Psychology meets International Politics: Towards an Interdisciplinary Theory of Trust

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This is an edited text of remarks made by Professor Nicholas Wheeler, Director of the DDMI, at the Psychology Forum organised by the Centre for Applied Psychology on 14 November 2007

I would like to begin by thanking Kate Bullen and her colleagues in the Centre for Applied Psychology for organising this forum. It provides an excellent opportunity to explore the possibilities for multidisciplinary collaboration. The ideas I am going to discuss this afternoon grow out of book that Ken Booth and I have written entitled The Security Dilemma: Fear, Cooperation and Trust in World Politics which will be published at the end of this month. They also reflect the on-going research work on trust-building which we are conducting in the David Davies Memorial Institute of International Studies (DDMI) at Aberystwyth University.

There is great scope for the discipline of Psychology to enrich research in the field of International Relations. To date, there has been little engagement between the two fields, though there are some notable exceptions to this. There has been important work exploring how attribution theory might help us to understand how decision-makers interpret another state's behaviour as predetermined by the internal characteristics of that state. Here, governments assume that others must behave in a hostile way towards them and do not challenge such an interpretation in the light of discrepant evidence. This led Ole Hosti in a famous essay to argue that decision-makers might adopt an inherent bad faith model in assessing the motives and intentions of others.

The other area where psychological theorising has made an important contribution is in the area of perceptions and misperceptions. Robert Jervis in 1976 produced a classic work entitled Perception and Misperception in International Politics. It was in this book that Jervis first discussed the concept of the security dilemma. The starting point for security dilemma theorising

is what philosophers call 'the other minds problem' – this is the fundamental problem that one group of decision-makers can never enter into the minds of another. Uncertainty is the existential condition of all human relations, but it manifests itself in a particularly acute way at the international level. The dominant approach in the discipline of International Relations has been to argue that because governments can never have one hundred per cent certainty about the motives and intentions of others, they must assume the worst and plan on the basis that others are acting as aggressors.

Ken Booth and I reject this starting point, arguing that uncertainty need not be incompatible with a politics of trust. The point of departure for this work is that whilst there has been a lot of theorising about trust in other disciplines, including of course psychology, very little of this has been applied to thinking about trust at the international level. Equally, whilst there has been some theorising about trust in the field of International Relations, this has been dominated by rational choice and game theoretic approaches. The latter are flawed because they strip away the crucial emotional basis of trust. In his Memoirs, Mikhail Gorbachev, reflecting on the close personal relationship that he had forged with Ronald Reagan which had been so important in ending the Cold War, called this 'the human factor' in trust-building.

I want to conclude my brief remarks by saying a word or two about what psychologists have said about trust and where I think there is scope for new collaborative efforts.

The social psychology literature considers that the key to building trust lies in individuals developing identifications and ties, leading to a strong sense of group identity. This can be difficult in interpersonal relations, so how much more so is it between states and societies? The project of European integration shows that such trust-building is possible between former enemies. The dilemma 'to trust or not to trust' that faces policy-makers in situations like the one between the United States and Iran today – can be overcome if actors develop a strong sense of identification above that of the individual self.

But even if mistrust can be overcome between a group of actors, so forming a new collective

identity, the possibility arises of this throwing up new security dilemmas relating to an out-group. The social psychologist Marilynn B. Brewer has noted that while there is no certainty that groups will mistrust each other, 'trust within and distrust between is the rule of intergroup behaviour' (1997: 206, emphasis added).

The uncertainty that potentially trusting partners might have about each other's future motives and intentions has led some social psychologists, writing about intergroup conflict and cooperation in business and other contexts, to posit the existence of a 'trust dilemma'. In an article entitled 'Close Encounters of the Suspicious Kind', Roderick M. Kramer and John T. Jost argue that 'Intergroup trust dilemmas are situations where two or more interdependent groups perceive an opportunity to benefit from engaging in acts of trust. To pursue such opportunity, however, they must risk the possibility that their trust might be exploited or abused' (Kramer and Jost 2003: 176). They explain this as the vulnerability that arises from the dangers of misplaced trust in situations where actors seek to secure values that could not be realized in the absence of trust (Kramer and Jost 2003).

This is relevant to trust at the international level, but calls for two comments. First, it is striking that the social psychology literature does not discuss 'trust dilemmas' at the international level, where the costs of misplaced trust are so high. It is intriguing to ask how social psychologists might alter their conception of the 'trust dilemma' if they were to study the international level. But as I said at the beginning, the academic study of International Relations has also neglected the concept of trust, particularly in relation to the emotional dimensions of trust.

The second point is that the focus on vulnerability in the literature on the 'trust dilemma' actually misses the dilemma which is implicated in questions of trust at the international level. To apply the language in The Security Dilemma, there is always a dilemma of interpretation about the motives and intentions of others – think of US-Iranian relations today - in the decision to trust. This is because, on the one hand, the consequences of not trusting in the international arena can be a security competition in which each side wrongly attributes aggressive intent to actions that are taken for defensive reasons, but on the other hand, by committing to trust, actors expose

themselves to severe costs if they are betrayed. Here, we come back to the proposition that trust always takes place in conditions of uncertainty, because of course if we had certainty we would not need trust.

Trust at the international level exists in a practical arena of risks and dangers, but partly depends for its success on the world of feelings. None of this can be properly accessed by rationalist theories of trust such as those that dominate in International Relations. Instead, what is required is a multidisciplinary approach rooted in a fuller appreciation of the 'human factor'. This is the agenda that guides the current trust-building work of the DDMI, and the field of Social Psychology clearly has an important role to play in enriching these theoretical investigations. I look forward to exploring with colleagues in the Centre for Applied Psychology at Aberystwyth how we might take agenda forward. Specifically, I think there are some fascinating multidisciplinary possibilities in relation to a mutual engagement with the 'trust dilemma'.

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References

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