INTRODUCTION

What are the causes and consequences of misperception? What kinds of perceptual errors commonly occur in decision-making? How are beliefs about politics and images of other actors formed and altered? How do decision-makers draw inferences from information, especially information that could be seen as contradicting their own views?

These questions have not been adequately discussed by specialists in either psychology or international relations. The latter have assumed that decision-makers usually perceive the world quite accurately and that those misperceptions that do occur can only be treated as random accidents. This book seeks to demonstrate that this view is incorrect. Perceptions of the world and of other actors diverge from reality in patterns that we can detect and for reasons that we can understand. We can find both misperceptions that are common to diverse kinds of people and important differences in perceptions that can be explained without delving too deeply into individuals' psyches. This knowledge can be used not only to explain specific decisions but also to account for patterns of interaction and to improve our general understanding of international relations.

If scholars trained in international relations have paid little attention to perceptions, the same cannot be said for psychologists. ¹ But while their work is extremely valuable for showing the importance of the subject it is marred by five major faults. First, more attention is paid to emotional than to cognitive factors. Wishful thinking, defense mechanisms, and other motivated distortions of reality are focused on to the relative exclusion of the problem of how even a perfectly unemotional and careful person would go about drawing inferences from highly ambiguous evidence in a confusing and confused world. As Robert Abelson has noted, "there are plenty of 'cold' cognitive factors which produce inaccurate world-views."²

Second, almost all the data supporting the theories are derived from laboratory experiments. Whether these settings and the manipulations...
that are employed reveal processes that are at work in the real world is hard to determine. Even harder to gauge is whether the influences discovered in the laboratory are strong enough to make themselves felt, and felt in the same way, when they are intermixed with the other powerful variables that affect political decision-making. For example, very few experiments give the subjects incentives to perceive accurately, yet this is the prime concern of decision-makers.

Third, a strong policy bias pervades most of the analysis—the element of conflict of interest is played down in international relations in general and in the Cold War in particular.

Fourth, and related to the last point, the structure of the international system and the dangers and opportunities peculiar to this setting are often overlooked or misunderstood. As a result of these four weaknesses, this literature contains a great deal of “over-psychologizing”; explanations, usually highly critical of the decision-maker, involving many psychological variables are given for behavior that can be explained more convincingly by political analysis. More specifically, there is little comprehension of the consequences of the lack of a sovereign in the international realm and little analysis of the reasons why even highly rational decision-makers often conclude that they must be extremely suspicious and mistrustful. These biases also lead psychologists to analyze only the views of those statesmen with whom they have little sympathy and to refrain from using their theories to treat the policy preferences of those with whom they agree. Thus images and reasoning drawn from the “hard line” approach to foreign policy are examined to show the operation of emotional influences and cognitive processes that inhibits intelligent decision-making, but arguments and belief systems that support conciliation are never analyzed in these terms.

As grave as these defects are, they are less troubling and less hard to rectify than the fifth: most psychological theories, and especially those that have been applied to international relations, do not account for the ways that highly intelligent people think about problems that are crucial to them. And few of the experiments that provide the bulk of the empirical evidence for the theories have been directed to this question. Rather, theories about the formation and change of beliefs have been constructed around beliefs that are relatively unimportant to the person, about which he has little information, and for which the consequences of being right or wrong are only minor. One reason for this is that the desire to construct theories that are rigorous and parsimonious has meant that only simple beliefs can be analyzed. Although this may be the best way to produce theories that eventually will be able to explain complex thinking, there is little reason to expect that at their present stage of development such theories will provide much assistance in understanding the ways
that competent people go about making important decisions. Thus Abel­
son admits that a significant criticism of the theory that he co-authored
and that often has been applied to foreign policy decision-making is that
“it gives too little scope to the possibilities of human thought, even as
practiced by mediocre thinkers, and, on the other side of the same coin,
that it imputes the drawing of certain . . . conclusions which are mani­
festly absurd by any standard.” 3 Similarly, Peter Sperlich argues that
consistency theories, which are the type most commonly used by psy­
chologists studying international relations,

probably can provide rather adequate explanations for behaviors of
the very young, of the retarded, and of some of the ill. They are also
likely to give adequate explanations for behaviors of normal adults in
certain circumstances, e.g., when frightened, when in completely un­
familiar environment other than by choice, when deprived of material
sustenance for some length of time, or when strong emotions have
attained temporary dominance over the person. What these constructs
do not seem to be able to furnish are reliable and valid accounts of
complex adult behavior in non-crisis situations. 4

A useful corrective would be the adoption of a rule of thumb that a
social scientist who propounds a theory that he claims is relevant to po­
litical decision-making must be willing to admit that the theory also bears
some resemblance to the way he makes up his mind, not on trivial issues,
but on serious matters such as his own scientific research. Of course the
context of the problem should not be ignored, but it seems reasonable
to assume that statesmen reach decisions by methods that are similar to
those employed by other intelligent men facing important, hard choices
and armed with uncertain knowledge and ambiguous information. Until
there is evidence to the contrary I see no reason to believe that political
decision-makers are less rational, sophisticated, and motivated to under­
stand their environment than are scientists. Although the statesman con­
fronts problems that are much more difficult than those facing a scientist
and he must use tools for investigation that are more limited, it is not
reasonable to assume that the former usually perceive and think in ways

3 “Psychological Implication,” in Robert Abelson et al., eds., Theories of Cog­
nitive Consistency (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1968), p. 119. Similarly, Neal Miller
says that “S-R [stimulus-response] theories do well in predicting stupid behavior,
but are much less convincing in predicting intelligent behavior.” Quoted in Peter
Sperlich, Conflict and Harmony in Human Affairs (Chicago: Rand McNally,
1971), p. 56.

4 Ibid., p. 172. For a related argument that the setting in which foreign policy
decisions are made reduces the applicability of many theories from psychology,
see Sidney Verba, “Assumptions of Rationality and Non-Rationality in Models of
the International System,” in Klaus Knorr and Sidney Verba, eds., The Inter­
that a scientist would be ashamed of. If a psychologist's view of ways in which decision-makers draw inferences from evidence is wildly different from the way he handles data bearing on his professional concerns, I think we are justified in being skeptical of his theory. ⁵

If these criticisms mean that we cannot take any existing psychological theories as they are and apply them to political decision-making, they definitely do not mean that we should ignore all these theories. To do so would be to overlook a large amount of invaluable work and would make it difficult to detect, and almost impossible to explain, patterns of misperception. Indeed it is partly because most international relations scholars have paid no attention to psychology that they have failed to recognize the importance of misperception, let alone deal with it adequately.

It would be possible to take a single psychological theory, try to correct the defects discussed in the previous paragraphs, and see how it explains a number of international cases. Instead, I have chosen an approach that is broader and more eclectic—too eclectic for some tastes, perhaps—and have borrowed from theories and experimental findings in diverse parts of psychology. In drawing on studies of attitude change, social psychology, cognitive psychology, and visual perception, one faces the danger of mixing incommensurable theories or incompatible assumptions and failing to do justice to the theories themselves. The former danger is outweighed by the dual advantages of gaining a wider variety of insights and greater confidence in our explanations by finding that they are supported by theories in such different realms as, for example, attitude change and visual perception. The second cost—failing to discuss in detail the psychological theories in their own right—is worth paying because my goal is to understand politics. Although some of my criticisms point out what I think are failings of the psychological theories in their own terms, I will discuss and modify them only if doing so helps to account for puzzles in political decision-making.

Complementing the problem of diverse theories that were not developed to deal with problems with which we are concerned is the difficulty of mustering solid evidence. This involves two major difficulties. First,

there is no easy way to determine the accuracy of perceptions. It is hard to know what a person’s perceptions were and even harder to know whether they were correct. Was Churchill’s image of Hitler right and Chamberlain’s image wrong? Until recently few historians dissented from this conclusion. But now there is no agreement on even as seemingly clear-cut a case as this. In other important instances, the experts divide more evenly. Was Germany moving to dominate the Continent before World War I? Could skillful diplomacy by the Entente have maintained the peace without sacrificing a position of equality with Germany? I cannot solve these problems, but have adopted three strategies to mitigate them. First, I have drawn most heavily from cases about which extensive evidence has been analyzed by historians who generally agree. I have, thus, taken little from recent history because of the impossibility of being confident of our views about the Soviet perceptions and intentions. Second, I have tried to note the existence of alternative historical explanations so that the reader is at least alerted to the relevant disputes. Third, some of the cases can be treated as plausible, but perhaps hypothetical, examples. At minimum they show that certain perceptions were held and could easily have been inaccurate.

An alternative approach avoids this problem entirely but raises new ones of its own. We may ask not “Was this perception correct?” but “How was it derived from the information available?” We could then seek to explain both accurate and inaccurate perceptions by the same general theory, just as many psychologists have argued that optical illusions can best be understood in terms of a broader theory of visual perception. The work on belief systems in psychology and operational codes in political science is directly relevant here. I have used this approach at many points, although without trying to produce a tightly integrated theory. We can also compare different actors’ perceptions of the same object, situation, or other actor. If we can find appropriate comparisons, we can try to locate systematic differences in perceptions traceable to differences in ways of processing incoming information, differences in pre-existing images of others or general views of the world, or differences in specific experiences. I have found this approach very valuable, especially when seeking to explain the determinants of a person’s perceptual predispositions.

The second major problem of evidence is that, even if we are certain about the existence of misperception in any single case, we cannot generalize and locate causation if the case is atypical. Many perceptual errors are random. We can probably find instances of any kind of misperception we can think of. But this will not tell us which are most frequent, whether one kind of error is more common than its opposite, or which errors are associated with which antecedent conditions. Thus we
cannot even establish correlations, let alone seek general causes. Again there is no good solution, and I must adopt an approach that is not completely satisfactory. I have studied a large number of cases from different historical periods and analyzed only those misperceptions that occur with great frequency. I have also searched for instances of misperceptions that would be inconsistent with the explanations I was developing. For many of the propositions, there were almost no cases that were the opposite of what was expected. But even if this makeshift method of gathering evidence has not led to false conclusions, it has inhibited the testing of complex explanations and the discovery of patterns of perception that are subtle or masked by confounding variables. Thus the lack of an appropriate sample of cases is less apt to mean that my arguments are incorrect than that they are limited to the more obvious relationships.

This book is limited in two other ways. First, my central concern is with perception, and I will discuss other aspects of decision-making only when they are relevant. I hope this work will add to our understanding of decision-making, but it will not cover all aspects of this subject. My focus on perception also means that I have not attempted to treat in detail all parts of the belief systems of individuals or groups. Second, I have ignored two well-known approaches to the study of perceptions—cultural differences and ego psychology. I have instead found it fruitful to look for patterns of misperception that occur within a shared culture and that are not strongly influenced by personality characteristics. The existence such patterns shows, on the one hand, that even when two actors have a great deal in common they can easily misperceive one another, and, on the other hand, that some important causes of misperception are traceable to general cognitive processes rather than to an individual’s disturbed psyche.

Finally, some readers may find this work strangely apolitical because it says little about actors’ interests. The reason for this is that this concept rarely can explain the kinds of perceptions and misperceptions I am concerned with. Knowing what a person’s interests are does not tell us how he will see his environment or go about selecting the best route to reach his goals. When does a statesman think that others are aggressive? How is information that is discrepant from established beliefs handled? How do images change? How are images formed? Questions such as these that deal with the processes of perception cannot be answered in terms of the actors’ interests. When we look at the perceptions of agencies within the bureaucracy, interest is involved, although the causal relationships are often hard to establish. Military men seem quicker to detect threats than political leaders. But at the highest levels, where the costs of perceiving other states inaccurately are a heavy burden, this method of analysis will not take us very far. It was not in Chamberlain’s interest to see Hitler as
appeasable, in Acheson’s interest to believe that China was not likely to enter the Korean War, or in the interests of any statesman incorrectly to see his adversary’s moves as the product of a coherent, centrally controlled plan. Max Weber argued that “Not ideas but material and ideal interests, directly govern men’s conduct. Yet very frequently the ‘world images’ that have been created by ‘ideas’ have, like switchmen, determined the tracks along which action has been pushed by the dynamics of interest.”6 For example, neither Marxist nor traditional liberal theorists have convincingly explained postwar American foreign policy in terms of interests alone. In neither formulation can interest explain interventions in countries such as Vietnam. These actions only make sense if the decision-makers either place a high intrinsic value on seeing insignificant states remain non-communist or believe in the domino theory. I have elaborated the former explanation elsewhere7 and here want to note only that interest cannot tell us why some people believe that the world is tightly interconnected. Once this belief is taken as given, interest can explain our policy, but this must not blind us to the crucial role played by the belief. Similarly, while either national or elite interest may have dictated that the United States strongly oppose the Soviet Union once the latter was seen as highly aggressive, the question remains of how and why this perception was formed.

A short outline of the book may prove useful at this point. The first section presents the background. Since the study of perceptions is an aspect of the decision-making approach, Chapter 1 discusses the level of analysis question and makes explicit the kinds of alternative approaches we are ignoring. Chapter 2 discusses the concept of an actor’s intentions and develops a framework of rules by which observers use others’ past behavior to infer how they will behave in the future. Chapter 3 analyzes the dominant psychological approach to international relations and shows that both the theorists of this approach and those they argue against—the deterrence theorists—have failed to come to grips with the issue that most sharply divides them—the intentions of other states in the system.

The second section of the study analyzes the ways that decision-makers process information and form, maintain, and change their beliefs about international relations and their images of other actors. Chapter 4 examines theories of psychological consistency in light of the logic of scientific inquiry, distinguishes rational from irrational consistency, and analyzes in detail the tendency for people to assimilate incoming infor-

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mation into their pre-existing images. The next chapter discusses the influence of what is at the front of a person's mind on his perceptions. If images of others, once established, are hard to dislodge, it is especially important to try to understand how they are formed. To this end Chapter 6 examines how international history, the decision-maker's domestic political system, and his nonpolitical training create predispositions that influence his perceptions of a wide variety of situations and other actors. The chapters in this section, and many other writings on this subject, may leave the impression that beliefs and images never change. Chapter 7 draws on the literature on attitude change to illuminate the ways that discrepant information does in fact alter established views.

The third section of the book discusses several common misperceptions. Chapter 8 analyzes the tendency for actors to see others as more centralized and calculating than they are. The next chapter deals with the conditions under which actors see others' actions as autonomous as opposed to being reactions to the actor's own behavior. The arguments about and evidence for wishful thinking are examined in Chapter 10. Both laboratory experiments and international cases must be closely analyzed because the evidence, and indeed the question of what evidence would support the proposition, is not as unambiguous as it appears at first. Chapter 11 takes up cognitive dissonance, a psychological theory similar to those used in the rest of the book but distinct enough to require separate treatment. The relevance of this theory is examined, several propositions deduced, and some cases analyzed in this light.

The final section consists of a chapter that discusses ways in which decision-makers could minimize misperception. Given the complexity and ambiguity of information about international relations, perceptual and other decision-making errors will always be common. But steps could be taken to increase the degree to which disciplined intelligence can be brought to bear and decrease the degree to which decision-makers hold images and reach conclusions without thinking carefully about what they are doing. Indeed if judgment is distinguished from perception by the criterion that the latter is automatic and not under conscious control, then these proposals are designed to increase explicit and self-conscious judgment and decrease the extent to which decision-makers perceive without being aware of the alternatives that are being rejected.