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REVIEW FOR POLITICS AND THE LIFE SCIENCES

Dominic D.P. Johnson, *Strategic Instincts: The Adaptive Advantages of Cognitive Biases in International Politics* (Princeton & Oxford, Princeton University Press), 395 pages. ISBN: 9780691137452. Hardback \$27.95.

Strategic Instincts offers a refreshing shakeup to the field of policy analysis by boldly arguing that cognitive biases may have not only the well-attested disadvantages but also some critical advantages in political decision-making. As Johnson explains, since rationalism began to overtake the behaviourist turn in foreign policy, it has been held as an ideal standard for evaluating policy decision-making (p.3), where costs and benefits are weighed against each other to reach optimal decisions for the policymaker.

Of course, the ability to perform this task is constrained by social or physical challenges such as imperfect information, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and cognitive biases, with each additional factor generally considered to be a detriment to rational deliberation, sometimes in poliheuristic sequence.¹ In placing cognitive biases in this class of real-world constraint to decision-making, policy analysts have neglected to consider the potential advantages they could play. Johnson's work distils recent evolutionary experimental studies and reflects on how these findings – which implicate our behaviour as human beings – might require us to fundamentally rethink decision-making in international politics.

Instead of assuming that cognitive biases inhibit rational cost-benefit analysis, Johnson analyses them for how these may produce situational advantages. The evolutionary insight is that if these biases did not proffer some advantages, then evolution would have selected against them. We are now familiar with the numerous disadvantages of cognitive biases, which leads us to the question, why then do they persist?

Johnson argues that “error management theory” (EMT, pp. 20-23, 279-281) explains the development of these cognitive biases. EMT explains historical (evolutionary) situations where the costs of making an error one way or another were asymmetrical. If the error of overestimating something (say, a predator) involves a low cost, but the error of underestimating that predator is very costly (i.e., fatal), then EMT maintains that selection will favour overestimation as “the side of caution”. Based on this principle, we evolved some traits that were geared to be more sensitive to the costlier outcome. Using EMT, Johnson explores three cognitive biases – overconfidence, attribution error, and group bias – which he argues as fundamental to the study of policy analysis.

The first bias is overconfidence, which has been covered in his previous work, *Overconfidence and War*.² Extending this, Johnson emphasises the benefits that accrue under specific circumstances, when “the benefits of war are sufficiently large compared to its costs” (p. 64). He discusses how overconfidence may increase ambition which aids in seizing chances if there is an opportunity-rich environment. It may also increase resolve, which may be important for the successful execution of action after the decision has been made. Finally, it may assist in deterrence, where confidence signals a determination to fight. Johnson then illustrates how this overconfidence played out for George Washington and his British adversaries during the American Revolution.

The second cognitive biases Johnson identifies is the fundamental attribution error (FAE). This is the tendency to describe others' negative behaviour as caused by their dispositions, while we attribute the causes of our own poor behaviour as situational – i.e., caused by our environment or circumstances (pp. 118-119). FAE may have played a positive role in our human evolutionary past by helping us to get the “big decisions” right (p. 127) as a type of error management, according to Johnson. In biasing our analysis of others' behaviours to their intentions rather than situational causes, this may be frequently incorrect (without much cost for being wrong) yet make us more prepared in the instance that we are correct (when it would be existentially threatening to be wrong). Johnson argues that

Neville Chamberlain's appeasement of Hitler in the 1930s was a demonstrable failure of FAE: Britain should have been warier of his intentions but was not and the result was catastrophic (chap. 6). Nevertheless, the advantages of FAE accrue only to a point, after which the costs of misattribution may be too great: healthy skepticism turns into paranoia.

Related to FAE, the third cognitive bias discussed by Johnson is group bias. This is the human tendency to raise our estimation of members in our group while devaluing others we deem not to belong to our group. While this can lead to well-attested impediments to decision-making such as groupthink, Johnson argues that there are several under-appreciated advantages. It may assist in promoting collective action and, in warfare, unit cohesion is vital for success. In-group bias in turn may promote offensive action, Johnson contends: "xenophobes are more likely to survive and prosper by virtue of their in-group cohesion and mutual purpose, and by the vice of their out-group competitiveness and willingness to fight." (p. 200). In other words, while being friendly with outsiders could confer some benefits, the cost of being unguarded with hostile strangers was often devastating. To demonstrate the effects of in-group bias Johnson describes the Pacific campaign in World War II between American and Japanese troops where vicious fighting to the death occurred during the 'island hopping' period of the war, and later the fire-bombing and atomic bombing of Japan.

Overall, Johnson makes a timely and important contribution to the study of decision-making that has typically framed cognitive biases as detriments to rational choice. In exploring why, as humans, we are prone to certain types of decisions or favour certain choices, the book sheds light not only on the policy world but ourselves as *Homo sapiens* and therefore is important for both academics and policymakers to read. The book shows how our instinctive modes of decision-making work without checks: why they are biased in certain ways, when those biases are advantageous, but also when they go too far. Where policymakers seek to improve decision-making, this book can provide insights to devise counterweights to these biases without losing their advantages.

There are still not enough books that bring evolutionary insights to the social sciences, and those that have been written tend to be undervalued. Yet many have tended to awkwardly cross from physical into the social sciences, and Johnson's criticisms of interpretive social science (p. 37) demonstrate this at times. His dismissal of Iver Neumann's emphasis on socially produced meaning goes too far when Neumann is calling for international relations/social science to incorporate biology better into our understanding of human activity, albeit critically.³ More importantly, Johnson himself must eventually come to the question of socially produced meaning as a selection factor in policy decisions.

In particular, there is difficulty in translating the mechanism of selection, survival, and reproduction from a biological level of analysis to human society, where natural selection is replaced by human (artificial) selection. How should the principles of survival and reproduction of policy choices be understood in the context of the contemporary social world, and how would these interact with cognitive biases today?

While Johnson has focused on warfare, which does provide a strict selection mechanism for decisions, existential wars have greatly diminished after 1945, and most decision-making in international politics involves no obvious culling mechanism as in nature. Thus, the selection mechanism of policy choices is much more social than physical. This is true even in much of modern warfare. For example, if the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan involved plenty of wrong choices, how were poor decisions punished? Not by the elimination of the decision-makers (as total wars do), but by further sets of decision-making within the US military bureaucracy, that is, nested social processes.

Johnson also leaves the reader to form their own conclusions of the implications of his work. In what ways do social processes and collective decision-making amplify or control individual biases such as overconfidence? If FAE and in-group bias confer certain kinds of advantages while also being capable of producing horrifying excesses, at what points are these thresholds reached, and how do we control them? In his discussion of xenophobia, how is the definition of the 'in-group' derived except through

socially produced meaning? Evolutionary scientists have consistently (and correctly) pointed out that 'is' does not imply 'ought'. But if policymakers are interested in these findings, it is in their prescriptive implications: The 'ought' questions. Perhaps this goes beyond the scope of the book and is a task for future scholarship.

There is much to like about Johnson's book that should be required reading especially in policy analysis. It is eminently readable, especially in bringing volumes of recent research findings from controlled experimental settings to a non-specialist public. These dovetail with interesting empirical case studies to demonstrate the need to rethink cognitive bias as a detriment to decision-making. As a whole, the book is suitable for undergraduate and graduate teaching as well as a strong entry point to evolutionary explanations in social science. Understanding why humans are prone to certain types of decisions – and the meaning of these choices – may be a necessary step to making better decisions.

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¹ Beach, *Analyzing Foreign Policy* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 119-21.

² Johnson, *Overconfidence and War: The Havoc and Glory of Positive Illusions* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

³ Neumann, "International Relations as a Social Science," *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 43, no. 1 (2014): 346-47.