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Attribution Theory and Arab Images of the Gulf War

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This article describes the results of an in-depth interview study of Arab elites in the wake of the Gulf war, research that only partially supports a crucial finding of research on actor-observer differences in social attribution. Although the aggregated explanations of these Arab respondents were consistent with the predictions of the theory, the attributions of Iraq's behavior by Egyptian elites, and attributions of the Coalition's behavior by Moroccan and Tunisian elites were not fully consistent with the hypothesis. These results were interpreted to suggest the importance of distinguishing, in applications of attribution theory, between complex political situations and simple social situations, the perspective of actors versus observers, and cultural differences in discursive practices.

KEY WORDS: Arab elites; attribution theory; dispositional attributions; fundamental attribution error; Gulf war; perception; Saddam Hussein; and situational attributions

I. INTRODUCTION

On 2 August 1990 Iraq invaded Kuwait and declared the country to be Iraq's 19th province. Twelve U.N. Security Council resolutions demanded the immediate and unconditional withdrawal of Iraq, first imposing sanctions and finally authorizing the use of force. Iraq, under the leadership of Saddam Hussein, refused to back down, setting in motion on 17 January 1991 the military forces of a coalition led by the United States and joined by more than 30 other countries, including Arab countries, to force Iraq to comply with the U.N. resolutions. The war ended with a

ceasefire on 28 February. Iraqi forces were defeated, Iraq's economic infrastructure was severely damaged, and many Iraqi civilians were left dead, injured, or homeless.¹

Despite the participation of Arab countries in the U.S.-led Coalition, people in the Arab world did not view the situation with one mind. In North Africa, for example, the onset of fighting resulted in protests and demonstrations in support of Iraq. "It is doubtful that many North Africans actually approved of the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait . . . [but] many were drawn to Saddam Hussein because he represented, or at least pretended to represent, a challenge to prevailing patterns of political economy," as well as the United States and its allies who "were perceived to be operating in defense of the status quo" (Tessler, 1991, pp. 8–9). Both Tunisia and Morocco, countries whose governments supported the Coalition, experienced substantial public support for Iraq and Saddam Hussein (Seddon, 1991, pp. 110–111). Even in Egypt, which contributed nearly 30,000 troops to the Coalition force, the advent of the ground war triggered student demonstrations and calls for a ceasefire (Haseeb & Rouchdy, 1991, pp. 77–78).²

White (1994) argues that attribution theory and one of its central ideas, the "fundamental attribution error" hypothesis, can help us to understand why some people empathized with Saddam Hussein during the Gulf war. This hypothesis states that actors explain their own behavior in terms of situational constraint ("I act this way because I have no choice"), while observers explain the same behavior in terms of innate disposition ("She acts like that because it is her nature").

In this article we will use attribution theory to study how people in the Arab world viewed the Gulf war. Previously, attribution theory has been applied to situations that were seen in the Arab world as being black-and-white, such as the conflict between the Arabs and Israelis (Heradstveit, 1979). The Gulf war is quite different, however, because many Arabs were ambivalent about the issues involved. While there was sympathy for Iraq's political claims, which were seen as rectifying old injustices done to Iraq by Western powers, there was little support for its methods and even less after he was defeated and became a "loser."

Before describing our empirical application, which involved field work in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, we will first discuss the claims of attribution theory with a view to exploring the efficacy of this approach outside a laboratory setting. Because there are so few applications of attribution theory to complex social situations involving people with different identity commitments, we approach this task with serious misgivings about the theoretical and methodological problems that we may encounter, as well as about the relevance of a theory that is grounded in an object-oriented view of language (Bonham & Shapiro, 1997).

¹ For a thorough description and analysis of the Gulf war, see Freedman and Karsh (1993).

² For more discussion of Arab support for Saddam Hussein, see Khalidi (1991) and Khouri (1991).

The Study of Social Attribution³

The study of attribution as a separate area within social psychology can be traced back to Heider (1958), who examined the process of “causal attribution in the perception of others.” Since the publication of Heider’s early work, attribution theorists have studied the efforts of people to explain and draw inferences from behavior—their own behavior and the behavior of others. The individual, according to this viewpoint, is a “constructive thinker” or “naive scientist” who searches for the causes of events and draws conclusions about people and their circumstances as a basis for action. Often, the search for causal explanation is aided by schemata, or cognitive structures that represent “organized knowledge about a given concept or type of stimulus” (Fiske & Taylor, 1984, p. 140). Schemata include general structures, based either on standard knowledge or an individual’s direct prior experience, self-schemata, generalizations about the self that are derived from past experience, and persona, which are representations of the “personal traits and characteristic behavior or particular human types” (Vertzberger, 1990, pp. 156–159).

In the field of international relations, Jervis (1976) has applied attribution theory to foreign policy decision-making, Heradstveit (1979) has studied how Arabs and Israelis perceived the causes of the Middle East conflict, Larson (1985) has used attribution theory to explain the containment policies of the Cold War, and Heradstveit and Bonham (1986) have analyzed the attributions of American and Norwegian policy officials with respect to Soviet activities in northern Norway.

The “naive scientist” framework is not the only way of thinking about attribution. Attributions serve other functions in addition to cognitive mastery. “The range of motives hypothesized to affect attributions includes the need to protect or enhance one’s self-esteem (e.g., Miller, 1976; Zuckerman, 1979), to create a favorable impression to others (e.g., Bradley, 1978; Orvis et al., 1976), and to believe in a just world (e.g., Lerner & Miller, 1978)” (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 69). This research suggests the operation of self-esteem motives or “self-serving biases” in attribution (Bradley, 1978). Self-esteem theory, for example, predicts that people will make internal attributions for success and external attributions for failure (Tetlock & Levi, 1982; Bradley, 1978). This tendency may be especially strong when people feel emotional about an issue. The presence of an audience, moreover, may affect the attributions people communicate to others. “According to the self-presentation position, people often communicate attributions designed, consciously or unconsciously, to gain public approval and to avoid embarrassment” (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 78).

³ This section is a revision of the literature review and critique found in Heradstveit and Bonham (1986).

The Fundamental Attribution Error

Jones and Nisbett (1972) have observed that attributors emphasize dispositions (abilities, traits, or motives) when explaining the behavior of others, while they use situational factors (external pressures and constraints) to explain their own behavior. Ross and other writers have referred to this phenomenon as “the fundamental attribution error,” a tendency in social attribution “to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behavior” (1977, p. 83).

The persistence of the tendency to ascribe “causal importance to persons at the expense of circumstances” suggests to some that the “fundamental attribution error” may be “deeply rooted in the individual psyche,” rather than a consequence of “the complexity and ambiguity of ‘reality’” (Renshon, 1993, p. 72). Behavior attributed to the inherent nature of others has the advantage of imposing regularity and predictability, thus enhancing the feeling of control (Miller, Norman, & Wright, 1978). This creates a dilemma, however, because the feeling of control provided by dispositional explanations “has to be balanced against other needs, such as the need for veridicality. These other needs may result . . . in self-serving situational explanations of others’ behavior” (Vertzberger, 1990, p. 162).

Although the “fundamental attribution error” has been confirmed in laboratory research, it has not been found in all situations (Cheng & Novick, 1990, p. 547). Moreover, one can argue that the term “error” is a misnomer. Is an involved actor in a better position to identify the cause of his or her own behavior than that of an uninvolved observer? Monson and Snyder (1977) have stated the case for the actor. First, they argue that actors have knowledge of their own inner states, attitudes, and dispositions. Such information is normally not available to observers. Moreover, actors are usually more knowledgeable about their own behavior in other situations and at other times than observers. Their analysis “suggests that the actor’s attributions of cause would be more often ‘correct’ than those of the observer” (Monson & Snyder, 1977, p. 94).

Not all psychologists agree that actors are aware of their higher-order mental processes. Nisbett and Wilson (1977) argue convincingly, however, that people, when asked to report how a particular “stimulus” influenced a particular “response,” apply or generate “causal theories about the effects of that type of stimulus on that type of response.” Sources for these causal theories include the culture or subculture, empirical observation, and shared “networks of connotative relations surrounding the stimulus description and the response description” (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977, p. 248).

Other research emphasizes the importance of the evaluative aspect—the social desirability of behavior—in the attribution process. Taylor and Koivumaki (1976) found that the actor does not generally view his or her behavior more situationally than the behavior of others. Instead, the actor explains his or her *positive* behavior in terms of dispositions (e.g., “I won because I’m strong”), but dismisses *negative*

behavior as being caused by the situation (e.g., "I was outnumbered"). Likewise, Heradstveit (1979) found little evidence for the "fundamental attribution error" until the evaluative aspect of behavior was taken into account. Arab and Israeli respondents, however, were overwhelmingly dispositional when observing their own good behavior (and their opponent's bad behavior) and situational when attributing their own bad behavior (and their opponent's good behavior). These findings seem to be consistent with motivational or functional approaches to the study of attribution.

Social Attribution: The "British School" Approach

Because our research design takes into account societal and cultural differences, the work of European scholars like Antaki (1981) and Hewstone (1989), which accounts for group and societal circumstances, is highly relevant. Hewstone and other representatives of the "British school" approach (Weary et al., 1989, p. 192) have an interest in "social representations" or shared knowledge structures (Hewstone 1989, p. 207), and how people make and communicate attributions about social events such as poverty and wealth, unemployment, riots, and racial equality (Hewstone 1989, pp. 217–231).

This approach has been influenced by Ichheiser (1943), who focused on "collectively (ideologically) conditioned patterns of misinterpretation" (p. 145) that were typical of people living within a group or a society. Ichheiser first identified the "fundamental attribution error," by noting that "success" and "failure," "merit" and "blame" were collective determinations "based on the belief in personal determination of behavior and were built into the ideology of our society" (Hewstone, 1989, p. 212).

Research on culture and attribution is a closely related approach. For example, Miller (1984) found that Hindus are more likely than Americans to attribute events to situational or contextual factors. Although her research alone does not discredit the "fundamental attribution error" hypotheses, it does suggest that "different cultures construe the world in ways that are truly different at base" (Ross & Nisbett, 1991, p. 186). People in the United States and most Western cultures may be socialized to expect that the actor is the cause of his or her behavior (Quattrone, 1982, p. 607), while in collectivist cultures, behavior is viewed more as reflecting norms, success is attributed to help from others, and failure is explained by a lack of effort (Triandis, 1993, p. 164).

Cultural Stereotypes and Attribution

The research of Bodenhausen and Wyer (1985) has examined cultural stereotypes and attribution. They found that socially undesirable behavior that is consis-

tent with a cultural stereotype is attributed by observers to dispositional factors. In such cases the observers are also more punitive in their interpretations. Such behavior that is contrary to a cultural stereotype, on the other hand, will be attributed to transitory or situational factors, and observers will be more lenient. For example, in a study carried out in southern India, Taylor and Jaggi (1974) found that Hindu subjects attributed undesirable behaviors performed by Hindus to external factors, while they explained the undesirable behavior of Muslims in the same situation by referring to internal characteristics.

After reviewing the literature on cultural stereotypes and attribution, Hewstone (1989) finds clear evidence for the “tendency to attribute negative outgroup behavior to personal causes within the actor” (p. 190). There are exceptions, however, especially in the case of “low status groups, against the background of political and cultural tension” (Hewstone, 1989, p. 176). For example, a study in Malaysia found evidence of ethnocentric attribution for Malays but not among members of the minority Chinese community (Hewstone & Ward, 1985).

Theoretical and Methodological Problems

The study of attribution is hampered by the absence of a “falsifiable cognitive theory—a theory that specifies when people will use particular rules of causal inference or the extent to which prior beliefs will influence the interpretation of incoming evidence” (Tetlock & Levi, 1982, p. 74). There is no comprehensive theoretical structure to explain the “fundamental attribution error” or any other cognitive heuristics. Although plausible explanations are offered by researchers, “plausibility” is largely a function of some formal or informal rule of judgment. For example, the “fundamental attribution error” has been attributed to the representativeness heuristic: “Actors (and their dispositions) may be a more representative cause of behavior than are situations, because it is, after all, the actor who does the acting” (Nisbett & Ross, 1980, p. 122). The same researchers have also explained the phenomenon by the availability heuristic: “The actor is an easily available explanation of this action because of his perceptual proximity to his action” (p. 122). Others have suggested that self-serving biases explain the social attribution process: Individuals tend “to accept responsibility for positive behavioral outcomes and to deny responsibility for negative behavioral outcomes” (Bradley, 1978, p. 68).

Methodological problems have also hampered research on social attribution. Findings are based, for the most part, on laboratory experiments in which captive populations, such as college undergraduates, are asked to explain their actions or the behavior of others in hypothetical or trivial situations. Because the generalizability to “real world” settings of many of these experiments is “questionable” (Olson & Ross, 1985, p. 287), “much more empirical work using more naturalistic stimulus materials (rather than or in addition to linguistic materials) to represent

social stimuli will be necessary . . ." (Weary et al., 1989, p. 61). Such research, conducted in natural settings and focusing on complex situations, may reveal that "people do not simply attribute causes and responsibility; they also offer more elaborate accounts and stories" (Weary et al., 1989, p. 194).

Forced-choice, closed-ended scales are almost always used to record attributions, but studies using multitrait-multimethod approaches show a lack of convergence among such scales. This implies "either that the scales are unreliable or that they are measuring different things" (Miller et al., 1981, p. 83).

Research based on the use of free-choice and open-ended scales, on the other hand, which allows respondents to express their own views about cause and blame, is time-consuming and open to coding problems (Howard, 1987, p. 50). Coding is often done on the basis of the form of the response rather than the content (Van der Plicht, 1981). For example, the statement "John doesn't want to go to the soccer match because of hooliganism" might be coded as a situational attribution. However, the response "John will not go because he is afraid of getting mixed up in a fight" might be coded as a dispositional attribution (Van der Plicht, 1981, p. 99).

This coding problem is frequently encountered because the situational-dispositional distinction is "not really a dichotomy. Most situational explanations imply assumptions about relevant dispositions" (Monson & Snyder, 1977, p. 20). "Each covers more than one type of thing, and either can have the same role in some instances" (White, 1991, p. 266). For example, "He did it for the money" can be restated as the dispositional attribution "He did it because he is money hungry." Hence, the situational-dispositional distinction "may reflect differences in language rather than thought" (Monson & Snyder, 1977, p. 20).

Ross (1977, p. 5) has attempted to solve the problem by formulating the following definitions of situational and dispositional attributions:

Situational Attributions. Those explanations that state or imply no dispositions on the part of the actor beyond those typical of all or most actors.

Dispositional Attributions. Those explanations that state or imply something unique or distinguishing about the actor.

Although the proposal by Ross may not have solved the problem (Lau & Russell, 1980), it does offer some guidance. The situational-dispositional distinction may not represent a dichotomous classification, but we can make judgments and code the perceiver's weighing of the relative importance of each (Monson & Snyder, 1977).

An explanation or attribution is dispositional only when it focuses on the idiosyncratic or the particular. It may be useful to call dispositional attributions "personal" attributions instead, as then the content stands out more clearly. We may thus ask whether the respondent is explaining an event by referring to the personality traits and peculiarities of the actor, or by referring to a response that is thought to be caused by stimuli in the actor's environment.

Hypotheses

Attribution theory, particularly research on actor-observer differences in attributions, may help us to understand some of the conclusions that Arabs drew about the actors who were involved in the Gulf war. Observers, as contrasted to actors, will attribute socially desirable behavior of others to situational factors and socially undesirable behavior of others to dispositional causes (Monson & Snyder, 1977, p. 103). Hence, Arab elites in our interview sample, observers of behavior in the Gulf war, should be inclined to explain the actions of the Coalition in situational terms that imply no dispositions beyond those typical of most actors, (e.g., “the Coalition had to move against aggression”), while attributing Iraqi actions to dispositional or personal factors that are idiosyncratic or unique (e.g., “Iraq has a war-like culture”).

Sampling and Interviewing Procedures

For this research the characteristics of the statistical universe are unknown, which makes it difficult, if not impossible, to obtain a “representative” sample. We were looking for members of the “elite” who were helping to influence policy in the conflict. Nobody has yet developed general criteria that can be used to define who is and who is not an elite political actor. Even if the relevant elite groups were clearly defined, it would still be difficult to specify which persons ought to be included in the theoretical universe. Such a specification would require much costly field work and complex analysis merely to delineate the theoretical universe.

Instead, we tried to find what we might, rather imprecisely, call “leaders of opinion” in the context of the conflict—people we suspected of having a direct or indirect influence on the policy of the main actors. In other words, we were not interested in those with a high position but no well-articulated point of view. Belonging to the sociopolitical elite was not enough; we emphasized the person’s reputation.

Our choice was made from these categories: active politicians, civil servants in the foreign ministry, members of university faculties, and journalists and editors. We employed two sampling strategies. On the basis of our general knowledge of the Arab world, we drew up a list of people we considered influential. Here we consulted experts, including the Norwegian Embassy in Egypt and Morocco, and the Swedish Embassy in Tunisia. Once in the field, we used a second method. After having interviewed a respondent, we asked that person for names of others it might be useful to interview and who would be willing to talk to us. This technique, called “chain selection,” was very helpful for getting us appointments. On the other hand, with this method, the persons recommended will probably be those the respondent likes or agrees with, which means that the sample becomes self-selecting. It was therefore important to combine the two methods.

Our interviews were conducted in Egypt and two Maghrebi countries in the spring of 1991, after Operation Desert Storm, but before world attention shifted to the Kurdish insurrection and its aftermath. Thirty-two “elite” respondents, 12 in Egypt, 12 in Morocco, and eight in Tunisia, were asked to account for the causes of the Gulf war and the motives of the antagonists. The interviews were conducted in English or French and translated into English. See the Appendix for a list of the interview questions and the distribution of occupations represented in the sample.

The results in the tables (shown in the Appendix) are meant as descriptive summaries—we are not in any way generalizing from sample to universe. Samples that are neither random nor representative demand, of course, that we use the data with caution. Therefore, the results must, in the stringent scientific sense, be regarded as tentative.

II. RESULTS

The responses of our Arab elite samples were coded on the basis of the type of causes of Iraqi and Coalition behavior they cited, dispositional or situational. The results of this analysis for all respondents, as well as a breakdown for Egyptian and Moroccan/Tunisian samples, are shown in Table I. A separate coding of Egyptian respondents, which distinguishes between explanations of Western (U.S.A.) behavior and Egyptian behavior, is shown in Table II. In addition, Table III summarizes our respondents’ views of Saddam Hussein as a person in terms of positive and negative characteristics.

Explanations of the Coalition’s Behavior

If we look at the results shown in Table I, we see that, generally speaking, they conform to the predictions of attribution theory. We hypothesized that Arab explanations of the Coalition’s behavior would be largely situational, and this is the case; the interpretation of the Coalition’s actions is sought mainly in the situation in which it found itself: 68% of statements were situational, while only 32% were dispositional.

In their explanations of the Coalition’s behavior in the Gulf war, our Arab respondents viewed the conflict largely from a realist perspective. Given that perspective, they were not surprised to see the United States promote the balance of power in the region through its military presence and the destruction of Iraq’s nuclear potential. For most of them, there was nothing unusual about this behavior because it is to be expected that a hegemonic power will assert itself to thwart challengers to system stability. From a realist viewpoint, these are clearly situational attributions. On the other hand, it would be out of character for Iraq to develop the ambitions of a hegemonic power by developing nuclear weapons.

Iraq's behavior was contrary to expectations. Saddam Hussein was acting "too big for his breeches!"

The geopolitical ambitions of the United States were highlighted by many of our Arab respondents. According to some, the main motive for the war was not the liberation of Kuwait but crushing Iraq as a nation, both militarily and economically. For the United States the primary goal was to prevent Iraq from becoming an important actor in the Middle East. Nor could the Gulf oil monarchies accept Iraqi hegemony. They were afraid of Saddam Hussein and very pleased to see an end to his ambitions in the Gulf. Especially threatening was Iraq's ability to make nuclear weapons. The Coalition, especially the United States, wanted to fight a war that would destroy Iraq's nuclear potential.

Some Arab respondents also claimed that the Coalition had another important aim: to secure the oil resources of the Gulf. The war enabled the United States to establish a direct military and political presence in an area of great economic significance. This was a vital interest for the domestic American economy, and it was also necessary if the United States was to retain its hegemony for Europe and Japan. The war gave the U.S. important economic agreements and contracts, including those for Kuwaiti reconstruction. Oil was the world's prime energy source, and the United States was extremely unwilling to allow a country like Iraq to control a large proportion of it, and, of course, oil has always been a major motive for foreign intervention in the region.

Although a large majority of Arab attributions about the Coalition were situational, some attributions presented the United States as a unique actor in international politics—a power that acts differently than most others. The argument is that Americans are naturally arrogant and that they do not tolerate the exercise of authority other than their own. Americans will not allow Third World countries to be self-sufficient; they are hostile to any such countries, like Iraq, that reach a certain level.

Surprisingly, our Arab respondents made few attributions about George Bush as an individual, except that he needed to display strength and leadership. Some also stated that George Bush would not tolerate a military challenge from a dictator.

Explanations of Iraq's Behavior

Generally, we also found the expected pattern of attribution with respect to Iraq's behavior; that is, explanations tended to be more dispositional than situational. For all respondents 64% of attributions were dispositional, compared to 36% situational.

Dispositional attributions made by the Arab elites in our sample were not confined to Saddam Hussein. Iraq was portrayed as a country that does not necessarily act the same way as other countries; for example, it was too ambitious. From a realist perspective, Iraq, by trying to act like a superpower, was behaving

in a manner that was not typical of most “normal” countries in the region. Behavior that might be “situational” for a hegemonic superpower, like the United States, is “dispositional” for Iraq, a small country in a regional setting.

Some respondents stated that Iraq has always had a warlike culture with very violent traditions. Saddam Hussein was really just a product of the Iraqi culture—he was merely living up to the ambitions of Iraq as a nation. Iraqis, according to some of the respondents, are also vindictive, which explains their attitude toward Kuwait. A warlike nation with violent traditions and a thirst for revenge is likely to make such decisions as invading Kuwait. Respondents also emphasized Iraq’s ideological orientation; the Ba’ath Party is utterly opposed to the present political borders of the Arab world; it aims at Arab unity and intends to achieve this by military force.

Most of the dispositional attributions, however, did refer to the person of Saddam Hussein, who was perceived in a very negative light. For all respondents, 82% of the attributions of the personal characteristics of Saddam Hussein were negative, while only 8% were positive and 10% neutral (see Table III).

Many of the recurrent Western arguments and assertions about Saddam, the individual, reappear in the responses of the Arab elites whom we interviewed. There is, however, one major difference: none of our respondents refer to Saddam Hussein as an “ungracious upstart who was ungrateful for all the help America had given,” which was a typical theme in the U.S. press (Goertzel, 1993, p. 722).

Saddam Hussein’s behavior was attributed by many of our respondents to his character as an autocratic and authoritarian leader who had no interest in democratic values and rarely consulted anyone. Others saw him as a coward, concerned only with hanging onto power or “saving his own skin.” They thought he was quite convinced that Iraq was destined to enjoy hegemony over the Arab Middle East. When they explained his behavior during the war, the consensus was that he acted on impulse and improvised. Strategy was made on the run—he was an “Oriental rug merchant.” Lacking any long-term strategy, Saddam Hussein persistently miscalculated, both locally and internationally. He attacked Israel in the hope that countries like Syria and Egypt would switch sides and join him. His most serious misjudgment, however, was the belief that the United States had given him the green light to invade Kuwait. That Saddam Hussein could misjudge the situation to that extent was explained by his small sphere of contact with the outside world. He isolated himself and did not consult the right people.

Respondents who made situational attributions about the behavior of Iraq pointed out that Iraq had heavy debts and was in conflict with Kuwait over oil prices. Historical antecedents were also emphasized, and the argument that Iraq had never accepted the border with Kuwait was repeated by some. War was waged to correct a historical injustice for which the colonial powers were responsible. Iraq had historical rights to Kuwait, which never existed as an independent emirate.

Respondents emphasized that Saddam Hussein was driven by narrow national interests. Iraq was acting under compulsion, because the other Gulf states were

waging economic warfare against it. Kuwait's demand for repayment for loans was taken by Iraq as an extreme provocation. Faced with this situation, and remembering how "stiff-necked" Kuwait was, Iraq had no choice. Objectively speaking, the country was obliged to "retreat by advancing." In a way, Saddam Hussein was manipulated into this decision, and, in this context, external forces, like the United States, pushed him into war.

Egyptian and Maghrebi (Moroccan and Tunisian) Attributions

Telhami's study of Arab public opinion and the Gulf war suggests substantial differences in attitudes within the Arab world, depending on distance from the conflict. For example, "the further removed from the Gulf an Arab polity was, the less bothered it was by the violation of Kuwaiti sovereignty . . ." (Telhami, 1993, p. 194).

Similarly, further analysis of the attributions of the Arab elites in our sample reveals differences between national subsamples. Table I shows that explanations of the Coalition's behavior by Maghrebi respondents were much more situational (87%) than dispositional (13%). This result is highly consistent with research on actor-observer differences. The attributions of Egyptian respondents, on the other hand, were much more evenly balanced between situational (56%) and dispositional (44%). A different pattern was found for explanations of Iraq's behavior in the Gulf war. As Table I shows, the attributions of the Egyptian respondents were very consistent with the hypothesis: 90% of Egyptian attributions were dispositional, while only 10% were situational. For the respondents from Morocco and Tunisia, however, attributions about Iraq's behavior were evenly balanced between situational (47%) and dispositional (53%). It should be noted, however, that the sample size for this analysis is small: 20 Maghrebi respondents and only 12 Egyptian respondents.

III. DISCUSSION: IMPLICATIONS FOR ATTRIBUTION THEORY

Although our interviews of Arab elites provided general support for the findings of research on actor-observer differences in attribution, further analysis revealed patterns of attribution that were related to the nationality of the respondents. The Egyptian elites conformed to the hypothesis with respect to Iraq's behavior but not the Coalition's behavior, while the results for Morocco and Tunisia were consistent with the hypothesis for the Coalition's behavior but not for Iraq's behavior. How should we interpret these results?

The Egyptian Respondents

The Egyptian elites, unlike the respondents from the other two countries, were unwilling to make statements about the behavior of the Coalition, as such. Instead, they differentiated between the behavior of the West (U.S.) and Egypt in the conflict with Iraq. For the Egyptians the motives of the Coalition members were quite different. The United States was not a friend in need; rather, the Americans were supporters of Israel, and they were prejudiced against the Arabs. The United States had a "one-track mind," namely, to extend its influence in the Arab world. Egypt, on the other hand, was in the uncomfortable position of being a member of a coalition against an Arab state, but this was a temporary alliance, which was dictated more by circumstance than deliberate choice.

To capture this viewpoint, we recoded Egyptian statements to distinguish between attributions of the West's (U.S.) behavior and attributions of the actions of Egypt. The results are shown in Table II. Explanations of Egyptian behavior were much more situational (78%) than dispositional (22%), a result that is consistent with the "fundamental attribution error" hypothesis. However, explanations of the West's behavior were almost equally balanced between situational (42%) and dispositional (58%).

This result suggests that applications of attribution theory outside a laboratory setting, especially those that involve collective actors like nation-states, ought to take into account the discursive practices of the observers. Some of them, such as the respondents from Morocco and Tunisia, may construct the world in terms of unitary actors. The Coalition, regardless of its membership, was behaving like a single unit. Others, because of their psychological involvement as members of a collective, like the Egyptians, may differentiate single actors within the collective. As a consequence of such differences in the discursive spaces of observers, the attributional patterns that emerge in their explanations may be quite distinctive.

The Maghrebi Respondents

Now let us look more closely at our Maghrebi respondents. First, although they may not respect Saddam Hussein as an individual, this does not mean that no one empathized with him and the position of his country. Respondents saw many positive aspects of the ideas Hussein stands for, such as standing up to the West, punishing Kuwait for its lack of will to negotiate over real grievances, drawing attention to the Palestinian problem, and so forth. This is reflected in Table III, which shows that 25% of the attributions of the personal characteristics of Saddam Hussein by Moroccan and Tunisian respondents were either positive or neutral, as contrasted with only 8% of the attributions of the Egyptians.

There is some evidence in the attribution literature that when observers empathize with actors, they are no more likely to make dispositional attributions

than the actors themselves (Weary et al., 1989, p. 37). For example, Regan and Totten (1975) found in a laboratory experiment that "taking the perspective of the target [an actor] through empathy resulted in attributions that were relatively more situational and less dispositional than attributions provided by standard observers" (p. 850). In another experiment, "instructions to empathize led to dispositional attributions for success and situational attributions for failure, while standard observation instructions resulted in dispositional casual attributions regardless of outcome" (Gould & Sigall, 1977, p. 480). If empathic observers and actors are functionally equivalent, then the Maghrebi respondents who empathized with Saddam Hussein and his people might have acted like Iraqis themselves and attributed the plight of Iraq to situational factors, thus resulting in the mix of situational and dispositional attributions shown in Table I.

Second, attribution theory's treatment of "actors" and "observers" does not do justice to the human ability to distinguish between a political leader and his or her country, between personal characteristics and policies, or between the aims of policies and the means employed to achieve them. People might consider that a leader acted as he or she did because of dispositional or "personal" factors which were distasteful, while at the same time claiming that the country was in such a position that something had to be done, if not exactly what the leader actually did.

Our Maghrebi respondents make a clear distinction between Saddam Hussein as a person, on the one hand, and the political ideas he stands for, on the other. This results in their disliking *both* Saddam Hussein *and* the policy of the Coalition. If so, it is easy to understand the Maghrebi respondents' emphasis on both situational and dispositional attributions. They feel the need to explain the logic of the situation that has led Iraq into conflict and war, at the same time as they feel a need to distance themselves from Saddam Hussein the man. Since the Maghrebi countries are relatively open societies, moreover, there seems to be a need to distance oneself from the allegedly "thuggish" Iraqi political culture as well.

This distancing motive may be seen in the context of our previous discussion of the "evaluative" aspect of social attribution. In the Arab-Israeli study (Heradstveit, 1979), respondents were overwhelmingly dispositional when observing the opponent's "bad" behavior, and situational when observing the opponent's "good" behavior. This suggests a large number of dispositional attributions by the Maghrebi respondents concerning Saddam and Iraq might reflect a deep ambivalence as to whose interests were really furthered by the Gulf crisis.

Our Maghrebi respondents implied that the personal characteristics of Saddam Hussein ("miscalculations") helped to bring the Americans down on his head, with unfortunate consequences for both the Gulf and the Arab world as a whole. His standing up to the West was, in principle, a good thing and was, therefore, explained situationally, but this praiseworthy self-assertion failed, and the causes of this failure are explained dispositionally. In short, Saddam Hussein was a bad man trying to do a good thing and failing, in part, through his own badness.

There is, on the other hand, no comparable cognitive dissonance or ambivalence when it comes to explaining the Coalition's behavior. Nobody seems to feel a need to demonstrate a mirror-image proposition that George Bush was a good man doing a bad thing, and attributions are therefore more uniformly situational. The West does what is expected of it, whoever is president of the United States, and there is no need for complex special pleading to overcome a sense of discomfort.

What we may be seeing here is a need in our Maghrebi respondents not only to complain about Western "imperialism," but also to exculpate the Arab world for having (so surprisingly and unpredictably) mismanaged its affairs. Here the villain of the piece is not George Bush but Saddam Hussein. In the context of explaining the catastrophe of 1990–1991, Saddam is the real "opponent"; though, of course, in the wider context of what an Arab statesman should be trying to do, he is not the opponent but the "hero." Dispositional attributions are associated with responsibility, and Saddam is held responsible for fighting the wrong war at the wrong time.

CONCLUSIONS

Our interview study only partially supports a crucial finding of research on actor-observer differences in social attribution. Although the aggregated explanations of these Arab respondents were consistent with the predictions of the theory, the attributions of Iraq's behavior by Egyptian elites and attributions of the Coalition's behavior by Moroccan and Tunisian elites were not fully consistent with the hypothesis.

In our view cognitive attribution theory falls short, in part, because it takes its starting point from explanations of an isolated "event." Events in international politics, however, are generally a matter of sequences of events, or cumulative development over time, where the actor who starts a particular sequence (in our case Saddam) necessarily "steals a march" on other possible candidates for that honor. This does not mean that he has "caused" the whole development, whose roots may stretch back centuries.

What, then, does it mean to "explain an event"? Respondents, who know the history of the region better than outsiders, or at least have internalized it more, may "take account of events more extended in time" (Monson & Snyder, 1977, p. 101). They attempt to "understand, categorize, and explain actions and events by placing them in typical sequences of the kinds discussed in research on scripts and story understanding" (Lamb & Lalljee, 1992, p. 31).

Present attribution theory fails to account for such explanations because it does not "provide a sufficient analysis of the knowledge used nor of the cognitive processes involved in making the necessary inferences" (Read, 1987, p. 288). To capture the background knowledge that people utilize to explain social and political events, "we must investigate, in detail, people's scenarios and the knowledge that

is used to construct them” (Read, 1987, p. 295). Individuals and groups produce “stories” about complex situations, which can be represented in the form of causal event chains (Pennington & Hastie, 1986) and analyzed using techniques like cognitive mapping.⁴

The stories that individuals and groups produce are not merely exercises in cognitive mastery, however, because they also take into account an audience, whether actual or potential. The literature on self-serving biases tells us that people tailor their stories, based on their understanding of the audience, to be convincing and make themselves look good. People are not unbiased and value-neutral, especially when they feel emotional about a situation, such as in the conflict in the Gulf.

The problem of value-neutrality also applies to the content of an attribution, which may look quite different to the coders and the person making the attribution. We argued above that a statement about John’s not wanting to go to the soccer match may be coded as either situational (because of the violence) or dispositional (because he is afraid). In fact, of course, any explanation of John’s behavior must involve both the situation and the way his personal disposition interacts with it, but any particular interview response may come out sounding like either one or the other, but not both. Two respondents might formulate what is (if “unpacked”) actually the same explanation in two different ways, leading coders to think that the one is attributing dispositionally and the other situationally. This is particularly likely when emotive language is used: one man might say that the soccer stadium was full of hooligans (situational), and another that John was “chicken” (dispositional). To code such attributions, the coder needs to focus on the discursive spaces of the respondents (which might be related to age, subculture, mood, and so on), as we pointed out above.

Similarly, differences in interpretation might arise from the cultural affiliation of the coders themselves. A large proportion of the attributions of the Coalition’s behavior that we coded as “situational” were formulated in terms of the need for oil. Within our own theoretical paradigm this is an entirely “rational” motivation, but in this context—within the Arab cognitive framework—one might also classify it as an attribution that carries a heavy load of *blame*. For a Westerner, “oil” is shorthand for a set of technological and economic propositions, whereas for Arabs it may be shorthand for Western imperial exploitation. That is, a response along the lines of “because of the oil” sounds situational to Westerners, evoking a paradigm of rational economic man in search of utility, whereas it might well have been meant as a reference to the propensity (disposition) of the West to go to other people’s countries and remove their resources without their consent. The tendency of our Arab respondents to explain the Coalition’s behavior “situationally” need not, therefore, be taken to indicate sympathy or unwillingness to apportion blame.

⁴ Cognitive mapping is described in Axelrod (1976), Shapiro and Bonham (1973), Bonham et al. (1976), Bonham et al. (1979), Bonham et al. (1978), and Bonham and Shapiro (1986). For an example of attribution research that makes use of cognitive mapping, see Heradstveit and Bonham (1986).

Attributions which, on the surface, seem to refer merely to features of the situation can thus carry undertones of or associations to an (evil) disposition. These undertones can be communicated effectively within a given culture but are not always "heard" across cultural boundaries. This is another indication that the theoretical paradigm on which cognitive attribution theory rests is too simple and needs to be stretched by other perspectives (Shapiro et al., 1988). Rather than thinking about how individuals construe an event or situation, psychologically, one can treat construals as the pre-understandings that represent collective representations of a culture or subculture (Bonham et al., 1992). This approach "obviates the need for recourse to the interiority of a conscious, meaning-giving subject, either in terms of psychological and cognitive characteristics of individuals or shared mental templates of social collectives" (Doty, 1993, p. 302). Instead, the source of meaning in a particular situation may reside, in part, in the linguistic practices that are common to a group, organization, or culture.

Future research within this linguistic tradition would "attend less to the referential function of language performances than to the culture of self-understanding, the shared meaning commitments . . . that are institutionalized in language practices" (Bonham & Shapiro, 1997). Within a language-based ontology, research would focus on the historically (and culturally) developed practices that reside in the grammatical, rhetorical, and narrative structure that comprises discourse on events like the Gulf war. To study these practices, one might have to evade the object-oriented view of language favored by objectivists and emphasize the constitutive dimension of language as a discursive practice.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. According to your opinion, what were the principal aspects of the crisis and the events unfolding in the Persian Gulf since August 2nd of last year?
2. What were the causes of the crisis?
3. According to your opinion, why do you think the U.S. went to war?
4. According to your opinion, what do you think will happen next? Do you think that a similar crisis could occur in the Gulf ? Can you specify in what way?
5. Do you think that the crisis in the Gulf has influenced the attitude of the Americans toward the Arabs, and, on the other hand, the attitude of the Arabs toward the U.S.? If this is the case, why?
6. Do you think that the U.S. could have acted otherwise against Iraq?
7. What are the reasons for the reactions of Iraq?
8. What do you think would have happened, if the U.S. had pursued a tougher line toward Iraq?
9. If the U.S. had pursued a softer line towards Iraq, what do you think would have happened?
10. What should be the policies of the West in similar situations?
11. Do you think the West could improve its relations with the Middle East? In what way? What could lead to a worsening of the relations between the West and the Middle East?
12. Could you indicate more precisely what Western policy ought to be in the Middle East?

The Occupational Backgrounds of the Respondents

In the sample of 38 respondents, 13 were university faculty members, 10 were editors or journalists, nine were active politicians, and six were civil servants.

Table I. Explanations of the Behavior of Iraq and the Coalition in the Gulf Conflict/War. (*n* = number of statements).

	Explanations of the Coalition's Behavior		Explanations of Iraq's Behavior	
	Situational	Dispositional	Situational	Dispositional
All Respondents	68% (<i>n</i> = 133)	32%	36% (<i>n</i> = 142)	64%
Morocco/Tunisia	87 (<i>n</i> = 53)	13	47 (<i>n</i> = 85)	53
Egypt	56 (<i>n</i> = 80)	44	10 (<i>n</i> = 42)	90

Table II. Egyptian Explanations of the Behavior of the West (U.S.) and Egypt. (*n* = number of statements).

	Explanations of the West's (U.S.A.) Behavior		Explanations of Egypt's Behavior	
	Situational	Dispositional	Situational	Dispositional
Egypt	42% (<i>n</i> = 48)	58%	78% (<i>n</i> = 32)	22%

Table III. Attributions of Personal Characteristics of Saddam Hussein. (*n* = number of statements).

	Positive	Neutral	Negative
All Respondents (<i>n</i> = 60)	8%	10%	82%
Morocco/Tunisia (<i>n</i> = 33)	14	11	74
Egypt (<i>n</i> = 25)	0	8	92

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