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Role thinking: Standing in other people's shoes to forecast decisions in conflicts

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Abstract

When forecasting decisions in conflict situations, experts are often advised to figuratively stand in the other person's shoes. We refer to this as "role thinking", because, in practice, the advice is to think about how other protagonists will view the situation in order to predict their decisions. We tested the effect of role thinking on forecast accuracy. We obtained 101 role-thinking forecasts of the decisions that would be made in nine diverse conflicts from 27 Naval postgraduate students (experts) and 107 role-thinking forecasts from 103 second-year organizational behavior students (novices). The accuracy of the novices' forecasts was 33% and that of the experts' was 31%; both were little different from chance (guessing), which was 28%. The small improvement in accuracy from role-thinking strengthens the finding from earlier research that it is not sufficient to think hard about a situation in order to predict the decisions which groups of people will make when they are in conflict. Instead, it is useful to ask groups of role players to simulate the situation. When groups of novice participants adopted the roles of protagonists in the aforementioned nine conflicts and interacted with each other, their group decisions predicted the actual decisions with an accuracy of 60%.

Keywords: Combining forecasts; Evaluating forecasts; Expert judgment; Group decision making; Organizational behavior; Perspective-taking; Role playing; Simulated interaction; Unaided judgment

1. Introduction

We examined the problem of predicting the decisions people will make in important and novel conflict situations such as occur in politics, war, business, and personal affairs. To date, no statistical or casual models have been found to be feasible for predicting such situations, and thus decision makers must rely on judgmental methods.

Conflict situations are often complex because they involve interactions between two or more parties with divergent interests. The complexity of conflicts

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provides fertile ground for hindsight bias. Experts delight in claiming that the proper decisions in conflict situations were obvious and that the actual decisions were misguided (Fischhoff, 1975; Tetlock, 2005).

One possible reason for decisions that appear absurd in retrospect is that people involved in conflicts fail to properly consider the viewpoints of other protagonists. Robert McNamara, head of the US Department of Defense during much of the Vietnam War, drew this conclusion in the documentary *The Fog of War* (Morris, 2003). Experimental evidence shows that roles have a profound influence on people's behavior. Babcock, Loewenstein, Issacharoff, and Camerer (1995) found that research participants who were presented with identical briefing material on a legal dispute made very different estimates of the money settlement a fair judge would hand down, depending on whether they were given the role of lawyer for the defendant or for the claimant. Cyert, March, and Starbuck (1961) found that participants who were given the role of "cost analyst" made substantially different forecasts from those who were given the role of "sales analyst", even though they were given the same data.

One of the lessons McNamara said that he had learned from his involvement in the Vietnam War was that he should have put himself in the shoes of the enemy. Galinsky and Mussweiler (2001) conducted an experiment on "perspective taking" that supports McNamara's belief. Participants in the experiment who thought about an opponent's situation when involved in mock negotiations tended to obtain better outcomes for themselves. Rothbart and Hallmark (1988), however, found in their experiment that participants who were asked to take on the role of either the defense minister or a citizen of one of two imaginary countries involved in a conflict irrationally expected coercive strategies to be effective against the other country, but not against their own. Furthermore, Epley, Keysar, van Boven, and Gilovich (2004), in a series of experiments, found that in assessing the perspectives of others, people tend to anchor on their own perspective, and that their adjustments are incremental and partial even in the presence of incentives to make accurate assessments.

The broad advice to put oneself in the other person's shoes is commonly given to people who deal with conflict situations. For example, Nalebuff and Brandenburger (1996, p. 52) suggested, "To anticipate other players' reactions to your actions, you have to put yourself in their shoes and imagine how they'll play the game". We call this advice "role-thinking".

Given the potential benefits of following such advice, we investigated an approach to improving judgmental forecasting for conflicts by deriving forecasts from experts' analyses of information about the roles of the protagonists.

2. Comparison of role thinking with unaided judgment and role playing

In designing our research, we followed the multiple hypotheses approach advocated by Chamberlin (1965) and compared the accuracy of plausible alternative methods. The methods we compared were role thinking, unaided judgment, and role playing. Given the uncertainty surrounding the prior research, we expected that our findings would be useful, no matter what they turned out to be.

The most common approach to forecasting decisions in conflict situations is unaided judgment. By unaided, we use the narrow definition of "judgmental procedures unaided by evidence-based forecasting procedures". This definition does not preclude drawing upon knowledge about the situation and other similar situations, and discussing the forecasting problem with other experts.

For the method that is the subject of this research, role thinking, to be useful for forecasting, it would need to outperform unaided judgment. We expected that following the injunction to "put yourself in the other person's shoes" in a structured manner would improve people's ability to predict the decisions made by parties in conflict situations, and we expected that those with more expertise in conflicts would be better able to use role information to derive more accurate forecasts. However, we had reservations as to the extent of any improvement in forecasting accuracy from the use of role thinking. We expected that trying to represent a novel conflict in a realistic way by thinking through the interactions of protagonists with different roles would prove to be difficult. Role thinking would probably result in a cognitive overload, as the possibilities become enormous after only a few exchanges.