



Behavioral Decision Making Group Colloquium Series

is pleased to present



PAUL SLOVIC | Decision Research and University of Oregon

"When (In)Action Speaks Louder than Words: The Collapse of Humanitarian Values in Foreign Policy Decisions"

ABSTRACT

Decisions to save civilian lives by intervening in foreign countries are some of the most difficult and controversial choices facing national decision makers. Although each situation is unique, decisions involving tradeoffs that pit the value of human lives against other important objectives are quite common. Furthermore, there is often a striking disconnect between the high value placed on saving human lives expressed by top government officials and the apparent low value revealed by government decisions not to intervene. Specifically, when multiple objectives are in play, highly regarded humanitarian values seem to collapse in the competition with national security and economic security objectives. On the basis of theoretical models of judgment and choice, research in social cognition, and careful reading of official statements, I have developed a hypothesis to explain this collapse. Underlying our hypothesis is the “prominence effect” (Tversky, Sattath, and Slovic, 1988), which asserts that choice is inherently more lexicographic than expressed judgments of value. That is, the more prominent attributes of a proposed action will be weighted more heavily in choice than in judgments and decisions based on expressed preferences or values. I shall assert that the prominence effect may underlie the disconnect between expressed and revealed values regarding whether or not to act to save large numbers of civilian lives under attack in foreign countries. Specifically, I hypothesize that national security is the prominent dimension in this context. Chosen actions need to be justified, and deciding in favor of security likely makes a stronger argument than deciding in favor of saving, nameless, faceless foreign lives, no matter how many thousands or millions of lives are at stake. I shall discuss the moral, ethical, and strategic implications of this bias that devalues efforts to intervene in massive humanitarian crises.

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