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"Do Participants and Observers Assess Intentions Differently During Bargaining and Conflict? An Experiment"

Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Society of Political Psychology, Portland, Oregon USA, Jul 04, 2007

Publication Type: Conference Paper/Unpublished Manuscript

Abstract:

Political actors in settings of bargaining and conflict often find themselves uncertain about the motives of their counterparts. This paper explores the psychology of motive assessment using a novel experimental design involving imperfect-information versions of the ultimatum and dictator bargaining games. Subjects are randomly assigned to one of three roles -- the traditional proposer and recipient roles in these games, and a novel impartial observer role. Recipients and observers are given identical, but ambiguous, information about proposers' offers, and make post-play assessments of proposers' intentions that are rewarded based on accuracy. When uncertainty is sufficiently high, recipients' assessments of proposers' intentions are significantly lower than observers' assessments in the ultimatum game, in stark contrast to Bayesian predictions, but there is no evidence of any difference in the dictator game. The results suggest that individual perceptions can be directly affected by the set of strategic alternatives they possess, independent of access to information. One interpretation is that recipients' power to accept or reject may prime them to be more critical or negative than an impartial observer would be. If correct, this interpretation has important implications for theories of bargaining and conflict, and for the design of institutions for conflict resolution.

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