evaluation, which consists in the act of choosing among probabilistic prospects. We will now look in more depth at each of these parts.

Editing is the process through which the available options are constructed and presented. It is not solely a formal aspect of decision-making since how the alternatives are set forth strongly affects the final choice, contrary to the normative axiom of invariance. To test this claim, in the famous "Asian disease" problem, Tversky and Kahneman found that respondents significantly changed their choices depending on whether the same pair of alternatives (made of a sure option and a risky one) regarding a cure to an epidemic disease was expressed either in terms of deaths caused or of lives saved (Tversky & Kahneman, 1981). When the sure option was framed as to save 200 persons out of 600, people preferred that to the risky option; whereas when the sure option was worded as entailing 400 fatalities out of 600, then most of people picked the risky alternative. As witnessed by this experiment, even a delicate choice linked to saving others' lives can be deeply affected by the wording of the problem.

While framing is also found to depend on norms and habits that are idiosyncratic to individuals, Tversky and Kahneman pointed out several recurring mechanisms through

which framing operates. One of them, "acceptance", refers to the tendency to preserve one's original construction or frame of the choice problem, if this proves fairly reasonable. Differently, "segregation" is an operation that leads decision-makers to focus chiefly on those factors which seem more salient to the final choice while ignoring the ones which are perceived as marginal or less pertinent. For example, people rarely wonder what are the odds that a given event take place once asked to choose among alternative strategies to cope with that same event. While this habit is generally warranted, apparently marginal factors are sometimes relevant to the final decision. Another mechanism, called "coding", indicates the tendency to evaluate outcomes in relative terms of gains and losses, as when in sports we do not care much about what score our team obtained but rather whether it is higher or lower than the opponent's (McDermott, 1998, p. 23). Other framing operations include "simplification", which implies the exclusion of very unlikely events, and "cancellation", consisting in screening out those aspect of an option that are equal across the choice set.

These editing processes are relevant to decision-making since they primarily determine which alternatives will be made available for later choice and which ones will be discarded. Also the sequence of these framing operations is an important aspect, as for example an option that is cancelled in first stages of editing will no longer be taken into account even if the changed context makes it now viable. Furthermore, knowledge of these framing mechanisms leaves wide room of maneuver for skilled advisors who can influence decision makers' choices by presenting the options in a manner rather than another. We engage in this kind of strategy as well in several instances - often almost unconsciously - when for example we try to persuade others by presenting the option we favor vis-a-vis an extremely undesirable alternative, while excluding less negative alternatives from the comparison.

After framing the available options through the editing process, the decision-maker has to attribute value to each of them in order to make his choice. This second phase of prospect theory, called **evaluation**, is described by two different functions: the value function and the weighting function.

The **value function** is an S-shaped curve that describes the relationship between changes in outcome and changes in value and how people select among monetary prospects with known probabilities. A key assumption of this function is that utility – replaced by "value" in this theory - is a relative concept, which has to be referred to gains or losses. Changes in wealth rather than final states are "carriers of value" (Tversky & Kahneman, 1979, p.19). Gains and losses are measured as deviations from the reference point, which is a subjective element and might not coincide with the *status quo*. Another aspect of the value function suggested by the shape of its curve is diminishing marginal utility, both for losses and for gains. The curve is in fact concave in the domain of gains, on the right side of the graph, and convex in the domain of losses, on the left side. Thus passing from 10 to 20 dollars yields more value than passing from 1,110 to 1,120 dollars. In parallel, losing 10 dollars when we initially have 30 is more painful than losing the same amount when we have 1,130 dollars, that is, marginal utility (in the latter case negative) diminishes. Sensitivity to any asset change is thus higher near the reference point than farther from it.

The S-shaped curve is also steeper for losses than for gains, meaning that losses "loom larger" than gains. In other words, losses of a given amount carry more psychological significance than gains of the same amount do. Missing 10 dollars hurts us much more than finding the same amount gratifies us. This property of human psychology was labelled "loss aversion" (Quattrone & Tversky, 1988), and also accounts for the so-called "endowment effect" (Thaler, 1980; Kahneman et al, 1990).

Another important insight we derive from the value function is that attitude towards risk varies depending on whether the actor finds himself in the domain of gains or in that of losses. Empirical evidence came from classroom experiments, in which Tversky and Kahneman found out that most people are risk-averse when the choice between a safe bet and an uncertain outcome is framed as one involving gains, while they are on average risk-seeking when the same choice is framed in terms of losses. Risk propensity hence - and this is what matters most for application in international relations - depends crucially on the internal context in which the choice is pondered. The framing of the problem has then a decisive impact on the final decision, and is the product of personal norms, values, experiences, and those judgment processes discussed above.

The second part of the evaluation phase consists of the **weighting function**, which reveals that people's perceptions of probabilities diverge from the factual probabilities to a great extent. Overall value of a prospect equals the sum of the values of all outcomes times their respective *weighted* – and not stated – probabilities. Therefore as the interaction between value and wealth varies for losses and gains, so the relation between weighted probability (or "decision weight") and stated probability is not linear, and differs for small versus high probabilities. When the stated probability of an outcome is unknown, people primarily base their decision weights on their subjective estimate (or judgment) of the likelihood of that outcome, which as seen can be afflicted by several biases.

According to the weighting function, people tend to overweight small probabilities and underweight moderate and large probabilities. An interesting implication of this sensitivity towards small versus large odds is that it can actually reverse the cited leaning towards risk seeking for losses, and risk aversion for gains. The reason is that large gains with a small probability become more appealing since the probability is overweighted, with the effect of

inducing risk seeking. A small probability of a huge loss is similarly exaggerated thus prompting risk aversion. Hence the psychological overreaction to such infinitesimal probabilities outweighs the usual impact of losses and gains over risk propensity. Both the lottery and the insurance industries owe a lot to this psychological pattern.

In summary, the conceptual pillars of prospect theory are that utility (value) is referred to relative rather absolute wealth; that sensitivity to both positive and negative changes declines moving away from the reference point; that loss aversion characterizes decision-making; that people are generally risk seeking with respect to losses and risk averse with respect to gains; that overall value depends on weighted probabilities rather than stated probabilities; that people exaggerate small odds and minimize moderate and large odds. Moving from such a rich conceptual capital, we can now attempt to see if the theory - already supported by experimental evidence - has also external validity and can provide useful analytical lenses for understanding phenomena of international relations.

A PRACTICAL CASE: PROSPECT THEORY AND PUTIN'S FOREIGN POLICY

An important insight we borrow from prospect theory is that choice is mainly situational, in that it depends more on contextual factors than stable, internal traits. The setting or domain of decision-making - whether it is one of gains or losses - is a crucial variable. We saw indeed that how a problem is formulated or "framed" deeply affects the attitude towards risk and the evaluation of available alternatives. To define a loss or a gain we clearly need to set a reference point, which may differ from the *status quo* when for instance it coincides with an aspiration level, or when past losses are not absorbed and the reference point is not adjusted to the new situation.

The point was finally made that weighted (or perceived) rather than stated probabilities determine the overall value people assign to a given prospect. Decision weights also result from the processes of judgment addressed at the beginning of this chapter.

This theoretical bundle can be applied to specific cases of international politics that involve risky choices. The threat of loss (what risk is about) does in fact characterize most foreign-policy decisions, which also feature considerable value tradeoffs.

With this in mind, I will try to test the explanatory potential of prospect theory in Russian foreign policy with respect to the 2014 Ukrainian Revolution and the following "annexation" of Crimea by Russia in March 2014. A very concise summary of the main events can be useful to this purpose. In February 2014, after three months of the vehement "Euromaidan" uprising in Kiev, the pro-Russia incumbent President Viktor Yanukovych was ousted and an interim pro-West government took power in his place. The triggering reason for the protests was government's decision (allegedly under pressures from Russia) to stop the ongoing negotiations with the EU for the Ukrainian-European Union Association Agreement. After the overthrow in Kiev, some pro-Russia and pro-Yanukovych protests burst in South-Eastern regions traditionally aligned with Russia and mainly supportive of the former Ukrainian President. Similar protests also surged in the Autonomous Republic of Crimea. On 27 February 2014 the regional parliament in Simferopol, Crimea's capital, was seized by unmarked green-uniform militias carrying Russian weapons and equipment. With the presence of Russian troops and vehicles (without insignia) strengthening in the region, on 17 March the new Republic of Crimea declared its independence from Ukraine after a referendum, and asked to be *de-facto* administered by Russia.

The far-reaching decision to annex Crimea – given that Russian role was indeed decisive, despite repeated denials from Russian elite in a first moment - can be now analyzed with a prospect theory approach.

First, the actor under central focus in this case is President Vladimir Putin, since he is assumed to have a pivotal role in shaping Russian foreign policy. Secondly, we are to better define the setting of this choice (i.e. the annexation), given the above assumption on the importance of the situation in decision-making. We already emphasized that how a problem is framed greatly affects risk propensity and hence the internal evaluations of the options. In this case, Putin faced a very adverse scenario that began with the fall of his friendly Ukrainian government. The ousting of Yanukovych represented a blow to Russian interests, and a considerable obstacle to Putin's plans of turning his Eurasian Economic Union – with 45-million big Ukraine as its linchpin – into a credible counterpart of the European Union in the West.

Putin hence underwent a critical loss with the alienation of his biggest regional ally, saw his foreign policy agenda seriously undermined, and feared negative repercussions at domestic level. When the "little green men" were sent to the Crimean Peninsula to ensure Russian-speaking locals' "safety and security and a comfortable environment to express their will" (Direct line with Putin, 17 April 2014), Putin's reference point still coincided with the *status quo ante*, as he had not yet absorbed the recent overthrow in Kiev. In this regard, research has already shown that individuals are usually slow to assimilate recent losses while they quickly renormalize their reference point after gains - the latter phenomenon called "instant endowment effect" (Kahneman et al., 1990; Levy, 2003). The underlying principle is again loss aversion, according to which losses bear more psychological weight than gains of a comparable amount.

Having outlined the context of the choice, let us look at the different options then available to Putin, trying to assess the risk-dimension embedded in each. In order to define the riskiness of an option we can focus on the gap between the best and the worst outcome associated with that option. That is, the wider the relative variance in outcome, the riskier the alternative (McDermott, 1998, p. 39).

To simplify the matter, after the revolution the Kremlin faced two main alternatives to choose from. The first one was to refrain from any direct interference in Ukraine and just stand by. This course of action would have probably included conventional diplomatic moves such as complaints about the illegitimate government in Kiev, recall of the ambassador, setbacks in bilateral trade, pleas for protection of the Russian-speaking minorities etc. The second alternative was instead to exploit the crisis in order to earn geopolitical gains and extend Russian influence in the Ukrainian territories historically linked to it.

As for the riskiness of the first strategy, the worst possible outcome was an exacerbation of diplomatic relations with Ukraine, or a severing of commercial ties between the countries; and the best outcome was a gradual reconciliation with Kiev or the recognition by the new interim government of a special administrative regime for the Russian-speaking regions. The second strategy – intervention - implied a much broader variance in outcome. The worst case scenario was civil war, or full-fledged, open war between the two countries, or intervention by the NATO; whereas the best outcome was a moderate reaction by Ukraine or more diplomatic complaints from the Western powers. Hence intervening in Crimea was the riskiest option of the two, and prospect theory predicts that this same option would be taken if the problem was framed in term of losses from the reference point.

The first, less hazardous decision of non-intervention was framed by Putin as a certain loss (or "dead loss") since it would have just maintained the situation of negative change from his reference point still clung to the *status quo ante*, namely a strong sway over Ukrainian politics and Yanukovych firmly in power. Therefore Putin, in line with prospect theory, by choosing to intervene in Crimea and pave the way for its annexation took the riskiest decision - potentially generating an even larger loss than the sure outcome - so to avoid the dead loss implied by the *status quo*, and possibly return at his reference point. He had strong psychological (beside political) drives to try to recoup his losses caused by the Ukrainian revolution, and thus eventually behaved as a risk-taking actor.

The above case emphasizes that the domain of action is a crucial variable if we are to understand relevant foreign-policy choices. People assess the problems they deal with in terms of changes from a subjective reference point, which is the product of their aspirations, expectations and values. Another persuasive claim stemming from a prospect-theory outlook is that skillful aides and consultants can strategically manipulate the framing of an issue in order to spur a given behavior by the decision-maker. Finally, as a normative prescription to avoid systematic flaws in decision-making and make the editing phase more transparent, it may be advisable to present the issue at stake in as many different frames as possible – although this is sometimes no easy task (McDermott, 1998, p. 35).

Conclusion

After providing an overview of the research field of political psychology, in the second chapter we underscored the important role played by perception mechanisms in international relations. We saw that people tend to retain a balanced ordering of cognitions

and attitudes, and that they usually assimilate incoming information to their preexistent beliefs, or make sense of it in light of their "dogmatic substructure". Perceptions in decision-making also suffer from systematic drawbacks, such as the misconception that everything is unitary, ordered, and planned; or the belief that we matter enormously in others' actions and decisions. The case concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict showed that mutual hostility can be fueled by these psychological dynamics and the failure to recognize them on the part of leaders.

The third chapter attempted to address how people arrive at their choices among different courses of actions involving a component of risk and uncertainty. Processes of judgment were investigated along with systematic biases in gauging probabilities. Prospect theory was then presented as a cogent descriptive theory of individual choice under uncertainty. The most salient concepts from it were applied in the case concerning Putin's intervention in Crimea, by showing that the domain of action and the framing of the problem are crucial variables when analyzing a policy output.

It may now be worth underlining some potential limitations of this inquiry. A first notable problem with this research approach in general is that it is primarily centered on application of psychological findings to natural settings, such as international politics. This makes extremely difficult to operationalize the variables of interests, and to test the hypothesized relations between them due to the complexity of the situation.

Regarding the first chapter on perceptions, a possible flaw of the analysis is that oftentimes leaders are not so much naïve decision-makers driven by unconscious mindsets and misperceptions, but rather shrewd politicians who know how to capitalize on public perceptions and feelings. The component of political calculations or dissimulation of genuine attitudes by leaders was not given due consideration in this work. For example in

the case regarding Gaza and Israel, the Israeli leadership may well be aware that given actions justified on self-defense grounds can be instead interpreted as provocations from outside with the effect of buttressing the conflict, yet it may anyway judge the costs of this conduct as lower than its benefits in term of political legitimacy and support.

In the second chapter on choices, the core limitation lies in the difficulty of generalizing prospect theory findings to the international context. The theory was in fact first formulated out of classroom experiments with easily measurable variables. Expressing gains and losses in terms of monetary payoffs is way easier than doing it in terms of territorial, economic, and political costs and benefits. It is also quite difficult to define which is the riskiest alternative in a delicate foreign-policy problem. In questionnaires it is easy to define a sure outcome (suffices to write it on paper), while in international politics sometimes it is hard to say if an option is actually a safe bet or not. Moreover, testing the external validity of prospect theory can be difficult due to the likely presence of confounding variables in the natural setting. Finally, a downside of prospect theory when applied to international relations is that it was conceived of as a model of *individual* decision-making, while many aspects of foreign policy are actually the output of collective decision-making bodies (Levy, 2003). However, this potential downside is compensated by the fact that in international politics the role of individual leaders and presidents is usually more central than in domestic affairs (the US and Russia are clear examples in this regard).

Political psychology can of course broaden its research agenda in the future. An appealing area of interest could concern the impact of emotion and feelings in political phenomena, or the role of fear and anger in decision-making under extreme crisis, such as after terrorist attacks. Further research inspired by prospect theory may also deal with the relevance of strategic framing, and how political leaders set forth the available options to the public in

order to gather consensus, maybe with specific focus on the new right-wing populist parties emerging all over Europe. Another appealing topic could be how judgmental heuristics and biases are related to the formation and preservation of social prejudice, and how the latter might affect policy making. Moreover, the importance of psychological dynamics for political strategies can be explored with respect to contemporary global threats, e.g. climate change (and the impact of cognitive biases on the failure to cope with it adequately). Finally, future studies could offset the prevailing asymmetry in political psychology by investigating also the ways in which politics affects psychology – and not just the other way round (McDermott 2004).

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