

THE ROLE OF EMOTIONS IN FOREIGN POLICY DECISION MAKING

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Long viewed as an obstacle to be overcome in the pursuit of pure rationality, emotions are now widely recognized as a critical part of the decision-making process. As a result, any complete account of foreign policy decision making must account for how and when emotions impact political decision making. Facing difficult issues and multiple constituencies on a daily basis, political decision makers operate in an environment of near-constant time pressure and stress. How they process information and make judgments involves a complex interplay between affective and cognitive factors. In this entry, we present a framework for understanding the different ways in which emotions can enter into the decision-making process and the differential effects of key emotions.

Integral and Incidental Emotions

Emotions can enter the decision-making process in several ways. At the broadest level, emotions can be divided into two categories: integral and incidental. *Integral emotions* are those that are clearly related to the decision at hand, whether they are predictions of future emotions or emotions triggered in the heat of the moment. As such, integral emotions are consistent with a rational choice framework and may be thought of as additional elements of a utility calculation.

Integral emotions can be categorized as either *expected emotions* or *immediate emotions*. First, decision makers may attempt to predict how they will feel if they take a certain action and then factor that expected emotion into their decision calculus (this is called “expected, integral emotion”). For example, when contemplating a bold act of

diplomacy, a decision maker might calculate how she would feel if her foreign counterpart later betrayed her; the decision maker might then try to minimize future regret by choosing a less risky course of action. Second, the immediate emotion an individual experiences while contemplating a set of options may affect his decision-making process (called “immediate, integral” emotion). For instance, anger over a recent transgression by Kim Jong-il may contribute to a U.S. diplomat’s decision not to trust a new offer from a North Korean diplomat.

Incidental emotions make up the second broad category of emotions. Although normatively unrelated to the decision at hand, incidental emotions nonetheless affect decision making in critical and often unappreciated ways. First, relatively stable dispositional attributes—a person’s “temperament”—can predispose them to react to a situation in a particular way. Second, emotions unrelated to a current decision can “carryover” from prior situations even though they are unrelated to the problem at hand. For example, it is easy to imagine that the severe agitation President Kennedy reportedly experienced during the Cuban Missile Crisis might have carried over to impact decisions unrelated to the U.S.Soviet confrontation. For example, Kennedy was confronted at the height of the crisis by the surprise Chinese invasion of India. In his meetings on that topic (conveniently recorded for posterity), the specter of the unrelated Cuban crisis looms large (see Zelikow and May 2001, 337-344). In sum, incidental emotions arise from past situations or from chronic personality characteristics that – contrary to integral emotion -- are normatively irrelevant to the judgments and decisions at hand.

Table 1 synthesizes this basic taxonomy for understanding the effects of emotion on judgment and decision making.

Table 1. How Emotions Affect Judgment and Decision Making

	<u>Expected</u>	<u>Immediate</u>
<u>Integral</u>	Decision makers may engage in a cognitive calculation to predict how an outcome will make them feel.	Aspects of decisions can cause decision makers to experience a certain emotion in the present.
<u>Incidental</u>	—	While faced with a choice, decision makers may be experiencing an emotion normatively unrelated to the decision at hand.

How and What We Think: The Appraisal-tendency Framework

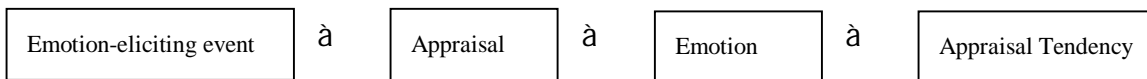
Emotions serve a critical coordination role, setting in motion responses across a wide variety of domains—including physiological, behavioral, and cognitive—that allow individuals to deal with their present situation. Once evoked, emotions act like a weather system, affecting everything in their path. Indeed, multi-modal responses are often so strong that they affect how individuals perceive and take action in subsequent events, even if the emotion is no longer normatively relevant (Lerner & Keltner 2000). In their now-classic experiments, Smith and Ellsworth (1985) found that virtually all emotions could be described using a basic framework consisting of six cognitive dimensions: certainty, pleasantness, attentional activity, control, anticipated effort and

responsibility. These dimensions help to define and distinguish each discrete emotion, as well as to shape its likely influence on judgment and decision making.

Each discrete emotion (happiness, fear, anger, etc.) is associated with a *core appraisal theme*. These themes both cause and are caused by emotions. For example, uncertainty is an appraisal theme known to induce anxiety, and feelings of anxiety are known to trigger perceptions of uncertainty (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Similarly, sadness arises from appraisals of situational (and not individual) responsibility and also triggers appraisals of future situations as arising from situational factors. The carryover of emotion to perceptions of new situations is called an *appraisal tendency*.

These propositions make up the “appraisal tendency framework” (ATF), illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Appraisal Tendency Framework (ATF)



Emotions can have different effects on the *content* of thought (what exactly decision makers think about) and the *process* of thought (how deeply or shallowly they consider information). As we discuss these effects, we will contrast the appraisal tendencies of two emotions relevant to foreign policy decision making: fear and anger. Table 2 summarizes the key appraisal dimensions associated with these emotions.

Table 2. Key Appraisal Themes of Fear & Anger

Appraisal Dimension	Fear	Anger
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Certainty Degree to which future events seem predictable and comprehensible (high) or unpredictable and incomprehensible (low).	High	Low
Control Degree to which events seem to be brought about by individual agency (high) or situational agency (low).	High	Low
Responsibility Degree to which someone or something other than oneself (high) or oneself (low) seems responsible.	High	Medium

How Emotion Affects the Content of Thought

One of the most important ways that emotions affect decision making is by impacting *what* individuals think. The appraisal tendency framework provides insight into this process. Recall that anger is associated with an appraisal of individual responsibility, which creates an appraisal tendency to focus on an individual (or individuals) rather than a situation as a causal factor. For instance, Dunn and Schweitzer (2005) found that experimentally induced anger led study participants to judge their coworkers and acquaintances more harshly, even though those individuals had no role in causing the anger. Anger also has pernicious effects on intergroup relations, as it can contribute to stereotyping and prejudice in judgments of out-groups. This is not true of all negative emotions; sadness and fear (neither of which is associated with individual blame), for instance, do not lead to more punitive attributions or negative stereotyping of out-groups

Emotions can also influence judgments of risk perceptions and risk preferences. Fear and anger, though both “negative” emotions, differ drastically on the dimensions of

certainty and control (see Table 2). Fear is associated with appraisals of situational control and uncertainty, while anger is associated with individual control and certainty. As a result, these two emotions produce divergent effects on risk attitudes. Fear engenders pessimistic risk assessments and a preference for risk-averse options (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Lerner, Gonzalez, Small & Fischhoff, 2003). In contrast, anger produces optimistic risk assessments and a preference for risky options. Note that even though anger is associated with optimistic risk assessments, it is not associated with an overall feeling of optimism; angry decision-makers generally are not happy, but they are confident they will overcome whatever obstacle stands in their way.

Finally, emotions have important effects on memory recall. In international politics, decision-makers often encounter situations in which uncertainty prevents a rational cost-benefit calculation from yielding an obvious answer. In such situations, individuals may fall back on previous routines and experiences to help them make sense of their current reality. Emotions can affect which information comes to mind most readily and which information is ignored. What information decision makers recall and deem relevant at those times can have a significant impact on eventual outcomes. It seems likely, for example, that President George H.W. Bush would have reached a different decision about whether to launch the First Gulf War in 1990 if he had thought Iraq's invasion of Kuwait resembled his own decision to invade Panama in 1989 rather than Hitler's invasion of Poland.

How Emotion Affects the Process of Thought

In addition to affecting *what* people think, emotions also have a significant impact on *how* we think. For example, certain emotions cause *attention effects*, such that we pay more attention to incoming information that is congruent with our present emotional state than information that is contradictory. Angry individuals selectively attend to and encode information that relates to anger, just as fearful individuals selectively attend to and encode information that relates to fear and anxiety.

Emotions also influence judgments and decisions by affecting the depth of cognitive processing—for example, whether a decision maker thinks deeply or shallowly about a topic as well as whether she considers information in an even-handed or biased way. Emotions that have the core appraisal theme of certainty, such as anger and happiness, result in processing that tends to be characterized by speed and reliance on previous knowledge or rules of thumb (termed “heuristic processing”). In contrast, emotions associated with appraisals of uncertainty, such as fear and sadness, prompt more systematic processing characterized by detailed and careful analysis of options.

Recap

As the study of emotion matures, new insights into the role emotion plays in foreign policy decision making are emerging. The picture we see now is a nuanced one. We see differences between the effects of emotion on the *process* versus the *content* of thought. We see differences between the effects of one negative emotion (e.g., fear) versus another (e.g., anger). We see differences between the effects of *incidental* versus *integral* emotions. Taken together, however, we see at least one remarkable similarity: Emotions are central elements of humans’ most important judgments and decisions.

Citations

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Key Terms

Emotion, foreign policy, decision-making

Bio

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