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Chapter 8

Individual Level International Relations Theories – Human Nature Theory

We have now reached the third and final of our levels of analysis for international relations theory: the individual level. This section includes theorists who view the foreign policy and interaction of states as a result of the nature, characteristics, and values of either people in general or individuals in leadership roles. Proponents of these theories emphasize that systems, countries, and governments don't necessarily dictate the behavior of states—people do.

Each theory differs significantly, however, in its approach to the role of the individual. The first theory presented in this section, human nature theory, and the last, peace studies theory, both focus on the broad characteristics of humans as a race, but from vastly different perspectives. Human nature theorists view the more violent tendencies of the human race as unavoidable and, therefore, an essential and integral part of our relationships with one another. Scholars dedicated to the theory of peace studies suggest that people can overcome this kind of aggression and learn to live and work together peacefully.

If we look at the individual level of analysis as a spectrum, with human nature theory and peace studies theory at one end emphasizing a broad, all-encompassing look at the human race in general, then the second theory presented in this section, cognitive theory, stands at the opposite end of that spectrum. Cognitive theorists believe that the personalities of specific leaders and the personality traits characteristic of those who hold leadership positions often have a significant impact on the course and implementation of a state's foreign policy. Certainly in the first instance, Adolf Hitler played a key role in the rise of Nazi Germany and is often used as a glaring historic example of the power of one individual to dictate, quite literally, the policies of a nation. In the second instance, we might view the pursuit and attainment of leadership positions as somewhat self-selecting. For example, not everyone wants to be president, and those individuals who aspire to that level usually have certain personality traits in common: drive, ambition, willingness to lead, ability to compromise, and so on. Whether the topic is a specific person or simply "a leader," cognitive theorists argue that when it comes to making a decision that could affect the course of a nation and the course of history, the key component in the equation is the man or woman facing that decision.

So, we see that the individual level of analysis looks at the distinctive characteristics of people within our society to specific individuals. We will begin with the fairly pessimistic view of human nature theorists, then take a look at cognitive perspectives, and end with perhaps a more optimistic analysis by the proponents of peace studies.

Introduction

In looking at the individual level of international relations theory, we begin with the fairly broad interpretation of "individual" that actually encompasses all of humanity—human nature theory. **Human nature** refers to the qualities and traits shared by all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, culture, and so forth. Human nature theorists assert that the behavior of states is fundamentally patterned after the behavior of humans themselves. Human nature, then, can provide clues about when and why states might behave in a particular fashion.

Human nature theorists argue that, on a basic level, human nature—and, indeed, the nature of other species as well—is often guided by instinct. **Instinct** could be defined as an innate impulse that is prompted in response to specific environmental conditions. It is almost as if humans and other species are preprogrammed to respond in a certain manner when confronted with a

particular set of circumstances. Just as the antelope of the African plains have an instinctive fear of lions and other predators, these scholars suggest it is basic human nature that makes states fearful of a neighboring country's perceived military strength and defensive of their territorial rights.

In the excerpt by the Greek scholar and philosopher Aristotle, it is indicated that the nature of man is essentially divided into two parts (good and evil) and, therefore, life and the relations between people are also divided. That is, one cannot know or understand the bounty and tranquility of peace without having experienced the hardship and terror of war. Although the human race can, according to Aristotle, emphasize one facet over the other (presumably peace over war), this exercise does not negate the presence of the less desirable side of existence. He also extends this theory of human nature to the nature of governments formed by humans, asserting that the government of "freemen" is nobler than that of authoritarian rule. Here we might go so far as to say that what is good for individuals (citizenry) is also good for the state.

In the excerpt taken from Thomas Hobbes' classic work *Leviathan*, the author asks us to imagine the wretchedness of human existence in a "**state of nature**" when there was no central government able to control the baser instincts of humans and to provide order. Hobbes points to three specific causes of conflict that are endemic to human nature: competition, diffidence, and glory. It is important to understand the context in which he uses these terms. **Competition**, as Hobbes views it, represents the perpetual struggle between humans for resources, power, or anything else that might represent some sort of gain. We might presume that at some point relative parity is achieved between individuals or that a person could be content with the fruits of his or her individual labors in a civilized world.

This path, however, leads to diffidence in Hobbes' estimation. **Diffidence** arises from a perception of equality or a sense of self-satisfaction that occurs when individuals attain a particular set of goals or ends. Hobbes suggests conflict arises from the need to protect these gains from other humans who, because of their very nature, cannot help but try to subdue, conquer, and master another's holdings. So, whether you look at the individual attempting to seize another's possessions or the individual protecting his or her assets, both will likely be moved to violent means.

The quest for glory in human nature is the third portion of Hobbes' trilogy about the unavoidable violence of existence. He defines **glory** as the quest for and preservation of honor, respect, or reputation as it refers to the individual or, indeed, as it reflects on the family, friends, name, and so forth, associated with that individual. Under these conditions, Hobbes appears far less certain than Aristotle of man's capacity to avoid conflict. It is, in essence, impossible for an individual to be a pacifist, content with the status quo, because others will strive to change this balance. Humans seek to master others who present, may present, or are perceived as presenting a threat. It is not surprising, given this overall perception of human nature, that Hobbes declares that, in the state of nature, the "life of man was solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short." Later in his book, Hobbes concludes that life becomes bearable only when humans subjugate themselves to the control of a strong central authority that can enforce law and order.

Though we might hypothesize that these base traits are inevitably passed from the nature of humans to the nature of the states and other institutions that humans create, the last article by twentieth-century psychologist Sigmund Freud suggests otherwise. Freud argues that the natural violence of the human animal can actually be "overcome by the transference of power to a larger unity" or group. The group comes together and is linked by the emotional ties (belief in democracy and freedom, protection from a common threat, etc.) of its members. In his letter to Albert Einstein addressing the scientist's query about how future wars could be avoided, Freud states that transferring power to a central authority mitigates the possibility of violence. He suggests further that although humans have an instinct for hatred and destruction, this is only half of the essential dichotomy of human instincts. In pairings of seemingly opposite characteristics, humans also have instincts for love and cooperation, which might be promoted and enhanced by such an overarching group authority.

Despite this more hopeful acknowledgment, the enduring theme linking the three articles in this section is that humans are by nature—and can generally be counted upon to be—violent and

aggressive. Human nature theorists suggest that these traits, so instinctive to men and women, are thereby carried over to our relations on an international level. Just as the saying suggests that an apple doesn't fall far from the tree, the behavior of states does not stray far from the behavior of the people within them.

A Critique of Human Nature Theory

The use of psychology and examination of human behavioral patterns that characterize human nature theory have made some insightful contributions to the study of states and international relations. Classical realist theory is itself based in part on the assumption that man is inherently aggressive, and, as we noted earlier, represents a popular and widely accepted theory among contemporary scholars.

The critics of human nature theory argue, however, that it does not delve deeply enough into the driving forces of foreign policy and global politics. Proceeding on the assumption that the human animal is by nature competitive and prone to violence leads to a number of questions. First, does human nature theory provide a sufficient explanation of the complex character of international relations? We might also wonder whether this theory has the analytic depth necessary to understand international relations in our world today. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and its communist ideology, the integrated world economic structure, and the ever-expanding global communications network are just three of the many significant events and processes that have changed and are changing our planet. Can we assume that human beings' natural aggression and lust for power or even Aristotle's notion of the conflict between good and evil in individuals, represent the driving forces behind not only the behavior of states but behind all of these other events, as well?

It appears that human nature theory alone does not offer a sufficiently detailed framework to address these issues. Certainly, however, proponents of this theory can point to a number of instances throughout history where human instincts toward aggression and domination affected the course of international relations. Nazi Germany of the 1930s and 1940s, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and the rampage of the Mongols across the Asian continent in the thirteenth century are examples that come readily to mind. But, staying with an individual-level perspective in our examination of the behavior of states, is the driving force actually human nature as we have defined it here? Or should we take a closer look at individual leaders, their particular features, and unique ambitions?

Key Concepts

Competition is a term used to represent the perpetual struggle between humans for resources, power, or anything else that might represent some sort of gain. According to Thomas Hobbes, competition is one of the three specific causes of conflict that are endemic to human nature. The other two causes are diffidence and glory.

Diffidence is one of the three causes of conflict, according to Thomas Hobbes, that are endemic to human nature. Diffidence arises from a human's perception of equality or a sense of self-satisfaction and occurs when individuals attain a particular set of goals or ends.

Glory is defined by Thomas Hobbes as the quest for and preservation of honor, respect, or reputation as it refers to the individual or as it reflects on the family, friends, name, and so forth, associated with that individual. According to Hobbes, glory is one of the three causes of conflict that are endemic to human nature.

Human nature refers to the qualities and traits shared by all people, regardless of ethnicity, gender, culture, etc. Human nature theorists assert that the behavior of states is fundamentally

patterned after the behavior of humans themselves. Human nature, then, can provide clues about when and why states might behave in a particular fashion.

Instinct is an innate pattern of behavior characteristic of species, including humans. To varying degrees, humans and other species are preprogrammed to respond in a certain manner when confronted with a particular set of circumstances.

State of nature refers to Thomas Hobbes' pessimistic view of life prior to the creation of a central government or authority to control the baser instincts of humans and provide order. Under these conditions the life of humans would be "solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short."

Chapter 9

Cognitive Theory

In the course of growing up and learning to live with others, we have all probably heard the phrase, "Imagine how dull the world would be if everyone were the same." Dull, certainly, but such uniformity would make it easier for political scientists to predict people's behavior and put together theories of international relations. Doubtless, however, even most political scientists would thankfully acknowledge—along with the rest of us—that we are all unique individuals, with different personalities, beliefs, ambitions, skills, and so on. The theory presented in this chapter, which we will call cognitive theory, suggests that a leader's specific personality guides not only his or her own actions but the destiny of the state and its relations with other countries.

We can define the term **personality** as the package of behavior, temperament, and other individualistic qualities that uniquely identifies each of us. Cognition is one element of this personality package. **Cognition** is what an individual comes to know as a result of learning and reasoning or, on a more instinctual level, intuition and perception. All of these components combine to form a person's cognitive facility. In our daily lives, we are perhaps more familiar with the term *recognize*. When you recognize a person or place, for example, you identify him, her, or it using accumulated knowledge or experience.

Cognitive theorists believe that the personality traits of leaders can often define both the agenda and specific features of a state's foreign policy. In his article "World Politics and Personal Insecurity," Harold Lasswell suggests that, unconsciously, leaders actually superimpose their own sense of self over that of the state. That is, the line separating the leader from the state becomes blurred, with the personality of the leader—complete with flaws and insecurities—shaping the policy and perceptions of the state.

A leader's individual perception of reality is naturally conditioned by emotional attachments and aversions that he or she formed in life. In putting together a world-view, Lasswell asserts, people tend to displace emotions of those close to us onto symbols that are more removed, such as nations, classes, and rulers. For example, the frustration of a peasant in pre-revolutionary France was not solely directed at a single aristocrat, but at the entire aristocracy. Or, a neighbor's dispute with one who is from a foreign country might prejudice his view toward that country as a whole. According to Lasswell, in political personalities, these associations—however loose—are likely to have some conditioning effect on performance and, hence, policy.

Margaret Hermann provides a structure for analyzing the individual traits that might affect a leader's decisions and policy making. In "Explaining Foreign Policy Behavior Using the Personal Characteristics of Political Leaders," Hermann isolates four broad types of personal characteristics: beliefs, motives, decision style, and interpersonal style. Although other factors do come into play (interest in foreign affairs, diplomatic and foreign policy training), these can be combined with an assessment of a leader's basic characteristics to form a fairly complete profile.

From her analysis, Hermann concludes that leaders generally have one of two orientations toward foreign affairs: independent or participatory. An **independent leader** tends to be aggressive, with a limited capacity to consider different alternatives, and, not surprisingly, is willing to be the first to take action over a perceived threat. In regard to foreign policy, independent leaders seek to preserve a state's individual identity and tend to be somewhat isolationist, viewing contact with other nations as a slippery slope toward dependence and practicable only under their own specific terms or conditions.

By contrast, Hermann defines a **participatory leader** as generally conciliatory, with an inclusive nature that encourages relationships with other countries, considers various alternatives in problem solving, and rarely seeks to initiate action. Participatory leaders also have a different approach to foreign policy. They promote contact and ventures with other nations and are likely to be quite sensitive and responsive to the international environment.

Whether independent or participatory, cognitive theorists view leaders' perceptions of other states and other heads of state as key components of foreign policy. Robert Jervis' well-respected

work, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, discusses how decision makers perceive others' behavior and form judgments about their intentions. He actually focuses on several vital misperceptions that are common among people and often lead to disputes or even war. These misperceptions might be compared to the stereotypical images of "good guys" versus "bad guys" in an old Hollywood western. First, we tend to view the people of other nations as more hostile than we are. That is, we might represent ourselves as the peace-loving townspeople and the other side as a band of aggressive marauders. Second, we also view other countries as organized and integrated, behaving according to a coherent strategic plan. Returning to our old western movie analogy, the "bad guys" always seemed to operate within an accepted and rigid hierarchy and to have some sort of a plan to get what they wanted, whether it was robbing the town bank, getting control of the town, or capturing rights to the local water supply.

Finally, just as it is difficult to envision the gentle townspeople in this image intimidating the fierce band of marauders, we too find it difficult to believe that others might be afraid of or intimidated by us. But it is these kinds of misperceptions that can foster errors in judgment about the motives and aims behind the actions of other countries. We see, then, that the perceptions (and misperceptions) of leaders could affect the foreign policy of states and the international system as a whole.

If we accept that leaders are, in fact, conditioned by the unique features of their own personality, cognitive theorists would argue that we must also acknowledge that a leader's perception of policy, the state, and the system will be conditioned by these same features.

Operational reality refers to the picture of the environment held by an individual (usually a leader) as it is modified by his or her personality, perceptions, and misperceptions. Essentially, we all live and work within our own operational reality, but a leader's view of reality has an impact on policies and decisions that influence millions of people and could well affect the course of history.

At this point, we need to acknowledge that often these policies and decisions are made by an influential collective or group. Although this chapter and the other chapters in this section focus on individual level of analysis theories, we might expand the image somewhat to include such groups of like-minded individuals. These individuals' beliefs about, ideology of, and approach to foreign policy fall within sufficiently narrow confines as to be considered a single voice.

Cognitive theory is really about individual personalities and perceptions and how they can affect the behavior of states in the international system. These unique qualities are based on both a person's innate, instinctive reactions and learned or reasoned patterns that come from knowledge and experience. Cognitive theorists suggest that a leader's personality conditions how he or she makes decisions, implements those decisions, and judges the outcome within a global context. It would seem that the distinctions that make us who we are would quite likely have an impact on how we try to shape or control the world around us. But, should personality be the defining feature in an analysis of international relations?

A Critique of Cognitive Theory

The notion that individuals make foreign policy and can shape the international system in which they exist is the most important contribution of the individual level of analysis. Cognitive theory, with its emphasis on studying the values, beliefs, and personal characteristics of leaders, forces us to recognize that all explanations of political behavior must take into account the role of the individual. Only by narrowing our focus to the level of the individual can we understand fully the actions of states.

Critics of cognitive theory might argue that focusing on personality profiles of individual leaders to determine an analytical framework for studying international relations is, indeed, limiting. In addition, one's assessment of any leader should be based on a sophisticated and complete psychoanalysis. Such a scenario is improbable, at best, since most leaders have not subjected and would not subject themselves to this type of scrutiny. Thus, it is left to the scholar to examine the background and behavior patterns of leaders or potential leaders, which would tend to produce both vague and problematic results.

Other criticisms of cognitive theory revolve around its limited scope. The emphasis of the theory (personality/cognition) is so narrow that it seems inappropriate to attempt a broad, all-encompassing application to international relations as a whole. The price of focusing on specific individuals is the danger of getting bogged down in a detailed analysis of the subject's idiosyncratic characteristics and losing sight of the broader picture. In addition, the principles of cognitive theory might lead us to believe that all wars are simply the result of misperceptions or misunderstandings between individual leaders. Cognitive theorists ignore the fact that wars often result from fundamental conflicting interests between states on larger issues, such as national security, competition over scarce resources, or dozens of other factors that affect global politics.

One final comment is similar to the critique used against human nature theory: Can cognitive theory provide a framework substantial enough to analyze contemporary issues of foreign policy in a contemporary context? Do personality, perceptions, and beliefs hold the key to understanding international monetary policy, the formation of interdependent trading blocs, or the changing nature of collective security? We would have to say under these circumstances that cognitive theory—though important and useful in understanding how and in what way individual leaders do play a role in the formulation and conduct of foreign policy—may not offer a complete understanding of the patterns and process for international relations today and in the future.

Key Concepts

Cognition is an individual's knowing as a result of learning and reasoning or, on a more instinctual level, intuiting and perceiving. All of these components combine to form a person's cognitive facility.

Independent leader is one of the two major orientations of leaders according to Margaret Hermann. Independent leaders tend to be aggressive, have a limited capacity to consider different alternatives, and are willing to be the first to take action over a perceived threat. Independent leaders seek to preserve a state's individual identity and tend to be somewhat isolationist, viewing contact with other nations as a slippery slope toward dependence and practicable only under their own specific terms or conditions.

Operational reality refers to the picture of the environment held by an individual as it is modified by his or her personality, perceptions, and misperceptions.

Participatory: leader is a term used by Margaret Hermann to characterize a type of leader who is generally conciliatory and encourages relationships with other countries, considers various alternatives in problem solving, and rarely seeks to initiate action. Participatory leaders are likely to be quite sensitive and responsive to the international environment.

Personality is the package of behavior, temperament, and other individualistic qualities that uniquely identifies each of us. Cognition is one element of this personality package.