



Casualties of war and sunk costs: Implications for attitude change and persuasion[☆]

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present research was to gain greater insight into how people's support for an ongoing war might be influenced by providing information about recent casualties of war. On intuitive grounds, one might expect that such information might often decrease support for the war, especially when the war in question is relatively unpopular. However, research and theory on the "sunk cost effect" suggests, somewhat paradoxically, that highlighting such losses could actually increase, not decrease, support for the war, as driven by the goal to avoid wasting valuable resources. Across two experiments (one focusing on the war in Iraq, another focusing on the war in Afghanistan), we found that the effects of the war casualty information on attitudes were moderated by a recent use and activation of the relevant "don't waste" goal, which had been previously primed in a non-political context. The implications of our findings for theory and research on attitude change, as well as the judgment and decision making area, are discussed.

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A number of years ago, one of the authors of this article walked into the main quadrangle of his university and came upon a stunning display that had been erected the evening before: Hundreds of papier-mâché tombstones, each inscribed with two casualties of the Iraq war, one American, one Iraqi. Inquires with the organizers revealed that the display was designed to foster opposition to the Iraq war. The assumption seemed reasonable: Any display of tombstones, whether symbolic or real, would presumably serve as a reminder that the war was going disastrously, and that it had far exceeded expectations in terms of its costs, most tragically in terms of the numbers of people who had perished since the onset of the war.

However, theory and research on sunk costs (Staw, 1976) suggests that this display could affect attitudes in a way opposite to that intended. Sunk costs are irrecoverable investments which, according to normative rules of decision-making, should not govern future decisions. However, people have a tendency to continue an endeavor once an investment in money, effort, or time has been made (Arkes & Ayton, 1999). This can, in turn, lead to an escalation of commitment even as one is presented with growing evidence that one is involved in a losing cause (Moon, 2001). If people could treat information about war casualties as they might other sorts of

valuable resources, this suggests that reminding people of these deaths might serve to increase, not decrease, their support for the war.

These considerations highlight a provocative ambiguity about losses (for a related discussion, see Boettcher & Cobb, 2009). Many decisions in life are relatively "risky" in the sense that they can lead to the loss of valuable resources of all sorts, including the loss of human life. On intuitive grounds, it might seem that calling attention to these losses would tend to decrease people's commitment to any prior decision that was responsible for producing those losses in the first place. Theory and research from the sunk cost literature, however, suggests that calling attention to these losses might have the opposite effect, serving to actually increase commitment. We believe that both perspectives are correct. In other words, given any "objective" information about loss (e.g. "8000 troops have perished so far in the war") there are likely to be conditions under which this information will decrease commitment, but there are other conditions in which the opposite effect will occur. At the present time, however, the boundary conditions under which losses will exert these different types of effects are unclear. The overarching goal of the present research was to gain more insight into these matters.

Theoretical background

Previous research on war casualties and public support for war

There is a long history of research in the political science literature which has considered the factors determining Americans' support for war (Brody, 1984; Gartner & Segura, 1998; Mueller, 1973). One of the more commonly-discussed variables is war casualties and, in

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particular, loss of life among American troops. For many years, it has been assumed that public support for any given military operation (e.g. an invasion of another country) should be inversely related to war casualties, such that higher loss of life is associated with less support for that operation, and vice versa (Coker, 2001; Gentry, 1998; Luttwak, 1996). As noted in a recent review by Gelpi, Feaver, and Reifler (2009), however, the actual picture is somewhat more complicated, as factors other than war casualties can determine public support for the war, such as likelihood of a successful outcome (Eichenberg, 2005). Indeed, Americans have shown the capacity to be remarkably tolerant of war casualties, provided that the subjective probability of success of the stated mission is relatively high (Gelpi et al., 2009). When casualties *do* exert an effect on attitudes, however, the prevailing assumption in this literature is that such casualties will tend to decrease support for war.

To date, much of the evidence in this area is correlational, involving retrospective analysis of survey data (e.g. involving attitudes toward the Vietnam War), in which changes in public support are plotted as a function of changes in the rate at which casualties are occurring (Gartner, Segura, & Wilkening, 1997; see also Klarevas, 2002). In principle, such a causal link could be established in a controlled study, in which participants are randomly assigned to condition in which they either are, or are not, presented with/reminded of statistics regarding loss of life among U.S. troops. Importantly, one would need to present such statistics in isolation from other persuasive elements (e.g., persuasive arguments either for or against the war) in order to show the impact of war casualties per se on attitudes. However, we know of no research which has taken this type of experimental approach. Hence, although there is a good deal of correlational evidence to support the link between war casualties and attitudes toward war, we are not aware of any studies to show direct evidence of causality.

Quite apart from the aforementioned literature on the determinants of public support for war, there is a largely separate and distinct literature on the “sunk cost effect” (Arkes & Ayton, 1999), mostly conducted in the decision making literature, which has been concerned with the psychological processes by which people remain committed to a previous decision. As Boettcher and Cobb (2009) have noted, there have been surprisingly few attempts to reconcile the political science literature on war casualties with relevant research and theory on sunk costs. Such integration would be interesting and potentially fruitful, given that theory and research on the sunk cost effect would seem to suggest that highlighting war casualties might serve to actually *increase* public support for war. In the section to follow we consider some of the implications that arise from this literature.

Research and theory on the sunk cost effect

The sunk cost effect can generally be seen as a tendency for people to remain committed to a given decision on the grounds that one has already “invested too much to quit” (Teger, 1980) and that a shift in course would result in a needless waste of those past resources. Arkes and Ayton (1999) proposed that the sunk cost effect is fundamentally grounded in the use of a relatively simple “don’t waste” rule, which can usefully be seen as a kind of abstract goal or heuristic (but see also Gunia, Sivanathan, & Galinsky, 2009). Technically speaking, however, this goal is not simply oriented toward preserving valuable resources. Rather, it represents a specific type of avoidance motivation (cf. Atkinson, 1964; Carver & Scheier, 1981; Crowe & Higgins, 1997) in which people are motivated to avoid the unpleasant feeling that they would be wasting valuable investments by prematurely terminating a prior commitment. Hence, although the relevant goal might be more precisely rendered with the more cumbersome phrase “*don’t waste previous investments by prematurely ending a prior commitment*” we

use the “don’t waste” terminology in this paper for ease of exposition and to maintain continuity with usage by previous researchers.

Concern about wasting previous investment represents a perfectly reasonable basis for making a decision in many cases. As Arkes and Ayton (1999) note, however, people often overgeneralize this goal/rule to situations in which the valuable resources in question are irrevocably lost (i.e. “sunk”), regardless of what decision is selected. For example, in the well-known “tennis elbow” task (Stanovich, 1999), participants are presented with a simple hypothetical situation (e.g. *imagine that you’ve already joined a tennis club with a nonrefundable \$500 membership fee, and you have tennis elbow, making it painful to play*) and are then asked to choose between two options (*keep playing, or not?*). When people are asked to choose between the two available responses, the majority of participants report that they would continue to play tennis, on the grounds that the alternative choice—to stop playing—is associated with an aversive feeling that one would be “wasting” the five hundred dollar fee. However, this reasoning seems to run counter to normative rules of decision making, since the money is gone (i.e. is irretrievable) no matter what choice is selected, and therefore should not govern future decision-making.

Among theorists who have studied the sunk cost effect, there is considerable debate as to whether these and other demonstrations reflect yet another example of the irrationality of human decision making (cf. Gigerenzer & Goldstein, 1996). However, such debate ultimately involves the thorny problem of how to define “rationality”, a centuries-old problem that is unlikely to be resolved to anyone’s satisfaction (Stein, 1996). For this and other reasons, we largely sidestep the “rationality” issue in this paper. In our view, studying the antecedents and consequences of the sunk cost effect are of interest in their own right, because such study is likely to yield valuable insight into the processes underlying human decision making, setting aside whether any individual choice is supposedly “rational” or not.

Some unresolved issues

Previous investigations have often studied the sunk cost effect in the context of hypothetical “decision scenarios”, in which participants are asked to imagine that they had made a prior commitment (e.g. enrolling in a health care plan), with the dependent variable typically focusing on their willingness to remain committed to that hypothetical decision. These types of paradigms can be very useful ways of studying the sunk cost effect, because they allow researchers a great deal of control over the various parameters (e.g. the amount of money or time invested) that could potentially influence people’s motivation to continue a prior decisional commitment. The flexibility offered by these sorts of experimental paradigms has been useful in showing the boundary conditions of the sunk cost effect (e.g., Heath, 1995; Soman, 2001). For example, Soman (2001) found that sunk cost effects are more likely to occur when resources are framed in terms of money rather than time, perhaps because people are somewhat less adept at mentally keeping track of “expenditures” of the latter compared to the former.

In principle, the results of these studies have the potential to speak to real-world issues, such as how people might remain committed to an actual, ongoing war in the face of mounting loss of life. This, in turn, raises an interesting issue that, to our knowledge, has not been explored in the literature: In the absence of any other explicit attempts to change people’s attitudes, would mere exposure to losses be sufficient to trigger the sunk cost effect, making people more committed to war than they otherwise would be? Note that this would be the opposite of what most of the literature on troop casualty rates might seem to predict. This question has important practical as well as theoretical implications. In the case of the United States’ involvement in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, for example, this raises the question as to how mere exposure to statistics about war

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