

Policymakers and International Engagement

Findings from Cognitive Elicitations

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I. INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

The success of the Global Interdependence Initiative will partially depend on finding a common language which is effective for both members of the public and the professionals concerned with setting U.S. policy. In previous reports, we have examined frames and language used by the public and in the print media on the topic of the U.S. role in the world (Aubrun & Grady 1999; Grady & Aubrun 1999) ; in this report we look at the ways in which professionals with international experience think and talk about the topic. While policy makers of course have a variety of views and have expertise in widely varying areas, there are nonetheless some patterns and generalizations that are relevant for the GII, since they represent real obstacles and opportunities.

In some areas, the language and perspectives of the policymakers coincide closely with those of the public. For example, both policymakers and the public feel that the U.S. generally acts from a moral high ground, that it does more than its share in most international efforts with which it is involved, and that it does have some obligation to help in times of humanitarian crisis abroad. (See also our discussion of overlap between public attitudes and attitudes reflected in the press; Grady & Aubrun 1999.)

On the other hand, even when their perspectives are similar – and, importantly, even when both groups have views that are a good fit with the GII mission – policymakers and the public tend to “speak a different language.” That is, policymakers and the public often use different frames, metaphors, and words to reason about appropriate American responses to various situations, even when the positions they are taking are roughly the same. Naturally, this represents a substantial obstacle to building a shared American discourse of cooperative international engagement.

This obstacle arises largely from what we refer to as policymakers’ “authoritative stance.” For many good reasons, policymakers tend to view the world as if from above, which has a variety of consequences for how they view the issues and the process of making decisions about the issues. One particular problem is that policymakers tend to have very little confidence in the public’s competence, interest, or goodwill when it comes to international affairs (see also Kull 1999). This means that there is not only a gap between how policymakers and the public think and talk about the issues, but actual resistance to, or at least skepticism about, bridging that gap.

The GII’s goal of forging a common discourse in support of cooperative international engagement is a challenging one. Taking stock of the distance between how the public and policymakers conceive of the U.S. role in the world is a critical step towards that goal.

(Note: For a fuller examination of particular expert models of the U.S. role in the world – as opposed to the general stance of experts towards foreign policy decision-making – see our report “10 Differences Between Public and Expert Understandings of International Affairs: Findings From the Mainstream American Press.”)

Key Findings

- Like the public, policymakers use simplifying models and metaphors to reason about international relations.
- Like the public, policymakers are, to some extent, constrained by the discourse of their peers – when speaking privately they are less inclined to conform to language and opinions accepted among their professional and/or political colleagues.
- Like all experts, policymakers tend to create and use “bird’s eye view” models of the world, which entail much broader knowledge than the public’s (even when the knowledge isn’t necessarily much deeper).
- The mental models used by policymakers may resemble games, in which complex phenomena such as policies, resources, and populations are represented as pieces; and leaders and governments as players.
- Policymakers tend to be especially ready to see the U.S. as a leader in world affairs.
- Like most leaders and experts, policymakers tend to exude an “air of authority,” whatever topic they address.
- Policymakers tend to adopt a cool and somewhat distant attitude to the events they deal with.
- Policymakers tend to be skeptical about the public’s competence, interest and good will, in the area of international relations. This means that they often feel little incentive to engage with the public.

Methodological note

The findings presented in this report are based on elicitations (i.e., one-on-one, semistructured interviews) with ten individuals in government, or organizations involved in some way with international activity. The group included a mix of political conservatives and liberals. Types and degrees of experience were also quite varied: the group included elected representatives at the state and national levels, as well as lobbyists and analysts. An overview of the methodology of cognitive analysis is provided in Aubrun & Grady 1999, and is not repeated here.

As in previous research for the GII, we have analyzed this material for ways in which relevant issues are framed, and metaphors are used. One earlier research project on expert views of international affairs – based on an analysis of the print media – allowed us to describe the differences in assumptions between experts and the public. By contrast, the interactive nature of cognitive elicitations makes it possible in this report to explore general aspects of the reasoning style of expert practitioners.

The first section of the report discusses some ways in which policymakers, contrary to what one might expect, resemble ordinary members of the public, in the ways that they think and talk

about the issues. The second explores the basis of an important difference between the cognitive stances of policymakers and the public; namely the tendency of expert practitioners to view the world “from above.”

II. TWO SIMILARITIES BETWEEN POLICYMAKERS AND THE PUBLIC

While policymakers obviously have a great deal more knowledge than members of the public in certain areas, there are also ways in which their reasoning is surprisingly like the public’s. More specifically, there are ways in which their thoughts and language on the subject of international engagement are subject to the same limitations and constraints as the public’s – policymakers constitute a “speech community” characterized by particular norms and expectations.

The knowledge of policymakers is structured (and limited) by frames.

In the popular view, experts such as policymakers are able to rise above simple metaphors to get at the empirical and literal truth about how the world works. In fact, however, the reasoning of policymakers is frame-driven, just as the public’s is. It is certainly true that the models of policymakers are often more highly elaborated and grounded in fact than those of the public. Nonetheless, policymakers, like members of the public, may rely on simple models and metaphors, make use of slogans, and have simple axes to grind. Given the popular assumption, this is an area where policymakers and the public are surprisingly similar.

... [R]egardless of the backwardness of the political leaders of China, the fact of the matter is China is not an 800 pound gorilla. It is a 1200 pound gorilla. It would be suicide for the United States not to engage with them economically.

I have explained over and over again to leaders of foreign countries or business people that they've got to understand that the United States, because it had an ocean on both sides and had a friendly neighbor in the north and a friendly neighbor in the south for the most part, it's basically a nation that looked within. And I don't think that has changed a lot.

[on the topic of UN dues:] Respectable people don't dump on their obligations.

And there is a bit of a naivete in suggesting that we forgive all the loans and give [developing countries] a lot more loans with no conditions. It is kind of stupid. If you loan a friend \$100 for the friend to buy groceries and he blows the \$100 on something else and then he comes back to you and says I would like to borrow another \$100, you might want to put some real stiff conditions on the second \$100 in view of the fact that he has blown the first.

In another example, a policymaker uses a metaphor in which social and military crises spread like disease – this is a more sophisticated variant on the old metaphor that countries are dominoes:

The situation where we clearly have an interest is when a humanitarian crisis is perpetuated on the neighbors of such a country. If this is metastasizing, then I think we have an interest in working with other countries to prevent that.

Q: Why is our interest greater in that case?

A: Because it keeps on growing; it will affect the whole world.

Policymakers' PUBLIC thoughts/language are shaped and limited by expectations.

As experts, policymakers often generate sophisticated and innovative ways of talking and thinking about international issues. This is one of the factors that makes it difficult for policymakers and the public to understand each other. It is difficult for the public to follow the language of policymakers, and it is difficult for policymakers to take seriously that of the public.

On the other hand, it is important to recognize that policymakers, like the public, are in some sense constrained by the expectations of their peers. Individual policymakers often seem less political and polarized in a private context, but are forced into accepted modes of thought and discourse when working publicly. Policymakers are typically creative in their use of language and metaphor, which gives the appearance of a certain freedom of thought and expression; and yet, they are usually working within a set of conceptual constraints.

The following quotes, from politicians from the two major parties, reflect the fact that politicians are often less polarized when operating outside the public arena. The first grants that there are problems within his/her own party, the second acknowledges that there is much to appreciate in the other party's approach to a particular issue:

... [C]learly you have the breakdown between on the Democratic side the anti-free traders, the labor unions, sort of the blue collar- and then you have on the Republican side an increasing group of right wing isolationists that have sort of found common ground...

I sort of enjoy the [other major party's] approach [to military spending].

III. THE BIRD'S EYE VIEW

As we have mentioned, policymakers and the public share certain understandings, e.g. that the United States is fundamentally moral, and that it shoulders more than its share of the burden in international affairs:

One of the things I am proud about our country is [that it is] generally true that most of the documents that we sign, we at least intend to carry out. I don't I think the European people tend to carry out [their agreements]. I think to them diplomacy is an act of duplicity, really.

I guess the American people are often tired of being the ones to sacrifice, to not make sales to a country, to boycott or to have to use American troops first.

But there are also sharp differences in the ways that policymakers and members of the public think and talk about the issues. Many of these differences are rooted in a single cognitive difference: the tendency of policymakers to create and use “bird’s eye view” maps of the world. Creating models of the object of study provides a powerful tool for understanding, as is clear from the examples of strategic maps of military operations, or plastic models of organic molecules.

The tendency to see the world from above – rather than from the perspective of a person “on the ground,” which would be more typical for a member of the public – has a number of consequences for how policymakers understand and communicate about international issues.

Pieces and players

In policymakers’ mental maps, complex phenomena such as policies, resources, and populations tend to be represented as pieces; and leaders and governments as players. It is easier for policymakers than for the public to think in terms of change, movement, and power relations among the pieces and leaders. Members of the public often have no well-established model in mind of how these complex phenomena might operate. Furthermore, where the public has a relatively static view of the world – they generally take whatever they know about the current situation at face value without questioning how it came to be, or how it might have been different – policymakers think in more historical terms, and deal more with cause and effect. They may think of stability, for example, in terms of a dynamic balance (or imbalance) of active forces.

I don't think humanitarian interests are a big player in foreign policy.

We only play by the rules when the rules serve our interest and we like them.

I think that a lot of capital flees to pollution havens, places where they are not required to meet either environmental or social standards. And I think that the United States could effectively constrain that kind of capital flow if they wanted to.

Foreign policy is obviously about national interest in the traditional strategic side's access to energy, balance of power; you want to prevent all sorts of weapons from getting into the wrong hands, and so forth.

Skepticism about the public

Policymakers tend to be skeptical about the public’s competence, interest, and good will. They tend to emphasize the gulf between the public’s world of everyday concerns and the world of policymakers who have the time, training, and interest to concern themselves with what they acknowledge are abstract and complex issues.

This represents a major obstacle, since it can lead policymakers to the conclusion that there's little reason to engage with the public.

Americans are out of the loop. To be an isolationist, you've got to care about foreign policy and you've got to oppose it, and I can't even find most Americans who care about it enough to oppose it.

[On why Americans seem uninterested in foreign policy:] I suspect it is largely because they are too concerned about their daily lives and what is going on in their own communities.

I have no idea what the American public thinks or if it even thinks about these issues. [Note: this statement is from a lobbyist, rather than an elected official.]

The authoritative persona

Like most leaders and experts, policymakers tend to exude an “air of authority,” which results from their status and, in many cases, their personal charisma, in addition to their actual expertise. Their statements tend to be presented and understood as depictions of the way the world is, rather than as personal opinions. This authoritative style facilitates the transformation of utterances by single individuals into public policy, and is an essential tool of the trade for policymakers.

Like virtually all experts, however, policymakers tend to have rather narrow areas of true expertise. This presents a problem when policymakers concern themselves (as they almost inevitably must) with areas outside their areas of true expertise: To put it simply, they tend to seem expert even when they're not, and their pronouncements on whatever topic they address carry a weight much greater than that of ordinary people. This can make policymakers part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

In the first example below, a policymaker emphatically asserts a definition of a basic economic term. In the second, a policymaker expresses a definitive judgement about the behavior of the United States. In the third example, a policymaker casts him/herself as a large mass which cannot be “moved” by a particular argument. Each of these examples reflects a perspective in which the speaker's opinion is taken to be objective fact.

Well, horse shit. Two and two is five. I mean you can get people to make any kind of arguments and try to redefine words and terms all you want. But free market means that you don't have interference from government authorities.

This is just bizarre on the part of the United States. We keep talking about everybody has got free trade and freedom and then we force our allies to take stuff they don't want.

I am unmoved.

The broad generalizations and absolute terms (“always,” “never”) in the following quotes are typical of the authoritative stance:

What happens now is we piss a certain amount of money out around the world. We move it around from crisis to crisis and we've never had a raison d'etre.

One of the reasons we are never going to really clamp down on the Chinese or really foul up their trade status is the day we don't import cheap Chinese goods is the day the American people understand they are not a middle class or even a wealthy nation.

Obviously, the sovereignty question is one we debate frequently in international politics. Clearly, the question would come up as to why the United States – versus Great Britain, France, and Italy. It's in their back yard. That is always a conversation that is going to take place when we are dealing with Europe.

America as “boss”

Members of the public tend to have an ethos of non-interference when it comes to international affairs (see Aubrun & Grady 1999). They tend to see the U.S. as the most powerful and most moral country in the world, but are wary of being perceived as bossy or bullying by their international neighbors. Policymakers are not inhibited by this deep cultural analogy between social and international neighbors. They are actively concerned, for the most part, with making sure that the U.S. enjoy the advantages (and fulfill the obligations) that come with being the sole superpower. They tend to focus on situations where the U.S. has played, or has been seen to play, a pivotal causal role in world affairs:

I think probably in the 80s our greatest success was sustaining Middle East peace and South Africa, the reconciliation. We've led in moral terms.

But taken together with our size we are the most stable political and economic society in the world, and as such that gives us an opportunity to lay claim to leadership that is not available to anybody else.

Since policymakers typically feel that the U.S. should be a strong leader in world affairs, they regularly express frustration at cases where the U.S. shows insufficient initiative.

So we're missing one of the principal ways we can use the WTO to influence events in the world by failing to use its internal organizational capacity to undertake negotiations that are in our national interest. We don't need a round table in order to negotiate. We're wasting all this energy on basically a shape-of-the-table discussion ... That's the reason we created the WTO and we're not using it.

The arm's length stance

Another consequence of the “bird’s eye view” adopted by policymakers is their cool and sometimes distant attitude to the events that they deal with on a daily basis. This presents a clear instance of the potential for miscommunication between policymakers and the public. From the point of view of policymakers, when members of the public show too much emotion about international affairs (such as in the recent demonstrations against the WTO and the World Bank), they seem to have put aside cool reason in favor of raw emotion, even hysteria. From the point of view of the public, this attitude can easily come across as bloodless and emotionally uninvolved, to the point of disregarding the moral dimension of world affairs.

Admittedly, macro-economic policies hurt little people at times but they would also have been hurt had there been no macro-economic policy.

Again, we've got to balance it against other stuff, but when do humanitarian interventions and talk out against genocide and stuff even when we don't have to, I think it's a luxury for a great power to do those things.

But there are some ecological issues that have an emotional content where we need to be more cautious.

In this example, a policymaker thinks of the WTO as a machine, a metaphor which highlights purely technical aspects of the organization:

We don't understand our own creation [the WTO]. It's quite a common thing. It's like an 80 year old getting in a modern car. She doesn't know that the seats are automatic and the mirrors you can push a little button. She thinks if you want to adjust the wing mirrors, the side view mirrors, you step outside the car and adjust them. You don't do that anymore. We don't know how to use it.

Implications

The findings presented here imply a set of challenges for the GII:

- *Frames chosen by the GII should harmonize with those currently used by the experts.*

Because a typical policymaker takes an authoritative stance – and is therefore skeptical of alternative positions – any frames which have a hope of being incorporated into a discourse shared by both elites and the public must pass certain tests:

For example,

- *Frames should not be based on emotional appeals.*

Policymakers tend to think in terms of pragmatic outcomes, or of well-defined moral/ideological principles (e.g., “A leader must take full responsibility for his country’s

welfare.”) They are usually skeptical of emotional arguments, of the kind that they believe is most appealing to the public.

- *Frames must not diminish U.S. status/”face.”*

Most policymakers are committed to a view in which the U.S. plays an important, even dominant role in the world. Given that the GII is trying to promote cooperative engagement, a delicate balance must be reached. For example, the “new management” frame recommended in our previous report (Aubrun & Grady 2000) allows for both hierarchical differences and substantial cooperation.

- *Factual information is not, in itself, persuasive.*

Like members of the public, policymakers tend to place new information into familiar frames of reference (e.g., they offer rationalizations for the United States’ record of minimal development aid, based on their own particular set of values and understandings). It follows that defining effective frames is just as important for communicating with policymakers as it is for communicating with the public.

The more encouraging side of this coin is that:

- *Simple frames and metaphors are just as likely to be effective with policymakers as they are with the public.*

That is, frames and metaphors do not need to be more sophisticated or complicated in order to be effective with policymakers. Even though policymakers often possess broader and deeper knowledge on a given issue, they still think in terms of simplifying models, just as members of the public do.

The frames and language used by policymakers reflect an important part of the landscape which the GII must negotiate. The challenges reflected in the findings partly relate to the substantive ways in which policymakers understand the appropriate role of the United States in the world – such as the common assumption that America should exert unilateral leadership. (Other aspects of policymaker understandings are positive from the GII perspective, however, such as the broader appreciation of cause and effect operating on a global level.) The more important, general pattern which the GII must keep in mind concerns the significant and inevitable gap between the basic stances of the public and the practitioners, respectively: There is only a certain amount of potential overlap between the “bird’s eye” perspective of policymakers, and the more ground-level perspective of other Americans. The caution inherent in these findings is that GII member organizations need to pay close attention to which audience their messages are likely to be most effective for, and need to bridge the gap between the audiences wherever possible. Our previous report on recommended framings and language (Aubrun & Grady 2000) addresses these concerns and suggests ways of building an American discourse of cooperative engagement with the potential to span the gap between these two distinct communities.

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