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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THREAT RESEARCH:
A REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

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This paper, prepared by George Ramsey of the TR&A staff, reviews the principal contributions of social-psychologists to threat research. Threats are conceptualized within the broader context of social interaction where one party seeks influence over another; in effect, threats or threat processes are just one of numerous forms of "influence" interaction. Ramsey classifies the research of such scholars as J.T. Tedeschi and Morton Deutsch into four distinctive areas of inquiry: (1) the characteristics of the source of the threat; (2) the different means of conveying the threat from one party to the other; (3) selected characteristics of the target of the threat; and, (4) the impact threat processes have on a wider range of social interaction (e.g., negotiation processes, coalition formation, etc.).

Ramsey argues the purpose for overviewing this social-psychological research on threat is: (1) to establish the relevancy link between threat research and a more complete spectrum of social interaction forms, and (2) to provide a "departure" point for future research efforts in light of the voluminous research already concluded. A critical dimension of the Ramsey review is its assessment that the findings generated in this experimental literature are well worth careful examination. Specifically, Ramsey suggests international relations research can benefit by applying some of the insights gleaned in this research to simulations of international interaction or field studies of situational threats.

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SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THREAT RESEARCH:
A REVIEW AND ASSESSMENT

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February 14, 1974

INTRODUCTION

This essay stands as one of a set of four related inquiries into the phenomenon of threat. Each of the four shares the common objective of the advancement of the probative value of the concept threat and the development of a foundation in existing literature for the construction of an extensive design for research on the recognition and analysis of threat processes in international relations.

In pursuing this objective, a wide variety of definitions and conceptual applications of threat have been uncovered, each representing a unique strategy for thinking about the implications of threat for international behavior. These diverse usages of the threat concept can roughly be divided into two general categories. The first of these includes those in which threat is defined as one of a class of social influence techniques. In this context threat is used to connote the deliberate, explicit transmission of a negative incentive from one party to another for the purpose of the modification and control of the threatenee's behavior. The second general usage of threat is with reference to the anticipation of a condition of impending danger, harm, or undesirable state of affairs. A general overview of the literature embodying both these formulations can be found elsewhere (Gutierrez, 1974). The intent here is to narrow the focus and provide a more detailed discussion of the most extensive body of literature on threat--the experimental research in social psychology.

The interest of social psychologists in threat is a logical extension of an attempt to identify the means by which individuals in social interaction seek to exert influence. Although the term influence has proved to be as elusive and unmanageable for social psychologists as it has for political theorists, its acknowledged importance as a basic form of social exchange has prompted a continuing search for clarification, and for analysis of its sources, its components, and its effects. These efforts may be recognized as consisting of: 1) examinations of the characteristics of the source of the influence attempt; 2) the differentiation of types of methods employed to transmit

influence; 3) analysis of selected characteristics of the target of the influence attempt; and, 4) the implications of various forms of influence for the broader range of social phenomenon, such as its effect on negotiation outcomes, and its relation to the amelioration, exacerbation, or resolution of conflict.

The purpose of concentrating attention on this literature is twofold. The first is to establish a conceptual and empirical baseline concerning the relevance of threat as a basic process in social interaction. Secondly, the assumption is made that establishing such a baseline will facilitate the identification of departure points and guidelines for subsequent inquiry.

The following discussion, thus, consists of a review of the theoretical and empirical examinations of threat represented in the social psychological literature, and an assessment of its implication for the advancement of a design for research on the recognition and analysis of threat processes in international relations.

THREAT AS INFLUENCE BEHAVIOR

In a volume representing one of the most extensive examinations of the processes of social influence (Tedeschi, 1972), a variety of types of influence are identified. These are: 1) manipulation; 2) the activation of commitments; 3) persuasion; 4) the mediation of rewards; 5) promises; 6) non-decision; 7) probes; 8) mediation of punishments; 9) modeling and social contagion, and 10) threats. Although the interest here is not to survey this entire range of modes of influence, it is instructive to characterize threat in terms of its relation to the larger context. The essential point to be noted at the outset is that threat is seldom observed in isolated form. Fisher (1969) has suggested that threats are typically issued with accompanying offers of reward for compliance. Gamson (1968) contends that differentiation between influence modes is often artificially imposed, suggesting that types of influence operative in any given social context is more a function of the selective perception of the target than a particular tactic employed by the source. Moreover, he emphasized the co-occurrence of warnings and threats, although maintaining the distinction that warnings are an act of persuasion, and threats are an act of deterrence. In the former case, the source has no control over whether the undesirable consequences will occur. Conversely, for a threat to exist, the source must have some control over the negative outcomes which are

invoked. Tedeschi (1970) similarly emphasizes the importance of the source's control over contingencies in coining the term mendation to refer to the issuance of a prediction of a favorable outcome by the influencer, although the outcome is not deemed to be subject to the source's control. Thus mendations stand in the same relation to promises, as do warnings to threats.

Several observations are, thus, in order regarding a definition of threat. It can be seen as constituting one of several methods by which one party engages in purposeful behavior designed to modify the behavior of another. In Dahl's classical terminology, A attempts to get B to do something B would not otherwise have done, or to refrain from doing something B might have done (Dahl, 1957). The influence attempt is further qualified by the conditions that the communication is intended by the source, and is made explicit to the target. Threats are distinguished from promises by virtue of the emphasis on the undesirable consequences of a failure to comply rather than the favorable consequences of compliant behavior. Moreover, threats imply the existence of a perception that the issuing party does, in fact, possess the capability of controlling the negative outcomes predicted. Although a dominant strategy often may emerge in a given social interaction, the modes of influence tend to co-occur and should be viewed as highly interdependent.

THREAT PROCESSES AND THE NATURE OF THE SOURCE

Much of the research about threat has focused on a variety of characteristics of the issuing party in an effort to explain the circumstances of its initiation and its effectiveness. Research on the effect of threats in strategic interaction indicates that the selection of threats as a means of influence instead of more cooperative strategies elicits the perception that the source's intentions are hostile, regardless of other information concerning who the source is or what the source is like (Nardin, 1968). However, other investigations yield evidence suggesting that given this constraint, source characteristics do affect the processes accompanying the threat communication. Tedeschi (1972) attributes the importance of source characteristics to the insights of DeKadt (1965)--that influence can be measured in terms of the resources, values, or qualities which contribute to the capacity of persons to affect others behavior; and Simon (1957), who suggested that by analysis of the magnitude of the influence base (i.e. wealth, status, etc.), one could assess the magnitude of influence. Schlenker, et al. (1970) explored the effect of the source's likeableness on threat

processes, finding that a disliked threatener is perceived as more likely to enforce his threats than a liked threatener. Hovland, Janis and Kelley (1953) emphasized the expertise and trustworthiness of the source as important determinants of the extent to which information is accepted and believed. Tedeschi (1972) reviews the importance of the standard dispositional variables -- self-confidence; domination; need achievement motivation; self-esteem; and internal control orientation - as well as identifying what he views as the primary characteristics affecting the application of threat -- status, expertise, and prestige. High status and expertise of the source leads to the expectation of deference and thus encourages the use of persuasive techniques. However, high prestige encourages the source to rely on the mediation of rewards and or punishments, but only where the target is lower in prestige. Thus, a large disparity between source and target with respect to these dimensions was found to be positively associated with communication frequency, frequency of influence attempts, and success of influence attempts.

Several studies have identified a positive link between the self-confidence of the source and the initiation and success of influence communications (Bass, 1961); (Janis and Field, 1959); (Marlowe and Gergen, 1969); (Higbee, 1966). Most of these do not specifically distinguish threat from other modes of influence. Yet, the evidence supporting the more general association gives no cause for hesitation about drawing the more specific inference to threat phenomenon. A notable exception in this context is Lindskold and Tedeschi (1971), who found that children with high self-esteem are more compliant to threats and attain more rewards.

Of all these source characteristics, the most pertinent to the phenomenon of threat in international relations seems to be source prestige. This is defined in these experimental studies in similar fashion to its conventional use in political science. Tedeschi (1972) suggests: "The quantity of disposable resources possessed by an individual which can be used to directly reward or punish another individual is presumed to be the primary factor for generating the perception of power (i.e. prestige)" (p. 306). Thus, the existence of large amounts of disposable resources not only promotes a higher incidence of influence behavior but also a greater subjective estimate of the likelihood of success, as the principal of marginal utility operates to reduce the relative costs of influence. The hypothesis that the greater the resources (hence the greater the prestige) at the source's disposal, the greater the source's confidence in initiating control attempts and the more frequent the use of threat has been supported by a study by Smith and Leginski

(1970).

Hornstein (1965) studied the use of threats in a game which required bargaining between two unequal players and, alternatively, between two equal players. Results supported the hypothesis that players with considerable resources initiated more threats to weak opponents. The closer the weak bargainer was in capabilities to the stronger of the pair, the more influence the weaker party attempted. As the level of equality or parity in dyads rose, the incidence of threat declined considerably, even though the potential for punishment was high.

The notion that differences in attribute and status dimensions between actor and target in an interaction dyad are important determinants of behavior is not unfamiliar to students of contemporary international relations theory and research (Rummel, 1972; Galtung, 1968). The evidence from this experimental research in social psychology tends to reaffirm that research designed to probe the dynamics of threat processes should include consideration of attribute distances.

THREAT PROCESSES AND THE NATURE OF THE TARGET

Most of the theory and research relevant to threat processes has concentrated on source characteristics to the neglect of the recipient. It should be clear, however, that to examine the various source characteristics in isolation is to fail to recognize the extent to which interaction in social dyads is dependent upon relational qualities. These may consist of relative capability levels, relative needs and interests, both compatible and conflicting, relative resources available, or the interdependency of perceptions and behavioral expectations.

The major consideration in those studies including attention to the nature of the target is the recognition on the part of the initiator that the target possesses or controls the availability of valued entities that the source desires. In addition, the target must be accessible to the source or the costs of reinforcing threatening behavior become prohibitively high. Support for this relationship is indicated in (Tedeschi, 1972) (Tedeschi, Horai, Lindskold, 1970); (Thibault and Kelly 1959); and (Homans, 1961). These studies show that increasing costs to the source of punishment for non-compliance due to great distances between the source and the target causes considerably less reliance on threat as influence behavior. The importance of relative capability levels in affecting modes of influence has been

explored by Schlenker and Tedeschi (1972); Lindskold and Tedeschi (1970); and MacLean and Tedeschi (1970). Findings from these studies indicate that a source with a superior capability advantage over a target tends to prefer the use of threats to the use of promises.

Thus, an inventory of characteristics found to be important determinants of both the choice of a target and the mode of influence exercised includes: 1) target proximity and accessibility; 2) resources at the disposal of the target relative to the source; 3) capabilities of the target relative to the source; and, 4) dispositional qualities of the target related to the source's estimation of the likelihood of success of the influence attempt. Proximity is important because it affects the costs involved in initiating the threat. Relative resource and capability levels are relevant because the powerful and prestigious not only are more likely to be chosen as targets because they possess desired values, but they also are observed to more frequently initiate threats.

THE RELATION OF THREAT TO BARGAINING AND CONFLICT

Research linking threat to the larger context of social interactions constitutes the most obvious application of the social psychological studies to threat processes in the international arena. In tracing these links, investigators have focused primarily on two phenomena: 1) the effect of threats on bargaining behavior; and 2) the relation of threat to conflict. Deutsch and Krauss (1960) explored these relationships in a seminal study which has attracted considerable attention in the form of further extensions of their original design. Their experiment explored the effect of the availability of threat upon bargaining in a two person game in which the capability to block another's passage over a road was varied in the manner that: 1) neither could threaten to obstruct the way; 2) one of the two could invoke the obstructive threat; or, 3) both could threaten to block. Defining threat as the communication of an intention to do something detrimental to the interests of another, their study reflected two important assumptions about the nature of threat: 1) given a conflict of interest, if a means of threatening exists, it will be utilized to cause the opponent to yield, with the qualification that the more intense the conflict, the stronger this tendency will be; and, 2) when threats are initiated by one party, the other will attribute hostility to the source and will tend to counter threaten and/or increase their resistance to yielding. Their results supported these assumptions, providing strong evidence that different capacities to block outcomes have considerable bearing on the mutual gains

produced in bargaining situations. Moreover, they found that where neither party possessed the threat capability bargaining was most successful, in the unilateral threat situation less success was attained, and least success existed in the bilateral threat situation. In a subsequent replication, these authors explored the effects of the opportunity for additional communications, finding that the threat potential was sufficiently strong to negate the effects of this communication option in increasing bargaining success (reported in Deutsch, 1973). Subsequent studies focusing on the effect of threats on bargaining included an analysis of tutored communications and the timing of communications (Krauss and Deutsch, 1966), the magnitude and equality of the threat (Hornstein, 1965), the effects of a need to maintain face (Brown, 1968), and the effects of threat when combined with varying levels of punitive power (Gumpert, 1967). Results of these studies suggest that: 1) those subjects receiving prior instruction to communicate fair proposals achieved greater bargaining success, 2) post-deadlock communication is more successful than pre-deadlock; 3) the less the magnitude of the threat and the greater the inequality in threat potential, the more profitable the bargaining outcome; 4) the loss of face before a significant audience leads to a greater likelihood of retaliation to an initiated threat; and 5) bargainers who possess both threat capability and punitive power have a greater propensity to invoke threats, are more likely to be perceived as credible, tend to become more competitive, and enjoy less success in obtaining positive bargaining outcomes.

Although these initial studies by Deutsch and his associates demonstrate clearly that threats in mixed-motive bargaining situations lead to competitive behavior, the intensification of conflict, and a reduction in mutual benefits in bargaining outcomes, the more recent observation is offered that such negative effects should not be construed to be inescapable (Deutsch, 1973). Although in the earlier experiments threats were likely to be perceived as illegitimate claims, thus inducing competition and hostility, they may be viewed as acceptable and legitimate by the target, especially when superior status or need is imparted to the source. The research of Kelley (1965) similarly emphasizes the perceived legitimacy of a threat and the needs which give rise to it. In addition to noting the importance of legitimacy, Deutsch (1973) identifies a number of other factors mediating the relation of threat to bargaining and conflict: 1) credibility; 2) magnitude; 3) the nature of values appealed to; 4) time perspective; 5) clarity of the contingencies involved; 6) style of transmission; and, 6) relative costs and benefits to the

parties involved.

Horai and Tedeschi (1970) also investigated conditions under which threats to block another's access to goals were effective in achieving desirable outcomes. In a two-person competitive game setting, their interest was in the size of the penalty imposed for non-compliance (threat magnitude) and the credibility of the threat. Both were found to positively affect the degree of compliance, confirming the notion that the most effective threats are those which are highly credible, and severe in the magnitude of punishment promised. It may be noted that the implication of this finding is that unilateral threats, if credible and severe, tend to produce successful bargaining outcomes for the threatening party, seemingly contradicting the conclusions drawn from the Deutsch, et al. experiments. Shomer, Davis and Kelley (1966) used a variant of the Deutsch game in which the possibility of choosing an alternate route was eliminated. Their results indicate that when both parties are compelled to remain in a threatening mode of behavior (i.e. the possibility of seeking valued outcomes by pursuing alternative action is not present), the bilateral threat condition does not necessarily lead to negative outcomes for participants. On the contrary, threats are perceived more as signalling behavior and may, in the short run, produce increased cooperation and greater bargaining success. Using a different experimental setting, Geiwitz (1967) observed a similar ameliorating effect of bilateral threat potential. Thus, both constructive and destructive effects of threats on conflict and bargaining have been observed, depending on the range of alternatives afforded.

A number of other studies confirm the importance of threat in relation to bargaining and conflict. Tedeschi (1972) cites the research of Goodstadt and Kipnis (1970), Lindskold and Tedeschi (1970), MacLean and Tedeschi (1970), and Rothbart (1968) as establishing that given a choice among influence modes, a high reliance on threats is coincident with high levels of conflict intensity. Fisher (1969) similarly found a positive association between conflict intensity and the frequency of threats. Kent (1967) reviewed threat's impact on bargaining, stressing the qualifying influence of credibility, resolve, information levels, and conditional utilities. Ogley (1971) observed that threat is related to conflict in two fundamental ways: 1) conflict tends to generate threat because it implies an incompatibility of goals and interests; and, 2) threats can initiate and intensify conflict.

SOCIAL PSYCHOLOGICAL THREAT RESEARCH AND THE RECOGNITION AND

ANALYSIS OF THREAT PROCESSES IN INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS

The preceding discussion has provided a review of the significant contributions in the social psychological literature relevant to the phenomenon of threat. Major approaches to the investigation of threat have been outlined, key concepts have been identified, and basic relationships highlighted. What remains is an assessment of this knowledge baseline in terms of its conceptual, theoretical, and empirical utility for the advancement of research on the recognition and analysis of threat processes in international relations.

Two procedures are necessary in order to provide such an assessment. The first is to briefly characterize the current status of threat in international relations; and the second is to analyze the contributions reviewed above in terms of the prospect of improving that status.

McClelland (1974) has offered some observations concerning the current status of threat in international relations theory and research, and it is appropriate here to summarize his characterization. He suggests that, with the exception of the use of the deterrence concept in national security studies, threat does not occupy a prominent position in current theory and research in international relations. Rather, it remains buried in the larger concerns of power, influence, legitimacy, authority, and conflict. He further concludes that this situation has resulted in the development that consideration of the threat element is generally restricted to a military context, with the result that the problems of recognizing threat in its more general forms and the development of analytic procedures for studying threat processes have gone unattended. The question thus presents itself -- what contribution is made by the social psychological threat research to the filling of this void? The general answer would seem, at the outset, to be that the potential contribution is considerable. The key concepts and empirical relationships linking source and target attributes as well as dyadic distances to threat behavior seem easily generalizable to the international context, as operational methods for defining those concepts often already exist. Moreover, the prospects for designing research in simulation settings as well as field settings, and for inferring testable generalizations from those identified and established through experimental research are promising. In addition, the links between threat and bargaining and conflict established in the experimental laboratory are applicable, in principle, to tests using "real world" international data. The analysis of capabilities, intentions, goals, values, and resources is

certainly not alien to conventional techniques for investigating other forms of international behavior. It should be clear, also, that much of the social psychological research discussed above was selected for review precisely because of its obvious relation to international phenomenon. Thus, an initial assessment of the relevance of this body of research for the advancement of theory and the development of methodologies for investigating international threat phenomenon is that it is substantial.

Initial assessments should always be subjected to subsequent evaluation, however; and, in this context, a variety of cautions and limitations are in order. The first of these consists of the observation that research in experimental settings often cannot easily be generalized to other empirical circumstances in which the definition of the situation by the parties involved, the preciseness and explicitness of communications, and the interpretation of the "rules" of the game and the outcomes obtained are much less subject to control and evaluation by the observer. A second consideration is that much of the experimental research reviewed treats the threat element as given, emphasizing the analysis of its effects to the neglect of the process of its recognition by the parties involved. A third caution to be noted is that threat is generally viewed in static, rather than dynamic fashion. The emphasis on the relationship between threat and relatively unchanging attributes of the source, the target, and the relationship between the two tends to obscure the fact that threat is a dynamic process, dependent upon a sequence of changes of a complex system of determining conditions. This dynamic component is seldom analyzed in the research under review here; thus, few clues concerning procedures for analyzing the process of threat dynamically may be observed.

SUMMARY

In this essay, a review of the social psychological research on threat has been presented and an assessment of that research has been offered. In doing so a case has been made for the relevance of threat as a primary aspect of human and social behavior. A knowledge baseline has been identified which, ideally, will serve to facilitate the identification of departure points and the establishment of guidelines for research on the recognition and analysis of threat processes in international relations. Three fundamental limitations to the applicability of the social psychological research are noted, but the basic assessment offered is that the contribution is substantial, warranting careful attention by those interested in promoting the investigation of threat in the international arena.

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